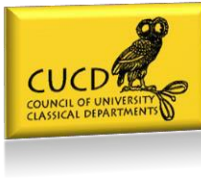


What is there of Interest to Classicists at the 60th Venice Biennale?

by Matthew Fox

There are three recognisable markers of classical reception that stand out in the vast exhibition of contemporary visual art that is the 60th Venice Biennale: columns, foundation myths, and the Greco-Roman past as inspiration for queer sexualities. But these elements are not in evidence in much of the work on display. The title of the biennale, *Stranieri Ovunque/Foreigners Everywhere* asks visitors to confront the issues of identity and migration that are so prominent a feature of our political moment. This biennale places a strong emphasis on art produced outside conventional canons, and above all, the work of non-European and indigenous artists, both in the pavilions representing eighty-eight nations, and in the central international pavilion. Its curator Adriano Pedrosa works in São Paulo, and is the first in this position to be based in the Southern Hemisphere while preparing the exhibition.

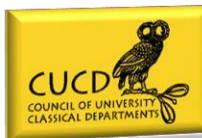
Pedrosa has been open about his pride in showcasing the work of artists whose location and heritage has presented obstacles to their inclusion in a global art scene that has traditionally been orientated to the West and North. Most of the artists selected are appearing at the biennale for the first time. The Danish pavilion provides a neat emblem of the effect of this emphasis. In 2022, it housed an installation inspired by centaur mythology and science fiction. This year, the word Denmark on the facade has been overwritten with Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenlandic for 'Greenland'), and the interior filled with an eye-opening and extensive show of photographs by Greenlandic artist Inuuteq Storch, in dialogue with archival images that he has recontextualized. In such a context, it is no surprise that classical references are thin on the ground. But



when they do appear, they make a cogent statement about the capacity of antiquity to contribute productively to narratives of canon subversion, de-colonization, and queerness.

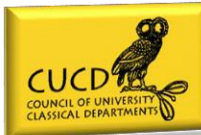
The work of two artists in the Arsenale section of the of the international pavilion are a case in point. The classicizing mosaics of Omar Mismar (from Lebanon) make inventive use of the medium, preserving something of the familiar colour range and some traditional iconography, but handling modern subject-matter. They also engage with issues of the management and preservation of cultural heritage. In one, archaeologists are depicted piling up sandbags to protect a mosaic panel from war damage. In another, two naked men embrace, but their faces are occluded by the rearrangement of the tesserae, alluding to a familiar problem in mosaic preservation, here given an extra layer by the frank homoeroticism. These are all displayed on the wall. Mismar has a further, large mosaic laid on the floor in the section of the show housed in the Giardini. This is an abstract work, containing no human figures, but interesting for its handling of pattern, making something new out of an ancient aesthetic tradition.

An enormous painted canvas by the Mexican artist Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, stretching across much of the width of the gallery in the Arsenale, has little about it that recalls any classical aesthetic. Entitled *Rage is a Machine in Times of Senselessness* it also contains elements of textile and metal. Different painting styles produce contrasting textures, some areas taking the eye into a forested landscape by the sea, others presenting a uniform surface recalling a vehicle of some kind, with exhaust pipes. There are a few small, embroidered panels, and the work is mounted to show the back of the canvas, and the areas where the threads of the embroidery are brought through. Here Jaeger has also made sparing use of writing as a gloss on the images on the front. One of these depicts a group of naked women engaged in sex acts. The textual gloss gives quotations from Sappho and by means of a drawn arrow describes the embroidered orgy on the other side as ‘Sapphic research.’



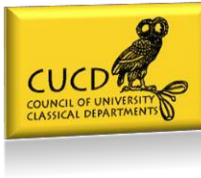
Further wings of the Arsénale house more national pavilions. Lebanon is showing an installation by Mounira al Solh, which includes a film, a boat-like structure and some paintings, some of which immediately recall ancient iconography. Knossos's snake goddess is here, so is an image of a girl kissing a bull. The installation is entitled *A Dance with her Myth*, and the myth in question is that of Europa. Al Solh reorientates the myth in striking ways, re-centring it in Tyre, where some of the action in the film was shot, and giving Europa a great deal more agency than is the case in earlier visual retellings. I particularly appreciated the inclusion, and subversion, of the story of Heracles and his dog as the discoverers of murex, as well as the bathetic scenes in the film where, failing to find murex, the narrator informs us that she resorted to red onions and red cabbage. It is a vision of mythology, and of Europe, as disappointments, but it also draws on myth to celebrate women's resourcefulness and solidarity.

Wael Shawky represents Egypt in the national pavilion in the Giardini with his film *Drama 1882*, exploring the country's history of colonization, which has been a hit with the critics. The film alludes to ancient Alexandria, but for a more concentrated engagement with his work in classical reception, you need to visit the Palazzo Grimani, a state museum which has for some years been a home for exhibitions of contemporary art. That programme has continued alongside its progressive re-fitting of the palazzo's original rooms with their impressive plaster work and wall paintings, expressing the humanistic interests of the Grimani family, and their close connection with Rome. This year, more sculptures from antiquity and the Renaissance have been liberated from other collections (mostly in Venice), and there is a show of three Grimani portraits by Tintoretto. The display of ancient statuary in the Tribuna, one of Europe's earliest galleries of ancient art, which was originally restored on a temporary basis, has become a permanent feature. With the removal of the screens that formerly showed a film of the speeded-up restoration process, it is now an amusing game to try to tell the new plaster surfaces from the original stone ones. Until 30th June, Shawky's film *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* is showing, commissioned as part of the Pompeii Commitment project, that engages artists with the archaeological site (see pompeiicommitment.org). At the heart of Shawky's work is narrative, and the film's



soundtrack is a retelling of Hesiod's creation myth in Arabic, with a few minor variations and alternative sources. It lasts 50 minutes and runs from the creation to the flood. Part of the action is filmed on the Nile at Thebes, and more in the archaeological site of Pompeii itself. Actors wearing baggy costumes and huge painted heads, with mouths and eyes operated by puppet rods, process around the ruins, gesturing and dancing, or disport themselves in Pompeii's houses. In each scene a figure acts a mouthpiece for one of the storytellers of the soundtrack. It bears some resemblance to Rossellini's TV film of the life of Augustine of Hippo, filmed in Pompeii half a century ago. It is an engaging and memorable experience, exploiting the archaeological site as a stage set in a unique manner.

