

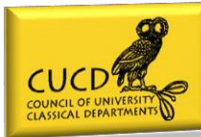
What is there of Interest to Classicists at the 59th Venice Biennale?

by Matthew Fox

The Venice Biennale is the world's largest public exhibition of contemporary art, bringing the work of artists from all over the planet to Venice. This year's Biennale was postponed from 2021 due to the pandemic, but it continues now until the end of November. In a place so powerfully shaped by the Renaissance, and so replete with expressions of various classical traditions, the presentation of contemporary art provides a unique stimulus to think about cultural tradition itself, and about the dialectic between antiquity and artistic production. I hope the following reflections will prove useful to any readers of the Bulletin considering a visit to Venice this year.

One of the most talked about exhibitions on show during the 2017 Biennale was Damien Hirst's *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*. That was a good moment for our disciplines, suggesting that a popular artistic blockbuster, also involving the investment of huge sums of money, could bring a new audience to areas of classical antiquity that had had little visibility, either in contemporary art, or in the perception of a wider public. Hirst's work engaged with ancient historiography, marine archaeology, and the history of the ancient economy, and it touched on a range of interesting ideas about the classical tradition in European art. Whatever your views on the exhibition itself, the positive effect of in its encounter with antiquity was obvious.

By contrast, this Biennale contains little evidence of the creative potential of classical



traditions, for reasons that soon become evident on visiting the central exhibition, or International Pavilion, as it is known. The curator is Cecilia Alemani, director of the art programme at New York's High Line. The exhibition's title, *The Milk of Dreams*, is a quotation from the surrealist, Leonora Carrington, and Alemani uses Carrington, and a collection of other artists from the early years of modernism, mainly women, to provide a kind of associative genealogy for the huge collection of contemporary works that she has assembled. There are no works by male artists in the first half of the exhibition in the International Pavilion in the Giardini and only a few in the continuation, in the exhibition spaces of the Arsenale. Many of the artists are working in non-European traditions, and a good number identify as L.G.B.T.Q.I.+. Providing a kind of historical background to this selection, the historical works, which occupy discrete rooms within the show, are not presented in order to substantiate claims about the formation of a contemporary canon, but rather, work on a more intuitive level, resonating in unpredictable and non-coercive ways with the contemporary work.

In that context, the non-appearance of classical references makes a lot of sense. History here begins in the early twentieth century, and is in any case non-linear, and non-teleological. It is, arguably, not even concerned with the process of canon formation. The exhibition made me aware of the great extent to which traditions, even if contested and challenged, do frame the worldview of the classical disciplines, at least in my experience of them. Looking for classics in contemporary art generally involves tracing points of contact with specific aesthetic and cultural traditions. This year's Biennale shows how much exciting art is being produced that has little interest in that perspective. And although the connection between the central exhibition and the work on show in the national pavilions, and elsewhere, is an informal one, there is a lot of overlap. Put another way, Alemani's vision reflects our contemporary moment. The dislocations and instabilities caused by the pandemic, as well as the interrogation of the post-colonial legacies, and current debates about gender identity and the body, are prominent forces in much of the work on show. The purposeful exclusion of the white male canon has, as a by-product, reduced the visibility of references to the classical tradition. In that context, it is interesting to look for where the classical heritage does appear, and to see what effect it has in the places where it can be



encountered.

Most obvious to the classicist visitor to the Giardini will be *Oedipus in Search of Colonus*, by Loukia Alavanou, a fifteen-minute virtual-reality film presented in the Greek Pavilion. Sophocles provides the names of characters, and the framework of a mythical narrative. But almost every other aspect of the work draws on contemporary references. Most of the film was shot in a Romani settlement not far from the site of ancient Colonus, and the performers, who do not enact anything that resembles a piece of formal theatre, are members of that community. The film begins in filthy bird coop containing a pair of vultures that hop around and sporadically attack each other, while a narrator, in a portentous, actorly voice, sets up the story of Oedipus at Colonus. There are many elements of grotesquery, slapstick, and general tonal instability, in a world which barely recalls the classical, except perhaps in the almost parodic intonation of the story that takes place in the film's voice-over, described by Alavanou as 'a chorus.' A particularly striking moment comes when the Polyneices character, who has just appeared from nowhere, is transported from the background of the camp to float in a black space, singing a Balkan-style pop-song, while golden Euro coins, Rolex watches, and Mercedes logos rain down around him. The virtual reality experience, of course, can be challenging for those who suffer even mildly from motion sickness.

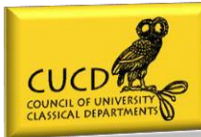
The Danish Pavilion has a range of Doric pillars along its rear side, which is not the entrance you use if you are walking up the main pathway of the Giardini, in the direction of the British Pavilion. That façade is in unadorned modernist brick, though the classical tradition is further in evidence in a curved row of baroque statues that seem to have clumsily survived from before the building was placed here. This pavilion has been transformed into a neglected stable block, festooned with imitation decaying straw. It houses a pair of deceased centaurs, some fragments of their tack, and even a dismembered compatriot. The centaur figures are modelled with remarkable realism: it took me some time to realise that the figure of one of them was not actually that of a living person wearing a centaur outfit. The text accompanying the exhibition, however, clarifies that these centaurs are not survivors from classical myth, but figures with a



unique, non-historical mythology relating to the relationship between bodies and water.

