

58TH VENICE BIENNALE

11 May - 24 November 2019
May You Live In Interesting Times
Curator: Ralph Rugoff



At the 58th Venice Biennale, we explore sound, national iconography and post-nationalism across more than 20 pavilions, and includes our brutally honest takes on the main show, curated by Ralph Rugoff, both for and against. We venture off-site to find poetic dialogues inspired by Etel Adnan and works by Lebanese artists Nadim Karam and Zad Moultaka. Plus, we present a special highlight on the Iran Pavilion and the presence of contemporary Iranian art at the biennial.

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Roni Horn. *Well and Truly*. 2009-2010. Installation view *Luogo e Segni* at Punta della Dogana. 2019. Pinault Collection. © Palazzo Grassi. Photography by Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

THE POETICS OF PLACE

The Tadao Ando-designed Punta della Dogana is holding an exhibition that celebrates a decade since it opened as the Pinault Collection's exhibition space. *Luogo e Segni* (runs until 15 December) features 36 artists who weave a narrative around the space that poetry occupies, evoking elements of nature and time that resonate with the architecture. These imaginary conversations between literature and art awaken a rare sense of romanticism of place and inner landscapes.

Words by Saira Ansari

Housed within the monumental structure of the Punta della Dogana is the breathing form of *Luogo e Segni* (*Place and Signs*). Curated by Mouna Mekouar and Martin Bethenod, Director of Palazzo Grassi – Punta della Dogana, the exhibition ties the essence of the site to the poetry of Etel Adnan – to which many of the artists had a special affinity – as well as to the writings of Federico García Lorca, Ezra

Pound, Fernando Pessoa. Mekouar takes aesthetic cues from the building, which is “constantly changing in relation to the time of day, the light, the sky, the sea, the wind, the rain, and the seasons,” she explains, in a recorded conversation with Bethenod in the catalogue. “Given the presence and the pregnancy of all these climatic variations, I immediately thought of Etel Adnan’s poetry.”

In a multi-voiced, intertwining narration, the curatorial framework is layered further with the relationships of admiration and love between the artists themselves. The theatrical site lends itself greatly to the experience of the works. It is a solid, overwhelming structure that has maintained the original character of the 17th-century building but which, through its many windows and skylights, infuses the spaces with natural light, panoramic views



Charbel-Joseph H. Boutros & Stéphanie Saadé. *Souffles d'Artistes*. 2014. Inflated balloon, breath of two artists in love. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artists and Grey Noise, Dubai

and a feeling of suspended weightlessness. Consequently, the exhibition's minimalist vision makes use of the high ceilings, exposed brick and poured concrete, to reverberate a rhythm of memory, which acts as a leitmotif for multiple manifestations.

The external – sunlight, darkness, wind, water and time – is thoughtfully brought into dialogue with the internal – conjoined breaths, fragrance, taste, loss, dreaming and fragility. The exhibition opens with *White Dickinson*, Roni Horn's assemblage of aluminium bars leaning against the walls. Inscribed with the words of Emily Dickinson, one reads, ‘*Night's Capacity Varies, But Morning Is Inevitable*,’ a forewarning of cyclical time that comes up frequently in the show. Upstairs, the narrative is pulled into a room where Philippe Parreno's haunting video projection *Marilyn* evokes the ghost of Marilyn Monroe on the set of a Waldorf Astoria Hotel suite in New York. As the video finishes, the room lights up to reveal an installation of Adnan's paintings,

forging new contexts onto their coloured planes. A window in the hall opens out into a cavernous hall that is viewable both from above and at ground level. Scattered around like large tablets, Horn's *Well and Truly* is an ensemble of 10 solid cast glass cylinders in shades of blue, grey and white. They echo the artist's preoccupation with water, but in their frozen, grounded format, they seem to be looking up at the sky and the clouds that hover above. The changing natural light in the room alters the work, affecting not only the translucent depths of the objects, but also rendering a spectacular reflected light show that plays out in slow motion on the walls.

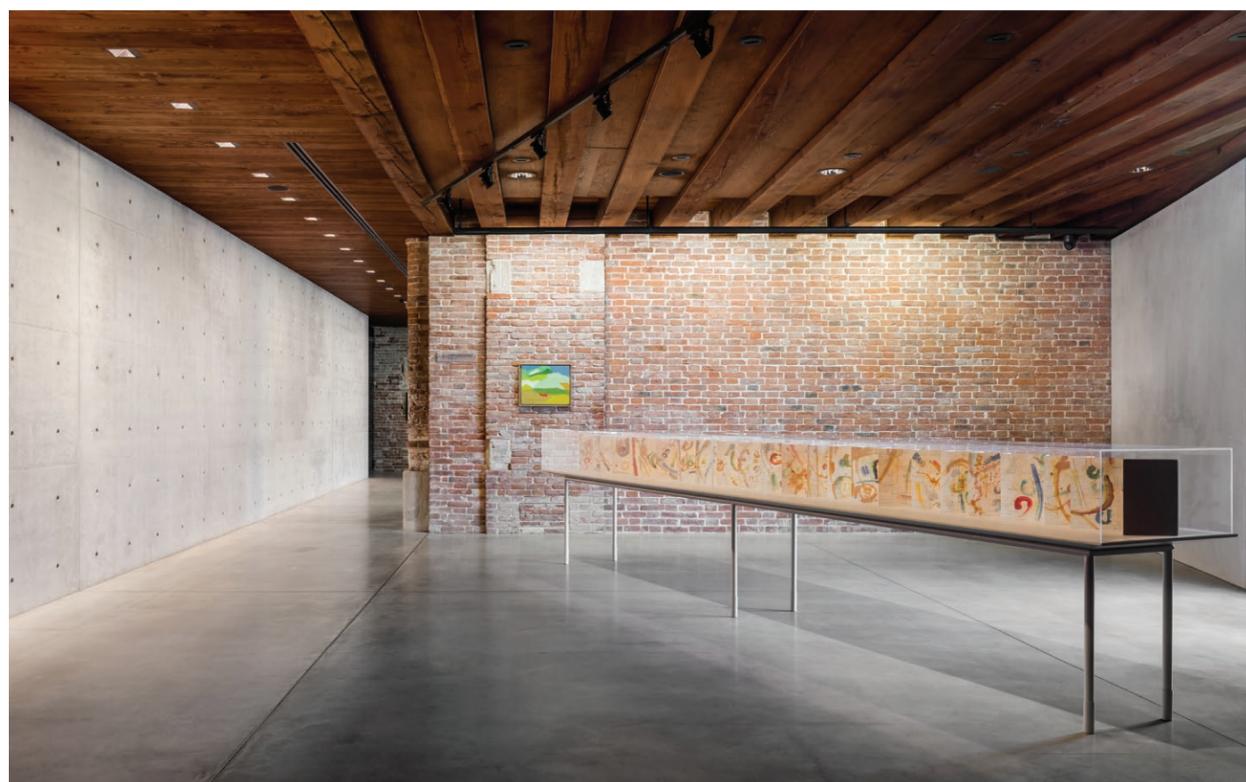
In another room is the work of artist-couple Charbel-joseph H. Boutros and Stéphanie Saadé. Their collaborative work *Souffles d'Artistes* (a nod towards Piero Manzoni's *Souffles d'Artista*) uses the collective breaths of both artists to inflate a white balloon. The delicate gesture literally