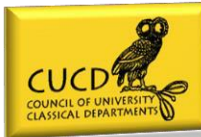
In two national pavilions, classical columns function as emblems of the doomed attempt to appeal to antique heritage to bolster corrupt political systems. In the Swiss pavilion in the Giardini, the Brazilian artist, Guerreiro do Divino Amor, has introduced a mini planetarium, which shows two films, united by a camp and satirical aesthetic, and drawing on classical themes in a number of ways. *Roma Talismano* repurposes Roman antiquity with sheep on the Appian Way, a woman legionary incarnating the Roman maternal she-wolf, and a text focussed on deconstructing the idea of *Roma aeterna*. The other film, *Miracle of Helvetia*, offers an alternative Olympian pantheon under the rulership of the goddess Helvetia. New gods including Diewiesa Æterna, who 'rules over biotechnology', and Nidusta, 'a wild agrifood beast with the face of an angel and an insatiable appetite'. To enter the planetarium, you pass an atrium littered with fallen pillars. In this work, despite the hilarity and vulgarity of the visual style, many questions are raised about the usefulness of the classical tradition in reinforcing, but also in disrupting, the cultural processes of late capitalism. In a more sombre mood, in the Turkish pavilion in the Arsenale, Gülsün Karamustafa's *Hollow and Broken* takes a similarly subversive look at a longer period of history, with plastic moulds for the different column elements. These sit alongside broken Venetian glasswork, and a free-standing screen showing a harrowing film collage of documentaries of extreme displacement and atrocity from the 20th century. Outside, by the water's edge towards the end of the Arsenale's exhibitions spaces, Lauren Halsey's *Keepers of the Known* take a more optimistic approach to the potential of the column to display cultural power.



These are five Hathoric columns, the surfaces carved with images conveying the culture of South-central Los Angeles, where the artist is based.

In the Romanian pavilion, paintings by Șerban Savu, alongside some architectural models with wall mosaics by Belgian collaborators Atelier Brenda, engage with reception in a lower gear. Savu's figures are captured at moments of rest from labour. Intriguingly, some of this labour involves archaeologists and restorers, working both on Thracian material and on churches. The apathy of the workers and the interrupted relationship between them and their surroundings give this pavilion a thought-provoking quality that leaves many questions open, including about the handling of the classical heritage in the region (paintings include scenes set in both Romania and Moldova). Worth considering too from a reception perspective is the work on show in the French pavilion, an installation by Julien Creuzet, born in the outskirts of Paris and growing up in Martinique. *Attila cataracte...* contains sculptures, film, music, and a poem, and has a strong immersive aesthetic. Creuzet's computer-generated image of a statue of Neptune revolving under water is evidence that there is no compelling reason why classical imagery needs to be encountered via the polarity of imperial oppressor and subject.

As usual, there are celebrity exhibitions beyond the biennale held in some of the grand permanent gallery spaces. At the Guggenheim, the first retrospective in Italy dedicated to Jean Cocteau presents a scholarly account of his life and works, not skirting over his enthusiasm for the neo-classical Nazi artist Arno Breker, but giving both his reworkings of classical antiquity and his homosexuality a good airing. One particularly striking example that was new to me is a drawing entitled *Laocoon* from the mid-1930s. Cocteau transforms the statue into a gay pin-up, with over-detailed genitals, and the serpentine restraints of the original statue transformed into a bondage accessory. Westwards from the Guggenheim, in the gallery of the Pinault collection at Punta della Dogana, a disorientating and futuristic show, *Liminal*, by Pierre Huyghe (born in Paris but working in Santiago, Chile) owes much more to the aesthetics of the *Dune* film series (including hovering spaceships spewing out dust) than to anything classical. But in one of a group of display cases that recreate an imaginary seabed, the lower half of



a human figure rests on the sand. It recalls a plaster cast from Pompeii more than a piece of statuary, perhaps also evoking memories of Hirst's *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, shown in the same space in 2017.

The controversy over the inclusion of an Israeli pavilion in this year's biennale reached a state of non-resolution during the opening week when the artist and curators declared that the pavilion would remain closed awaiting a ceasefire in Gaza and the return of hostages. Through the window, Ruth Patir's short film *(M)otherland* is showing on a screen that can be dimly seen through the window. But even from that viewpoint, it is clear that these mothers are engaged in a protest, and that they take the form of actors encased in costumes designed to bring to life the prehistoric clay figures familiar from many museums in the eastern Mediterranean, even, in some cases, including the museum accession number. The work makes an unusually clear connection between cultural heritage and political action. However, in many of the works I have mentioned here, that same connection can be felt. The classical may only be a peripheral force in Venice, but for those artists engaging with it, it remains a powerful and provocative one, receptive to a range of marginalized voices and available for continuing reinvention.

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