

The 2015 Venice Biennale's Central Show, Focused on Strife, Is Uneasy, Uneven

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 05/06/15 8:07 AM

Okwui Enwezor's 'All the World's Futures,' May 9–November 22



The Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in the Giardini, with a Glenn Ligon neon at top and Oscar Murillo flags.
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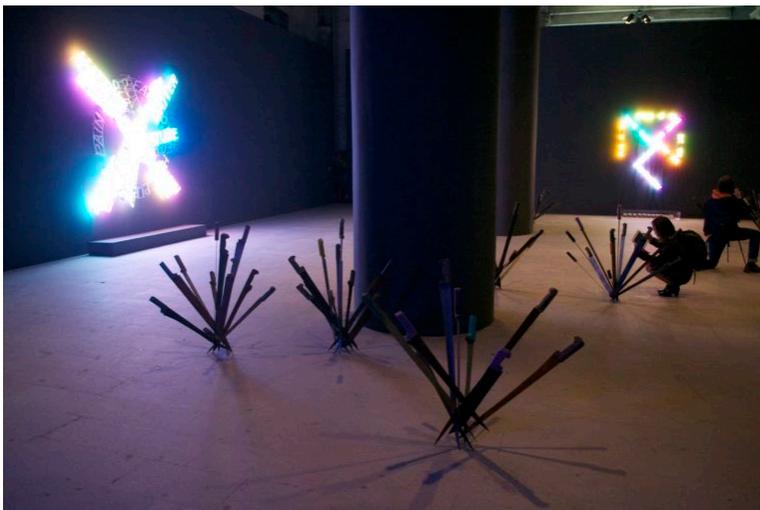
First catching sight of the Italian pavilion in the Giardini in Venice, it appears that the biennale it houses is in mourning. Dark flags hang at the front of the Mussolini-era structure, right below a tall neon sign that reads “blues blood bruise.” They are the works, respectively, of Oscar Murillo and Glenn Ligon, and they firmly establish the chastening concerns, and tone, of the 56th Venice Biennale’s central exhibition, “All the World’s Futures,” which was curated by Okwui Enwezor, the serious-minded director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich.

Enwezor, true to form, has organized a show that unflinchingly examines violence and conflict—pain, in a word. Its artworks, by about 140 artists and groups, focus on political and economic struggles, war, and the heavy psychic, economic, and physical tolls exacted by global capitalism. It is a brutal exhibition. (If anyone tells you this was their favorite biennale, worry about their emotional state.) It is at times woefully heavy-handed and wildly uneven. There are knockouts by big names and big strikeouts. But, thankfully, it is also punctuated by moments of quiet, resilient beauty.



Monica Bonvicini.

After passing through the Murillo fabric, you are greeted by a room of drawings that scream, in block letters, “THE END” and “*FINE*,” by the late Italian Fabio Mauri (1926–2009), and a short film, tucked off to the side, that shows a man sitting against a wall vomiting blood, by the Frenchman Christian Boltanski in 1969. Tubular lights by Philippe Parreno flicker off and throughout the sprawling Arsenale galleries, the show’s main venue alongside the Italian pavilion. The mood is dark, uneasy.



Bruce Nauman neons and Adel Abdessemed sculptures, a seemingly sacrilegious pairing that works.

Weapons are everywhere. In the Arsenale, Adel Abdessemed, who was born in Algeria and lives in London, has grouped together upturned machetes on the floor so that they look like menacing plants, the Mozambican artist Gonçalo Mabunda has assembled guns and spent shells into ornate thrones, and Italian-born, Berlin-based artist Monica Bonvicini has amassed bunches of chainsaws, slathered them with black polyurethane and hung them from the ceiling. A large artillery gun, made out of castoff metal by the Italian Pino Pascali (1935–68) in 1965 stands at the end of one hall.



A table filled with pearls outside of Mika Rottenberg's video installation *NoNoseKnows*, 2015.

Again and again, one sees the hands of workers. They construct a tombstone on one side of Steve McQueen's masterpiece of a two-channel video, *Ashes* (2014–15), the other side showing the eponymous man when he was alive, piloting a boat on the open sea, shot by McQueen more than a decade early. They do every manner of task—slice apart cars, perform surgery—in Ante Ehmann & Harun Farocki's rapidly cutting *Labour in a Single Shot* (2013–15). And in Mika Rottenberg's typically smart, funny, gently creepy video *NoNoseKnows* (2015), they pluck pearls from clams and operate a pulley system, making one of her bizarre Rube Goldberg systems hum. (A teaser: this one involves a Pinocchio-nosed woman who sneezes out plates of fully dressed pasta.)

Loose, playful, slightly goofy, and willfully ambiguous, that Rottenberg is everything that Enwezor's show so often is not. "All the World's Futures"—tendentious, if well-intentioned—instead lapses at intervals into a didactic and activist mode that can feel condescending, pedantic, or just scattershot.



A detail of Taryn Simon's *Paperwork, and the Will of Capital*, 2015.