depends on, and takes from, the artists for its very existence and must be recreated by them every time it is shown. As it slowly deflates through the duration of the exhibition, the joyous symbol performs the process of life and, humbly, the end. This melancholic sweetness echoes in the room as two other works by Boutros explore time and the marvel of a single moment – one a newsprint yellowing, first with the sun of Beirut and then with the sun of Venice; the other, a small marble box holding exactly one cubic metre of night from Lebanon's Naas forest.

The nature of night is echoed in the minimalist works of the late Lala Rukh, who captured the reflection of moonlight on the surface of water in her *Mirror Image* series. Delicate graphite markings on ink-black carbon paper allude to shivering rivulets on the surface, recalling her recurrent use of water and the horizon line as metaphors for the act of being.



Hicham Berrada. *Mesk-ellil*. 2015-2019. Installation view *Luogo e Segni* at Punta della Dogana, 2019. © Palazzo Grassi. Image courtesy of the artist and kamel mennour. Photography by Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti



Etel Adnan. *Untitled*. 2016. Galerie Lelong & Co. *Dhirk*. 1978. Musée de l'Institut du Monde Arabe. Installation view *Luogo e Segni* at Punta della Dogana, 2019. © Palazzo Grassi. Photography by Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti



Wu Tsang. *Untitled*. 2019. Installation view *Luogo e Segni* at Punta della Dogana, 2019 © Palazzo Grassi. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Photography by Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

At the highest point of the building, away from the portrayal of night, is a large holographic rainbow drape that reflects a dazzling spectrum of colours as the sun hits it from different angles. *Untitled* is a work by Wu Tsang, who is known for incorporating collaborative elements in her practice, and for *Luogo e Segni*, the display responds to Gonzalez-Torres' bead curtain at the entrance, both works transmitting similar symbolic gestures – in Wu Tsang's case, the entertainment culture that she often references.

Downstairs, Hicham Berrada's *Mesk-ellil* (*Musk of the night*) is a delightful shamanistic play on nature that turns time upon its head. A large hall is dominated by seven blocks of totem-like terrariums standing sentient. Inside them are shrubs of night jasmine, a delicate flowering plant that gives off a sweet, heady scent. The terrariums are fitted with two modes of lighting that re-programme the inside of the box to create day and night in a cycle that is contrary to the real world. As daylight filters into the hall, the darkened boxes with simulated

moonlight hide the flowers but expel their intoxicating fragrance; as evening approaches outside, the environment inside the boxes simulates sunlight, the smell disappears and the flowers are visible again. The play on illusion and perception via altering the sleep cycle of these plants is described aptly as a "botanical theatre" in the curatorial notes.

Towards the end of the exhibition, a room features a solitary painting by Etel Adnan and a nine-and-a-half-metre long leporello work from 1978, entitled *Dhirk*. In it, the artist has utilised drawing as an obsessive but meditative method whereby she writes "Allah" again and again, trying to find balance. It poignantly depicts a visual struggle that ascribes meaning in incomprehensible times of war.

"Whether it's Etel Adnan, known and read by almost all the invited artists, or Emily Dickinson, Roni Horn's muse, or Susan Howe, mother of R. H. Quaytman and a friend of Etel Adnan, these shifting cross-references are like phantoms at work... Carried along by this movement, the artists

play around with these displacements and entanglements, using them to tell stories within the story, to construct situations, places, and combinations of space and time, sometimes individually and sometimes jointly," Mekaour offers.

Moving from personal reflections to political ruminations, through engagements with poetry and verse, there is little chance that the impassioned tone of *Luogo e Segni* will leave a viewer unaffected. It does not shy away from addressing romantic beauty, nor does it offer an apology for sentimentalism – which is refreshing in these times. The role of the relationships and conversations between artists, either real or imagined, is undeniably the arbitrator of this intimacy. Additionally, a large representation of women and non-white artists working with conceptual and minimalist art offers a diversity of thought and expression that is sometimes absent from exhibitions of this scale. So, *Luogo e Segni* may be wrought in multiple reveries, but it is a pleasurable din to be submerged in.