

Galerie Daniel Templon

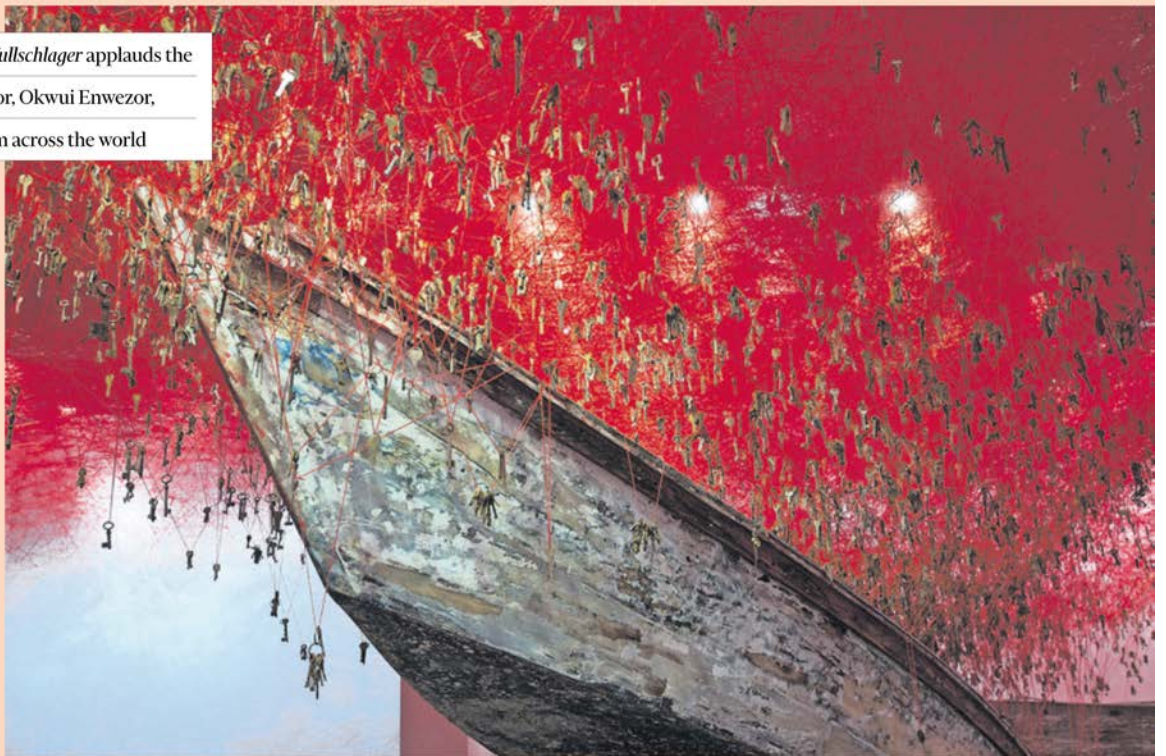
Paris

CHI HARU SHIOTA

FINANCIAL TIMES, 9th - 10th May 2015

Arts
Life&Arts

Venice Biennale | Jackie Wullschlager applauds the
vision of the event's curator, Okwui Enwezor,
and reviews pavilions from across the world



A global 'parliament of forms'

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Hundreds of knives studded into the ground to resemble spiky flowers; a four-metre wall of battered suitcases; a grainy video of a man choking; the words “Death Love Hate” revolving on a circular neon: these are the first works you see inside Okwui Enwezor’s exhibitions at the Giardini and the Arsenale. Spectacular and unassailable, they announce this curator’s themes and concerns: violence, deportation, oppression, the essential role of language in art.

Adel Abdessemed calls his knife-blossoms “Nymphaeas”, defying lineages of beauty after Monet. In a gap between his trunks and valises, Fabio Mauri has slipped a paper explaining that his work “The Western Wall or the Wailing Wall” references journeys of no return to Auschwitz and modern migrations. Christian Boltanski’s “L’Homme qui tousse” (1969) and Bruce Nauman’s “Life, Death, Love, Hate, Pleasure, Pain” (1983) are classic distillations of claustrophobia and fear heralding a dark, troubling biennale.