These centaurs act as a good example of one of the dominating motifs in Venice this year. Expressions of liminal corporeality are everywhere, in particular in *The Milk of Dreams*. As Alemani's introductory text describes it, 'the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; and the connection between bodies and the Earth.' This calls to mind an Ovidian sense of human/vegetable metamorphosis. But among the 238 works included, I found only very few that resonated with classical paradigms: works by Sao Paolo artist, Rosana Paolino, or Mexican born Felipe Baeza both could have been illustrating human-plant metamorphosis in an Ovidian mode. But from their look, and from the aesthetic traditions on which they draw, it would be hard to argue for any direct classical reference. Nor does Zheng Bo's film, *Le Sacré du Printemps*, in which four naked men stand in a forest agitating their bodies, then gradually merge themselves into the trees, recall to my mind any classical ideas. In a similar way, a statue in glass by Andra Ursuța that at first sight seems to resonate with a classical forerunner is, when viewed alongside her other works on display, more clearly engaged with the visual language of science-fiction films. In all these cases, corporeal liminality takes place in a manner that effectively bypasses history and classical mythology.

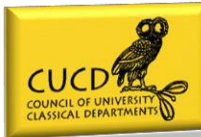
Two national pavilions engage in a different manner with archaeology and ancient material culture. Maria Eichhorn, in the German Pavilion, may be remembered for her work at the Chisenhale gallery in East London in 2016. That project centred on interrogating ideas of labour, including artistic labour, and involved the closure of the gallery and the stipulation that all the gallery's staff devote the five weeks of the show to leisure activities. In a similarly disruptive move, Eichhorn began her preparations for the German Pavilion with the idea of destroying and then rebuilding it. That option being, presumably, unavailable, she has chosen to excavate the structure, employing a local archaeological team to uncover the foundations, and to reveal alterations to the structure of the walls and floors. The visitor meets no further artistic intervention, but instead is confronted with the architectural traces of the history and evolution of the building, including a false rumour that it was destroyed in 1938. There is something



here to engage those with an interest in the politics and history of archaeology. There is a more direct engagement with ancient material culture, specifically early Islamic, to be found in *Queendom*, by Ilit Azoulay, on show in the Israeli Pavilion. Azoulay has produced a series of inkjet prints which mash together images taken from many collections of Islamic art and craft. The exhibition fabricates a parallel cultural history, 'non-linear and accumulative', which interrogates many conventional narratives of the history of the Middle East, as of the boundary between reality and the digital universe.

Nan Goldin's short film, *Sirens*, was for me a real highlight of *The Milk of Dreams*. Goldin's aesthetics repudiate any kind of classicism, largely because the work is a montage of clips from Goldin's favourite 30 films, many from the 1970s. Nevertheless, there are Homeric undercurrents here, Goldin applying a Joycean malleability. The *Sirens* become conflated with Circe, and their offer of worldly knowledge is pushed aside in favour drug-induced ecstasy. There are striking images of lone men in various kinds of trouble, and many of the Black supermodel Donyale Luna, who died at the age of thirty-three of a heroin overdose. At the time of writing, Goldin's film can be seen on the website of her gallery, Marian Goodman (mariangoodman.com).

The Palazzo Grimani is a state museum and exhibition space that hosts exhibitions to coincide with the Biennale. No-one with an interest in the classical tradition should miss the reconstruction of one of Europe's earliest rooms dedicated to the display of classical statuary, assembled in the mid-16th century, the Sala del Doge. The reconstruction was opened for the 2019 Biennale and was originally only intended to remain on display for a few months. The success of the project, and then the pandemic, have led to an extension, and the display is scheduled to continue until the Biennale's conclusion, at the end of November. The Palazzo itself contains wonderful examples of classically inspired wall-painting and plasterwork, and the reconstitution of the Doge's collection involved significant remodelling of the room, which can be appreciated by watching a time-lapse film. Currently on show in the exhibition areas are works by Georg Baselitz and the American painter, Mary Weatherall, whose large abstract canvases, some supplemented with fluorescent tubes, are responses to Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*. No mythological allusion is visible here: these are



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paintings about painting. But I would recommend a visit, simply to view the interior decorations and the Doge's collection. If you have institutional affiliation in a relevant field, you may qualify for free entry, as you will in all state museums in Italy.

As always, there is much to reflect on in this year's Biennale, and the central exhibition in particular opens up a wide space for debate, perhaps most directly about gender. It may leave those centred in antiquity with an awareness of their marginality, but that will itself also prove to be an impetus to continue conversations. The one I want to have concerns the relationship between artistic creativity and historicism.

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