South Korean artist Ayoung Kim has submitted a dry wall-chart with a sound accompaniment that maps out the history of oil. Petra Bauer, of Sweden, has gone with a slide show of women's socialist groups in the first decades of the 20th century. Enwezor has included in the galleries a documentary about Sergei Eisenstein's relationship to Karl Marx by the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge. (A marathon reading of Marx's final tome, *Capital*, is also in the offing.) The Iraqi-born, Berlin-based Hiwa K has melted down waste from war in his home country to make a bell, which appears along with a video about one of its makers. The New Delhi-based RAQS Media Collective presents awfully obvious sculptures on the Giardini grounds—royal statues that are disfigured in various ways, missing heads or off their platforms, which are emblazoned with quotations from George Orwell's 1936 essay about imperialism "Shooting an Elephant." Maja Bajevic, who was born in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, and lives in Paris, has embroidered various stock indices and measures of inequality into fabric. The Australian Marco Fusinato is selling thick volumes with selections from the Primo Moroni Archive for £10, the proceeds, which pile up on a platform as books are sold, going to support that storehouse for radical left-wing texts. And the American photographer Taryn Simon, always ready to overproduce a mediocre idea, has mounted an installation of books that feature the flowers that appeared alongside world leaders in diplomatic signing ceremonies over the years.



Petra Bauer, *A Morning Breeze*, 2015.

These project-based, vaguely pedagogical works are commonplace in so many international exhibitions, though it's hard to know what art viewers are really supposed to be able get out of them. They read as feel-good, one-note gestures, celebrating minor transgressions or simply riding on the coattails of the past. Frequently, one gets an unsatisfying glimpse of something that one suspects must have been very fun or rewarding to do. You may decide, as I did, that I would rather read an essay addressing the ideas or histories that are so laboriously indulged.



A jukebox by Jeremy Deller that is loaded with 7-inch records that play noises from various machines at factories.

However, the British artist Jeremy Deller shows you can be both engagé and aesthetically pleasurable in a room at the Giardini that includes texts about the history of workers' songs, a witty banner hung from the ceiling ("Hello, today you have day off"), and a jukebox loaded with 7-inch records pressed with the sound of various machines at work. It's cacophonous and exhilarating.



Hans Haacke, *Blue Sail*, 1965.

Also impressive is a survey of polls that the German-born, New York-based Hans Haacke has staged at various exhibitions over the years, inviting visitors to become political actors and registering their demographics. It features a new one, which has 20 questions on an iPad—among them, your views on economic inequality and conditions for building projects in Abu Dhabi. As people answer, it tabulates the results in real-time and prods: if there is such agreement on key questions in the art world—and there is, judging by one day of polling, at least—why are so few people politically active?



Jason Moran, *STAGED: SAVOY BALLROOM 1*, 2015.

Music arises repeatedly, winningly, as a source of community and remembrance, echoing along corridors, drawing you into rooms and through history. The great Charles Gaines, who is based in Los Angeles, shows scores in which he has paired speeches by the likes of Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela with traditional songs, and the Houston-based Jason Moran has meticulously recreated bygone New York music halls, one equipped with a piano that was playing a melancholy song when I walked by. The Belgian artist Carsten Höller, meanwhile, screens a rollicking two-screen video about popular bands in Kinshasa.



A quiet little chapel: new paintings by Chris Ofili.

When it comes to more traditional media, Enwezor is hit or miss. The London–born, Trinidad–based Chris Ofili presents four stunning, mysterious new paintings—all dense, flowing patterns figures—in a small chapel-like space within the Arsénale, while, in another (larger) one, Georg Baselitz presents eight expectedly overwrought paintings of upside-down naked men.



Kerry James Marshall.

In the Giardino, the seemingly unstoppable Kerry James Marshall has four new paintings—including two intriguing Rorschach-blot curveballs in bright limes and pinks—though his room leads rather unfortunately into one of 36 wan paintings of skulls by the Amsterdam–based Marlene Dumas and another of very familiar Andreas Gursky photos, of course charting the immense scale of the global economy.

Thomas Hirschhorn’s ceiling-to-floor spill of cardboard, masking tape, and texts looks strangely half-hearted (slapdash, and not in his usual charming way), though Katharina Grosse, who is still underrated Stateside, delivers a burner of an installation, spraying fiercely across fabric and concrete.

Worryingly, almost all of the show’s most meaningful moments come from such big, established names, along with a few under-recognized older figures, like the Egyptian painter Inji Efflatoun and the Peruvian conceptual artist Teresa Burga. With a few exceptions, the younger artists have trouble measuring up.



Isa Genzken, *Two Orchids*, 2015.

Despite its forward-looking title, Enwezor's biennale is obsessively fixated on the crushing concerns of the present moment, an attitude that is hard not to admire in an art world obsessed with big money and spectacular novelty. But that approach grows tiresome. As artworks about labor, social history, and unrest accumulate, one begins to yearn for just a little bit more poetry.

Which I think is why the artwork that has stayed with me is a new one by the storied German Isa Genzken, of two towering flowering metal orchids. They are planted close to, and at certain angles blend in with, trees at a far side of the Giardini. Barely seeming to stand (they are tied to poles), those flowers are beastly beautiful, and proudly questionable in taste—a renegade sprout of aesthetics in an otherwise party-line biennial. They should be left there permanently as a reminder of what we're on the hunt for at shows like this.