Enwezor, Venice’s first African curator, called for a “parliament of forms” of global contributions. But his own vision is so powerful that he has swept up all voices into an epic display of protest. With lively national pavilions (see below) rising to his challenge, he orchestrates a multi-part chorus which rings out as the most cohesive, authoritative, arresting, urgent biennale for decades.

For Iceland, Christoph Büchel transforms the disused church Santa Maria della Misericordia into a simulated yet actual environment, “The Mosque” – Venice has never had one – welcomed by the city’s Muslim community. Qibla wall, mihrab, prayer mat facing

Mecca are juxtaposed with the Catholic architecture: analogy for layers of history and religion fuelling both progress and conflict.

For Poland at the Giardini, CT Jasper and Joanna Malinowska record the staging of a Polish opera in a Haitian village, with animals criss-crossing the set, to question cultural identities and colonisation. In the Arsenale, Chile’s Paz Errázuriz explores marginal urban existence in intimate yet formally composed black-and-white photographs of male transvestites in drag make-up in underground brothels in 1980s Santiago: a story of the resilience of secret, unacknowledged lives.

Against projects of this seriousness, the British pavilion looks the tritest thing in town: Sarah Lucas’s huge yellow sculpted phalluses and torsos with vaginas, buttocks and belly buttons studded with cigarettes, sometimes draped over toilet seats, are embarrassingly puerile and have nothing to say.

For Enwezor’s show, the stage is set by Oscar Murillo’s giant, black, oil-drenched drapes obscuring the classical columns of the Giardini’s international pavilion, and lending a smouldering smell. The edgy/laconic aesthetic and personal myth of 29-year-old Murillo – London-based son of immigrant Colombian cleaners, he paints with a broom – have made him the market’s hottest currency. Here he inaugurates black as the colour of revolution. It dominates throughout: Adrian Piper’s blackboards repeatedly inscribed “Everything will be taken away”; Glenn Ligon’s black silkscreens “Come Out”; Wangechi Mutu’s caged black nude “She’s got the whole world in her”; Huma Bhabha’s quartet of fraught, totemic black wooden sculptures with staring faces entitled “With Blows”, “With Words”, “Mechanic” and “Against What? Against Whom?”.

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With nonstop declamations of *Das Kapital* in a central arena – a comically incongruous, popular meeting place from the first hour, when I glimpsed billionaire collector François Pinault and über-dealer Iwan Wirth hanging out there – Enwezor’s was always going to be a stridently political biennale. The current art world is rich, global, self-satisfied, swollen with hype, and irrepressibly smart at co-opting critique. In this it mirrors the capitalist system on which it depends: the market buys, manipulates and absorbs almost anything. Where, then, is the spirit of dissent? Enwezor’s triumph is to explore the multi-faceted ways in which artists young and old are responding to what he calls “the state of things . . . the exploitation of nature through its commodification as natural resources, the growing structure of inequality and the weakening of broader social contract”.

Tunisian Nidhal Chamekh, 29, shows a drawing cycle, “De quoi rêvent les martyrs?”; sketches of body parts, animal heads on human forms, guns and batons combined with Arabic scripts and phantasmagorical landscapes in confined spaces: a dystopian record of the upheavals of the Arab Spring. Alexander Kluge, 83, who began his career as assistant to Fritz Lang and was a friend of Theodor Adorno, presents “Nachrichten aus der Ideologischen Antike: Marx, Eisenstein – Das Kapital” (2008-15), a Tower of Babel video montage splicing footage of Russia’s 1905 uprising with talking heads: a lawyer debating guilt and accountability, a pianist hammering out key by key an argument for music’s revolutionary role.

Charles Gaines’s lyrical crossover of songs, texts and drawings turning on traditional spirituals, “All on Account of the Tariff”, is an unusual poetic rendering of radicalisation. Painting, rare here, is political: Kerry James Marshall’s sonorous “Lovers” and “Playground”; Chris Ofili compressing menace into willowy theatrical figures in “Bending over Backwards for Justice and Peace” and “The Caged Bird’s Song”. After many sprawling junk-and-entropy installations in the Arsenale – Katharina Grosse’s volumes of painted fabrics, soil and aluminium debris “Untitled Trumpet” is typical – Enwezor surprisingly concludes at an octet of colossal, frail, upended naked self-portraits by Georg Baselitz. With gouged eyes and throbbing red members, they recede into inky jet backgrounds against rough walls: the 77-year-old artist still fighting an upside-down, unjust world.

That the personal is political here is axiomatic; the documentary impetus overwhelming. Isaac Julien interviews Marxist theorists. Hans Haacke proposes a 2015 “World Poll” via iPad. Andreas Gursky’s photographs “Chicago Board of Trade” and “Toys R Us” dissect capitalist strategies. Ukrainian Mykola Ridnyi’s film “Regular Places” chronicles everyday confrontation (“Get the fuck out of here you bitch”) in Kharkiv.

Political art has never had this level of global visibility, and there is something about this biennale’s gravitas and broad platform that feels inevitable and right for now. Enwezor’s specific reading of art’s social responsibilities is not the only approach to culture, but at this scale and in this geopolitical climate it is an immensely potent one.

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Top five national pavilions

Iraq: "Invisible Beauty", Ca' Dandolo

Haider Jabbar, young painter of expressive, distorted heads, blindfolded, open-mouthed, bleeding, in rich seeping watercolour, is in a Turkish camp awaiting refugee status. Jabbar set out to record in paint the beheadings of 2,000 Iraqi youths, including many of his friends. These dark, unassuming small paintings show a fresh sensibility from a self-taught artist unaware of western traditions. Other artists similarly weaving their own chronicle of suffering into formally assured, mesmerising work include Salam Atta Sabri, with intricate, jewel-like drawings of daily life abstracted within a grid, and Akam Shex Hadi, whose starkly lit black-and-white photographs of refugees contain the recurring motif of an unwinding black thread: the ensnaring threat of the Isis flag. Work from the 1950s by father of Iraqi photography Latif Al Ani dramatises by contrast a worldly, prosperous Baghdad. This is Venice's most revelatory show.

Israel: "Archeology of the Present",

Tsibi Geva

The sleek glassy Bauhaus exterior of Israel's pavilion has disappeared behind breeze blocks and hanging car tyres. A spatially ambiguous interior utilises architectural elements – window lattices, terrazzo tiles – to create further blockages. Meanwhile, black-toned tender/crude layered paintings repeat the tangled, thorny exterior pattern with curlicue forms referencing the *keffiyeh*, the traditional Arab headdress, amid dark figurative references such as enormous ravens. Painterliness coexists with politics: Geva, a 63-year-old with no current gallery representation, references displacement, concealment, identity, home and homelessness.

US: "They Come to Us Without a Word", Joan Jonas

Jonas, 78, grande dame of video and performance art, has created a free-flowing fusion of film, bold simplified drawings and handcrafted objects – rippled mirrors, crystal-beaded chandeliers, Japanese kites – which limpidly offsets the tight US pavilion. Jonas's theme is nature's fragility: each room is focused on a creature or force – fish, bees, wind. All are linked by superbly lit, blurry films of children performing fragments of ghost stories from Nova Scotian oral tradition, which Jonas transforms by modernist, rhythmic diction and music: poetic, commanding, singular storytelling.

Romania: "Darwin's Room",

Adrian Ghenie

Ghenie questions the texture of history through the texture of paint, sometimes fluid, pushed into abstract distortion, sometimes slathered and into grotesquerie to depict monsters, such as Hitler in "Turning Blue". The disquieting "Darwin" canvases turn on the nature of knowledge; "Persian Miniature" depicting with miniaturist finesse at large scale a half-hidden figure in a snowy forest, addresses anxieties about our encounter with the other. Ghenie is one of Europe's most promising young painters.

Japan: "The Key in the Hand",

Chiharu Shiota

It is a brave artist who comes to Enwezor's Venice without a political agenda, but Shiota's simple, delicate yet monumental ceiling-to-floor installation of gossamer-thin red yarn densely filling the exhibition space to tumble down on to two wooden boats is this year's most beautiful presentation. Attached to the yarn are hundreds of small keys, metaphor for unlocking our minds, while in surrounding videos children recount early recollections. The boats are hands catching a rain of reminiscences which form our collective memory in a work which is at once spectacular and intimate, and carries a spiritual charge rare in this biennale.