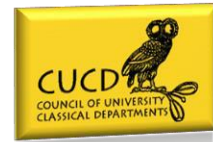


What is there of Interest to Classicists at the 61st Venice Biennale?

by Matthew Fox

In the enormous display of contemporary art brought together in Venice in alternate years, there are always prompts to reflect on cultures beyond the Classical world and its legacies. However, as in earlier editions, there is also much to be gained by unpicking the dialectic between Classical and contemporary, as between global and European, and I hope that this report will encourage visitors to Venice this year to dip into this biennale, doubtless also to find points of contact that I have missed.

The 61st biennale will be remembered for the controversies that accompanied the opening preview week. There were protests by artists and visitors against the inclusion of pavilions representing Russia and Israel, and a strike by the site's employees. These protests magnified the gesture made by the biennale's jury, whose role is to award prizes to the most significant pavilions or artists. This year the jury took the unprecedented step of resigning before the opening of the biennale, in protest over the way the Meloni-appointed directorate had facilitated the inclusion of a Russian pavilion despite international sanctions, and also questioning the legal basis on which bi-lateral agreements with Russia and Israel had remained in place while their leaders were subject to international war crimes indictments. That trouble came in the wake of the death, in May 2025, of the chief curator, Koyo Kouoh, who had been ill for some time. Her legacy and vision, however, is strongly in evidence in the large exhibition, *In Minor Keys*, in the Central Pavilion of the Giardini, and in much of the Arsenale, which was brought to completion by a team of dedicated successors. The show emphasises the work of artists from the global majority, many working beyond mainstream Western art institutions, or in marginalised or precarious settings. It stresses alternative



genealogies and the social embeddedness of new traditions, and in most of the work, the Classical tradition offers no lure to engagement. Even compared to the previous biennale, which shared a similar emphasis, there is little sign that most of the 110 selected artists are inspired, even negatively, by Classical artistic authority. Even the repurposed columns and subversions of mythology that were a sporadic feature two years ago were barely visible this year.

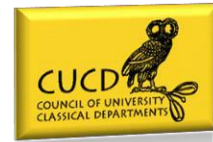
The Greek pavilion therefore is unusual in its direct employment of Classical themes and visual material. The neo-Byzantine building takes up one of the side edges of the long oblong extension to the original Giardini. Athenian artist and architect Andreas Angelidakis (b. 1968) has reconfigured the pavilion as an escape room, alluding to the world of immersive gaming, and in the process, producing (according to the exhibition catalogue) 'A Turbo-Charged Platonic Cave, born out of the Internet.' The interior is divided into two, both sections running the full width of the building, but with a division into a front half, a darker space strewn with beanbags and the occasional plinth, and the back, which is more like the interior of a shop selling fetish or clubwear. In the centre of the back wall, as it were like the puppet show in Socrates' cave, is a video screen, sometimes showing an owl reading a book, but also a wide-ranging video work in which discussion of sections of Plato's *Republic* alternates with testimony from more recent LGBTQ+ history in Greece. The huge, elongated beanbags are covered in a fabric printed as columns, but these have collapsed and are bound up in chains. Glass cases in the "shop" contain 3D printed objects inspired by Platonic texts, and unfeasibly oversize T-shirt-like garments are printed with designs evoking the same themes. It is a thought-provoking and allusive experience. But aside from the preview week, where the global art world arrives in huge numbers, this is a quiet corner of the Giardini, so the label of escape is perhaps more a commentary on this artist's ideological affiliations. There is a sense of alienation from much of what is going on elsewhere on the site, an escape into a more contemplative world where the value of theory for political action can be contemplated in a nuanced and relatively peaceful environment, albeit one imbued with a trashy queer aesthetic.

In spatial and ideological contrast, at the far side of the same area, is the Austrian pavilion, the *succès de scandale* of this biennale. Above the entrance hangs a large

church bell, and next to it is a small crane. The crane's operator is a woman, naked except for a safety harness around her waist. Dismounting from her crane, she climbs up a rope and hangs upside down inside the bell, which then strikes, her body being used to accompany the bell's clapper. The swinging head, the flowing hair and the chiming of the bell make disturbing viewing, but that is tame in comparison to the graphic theatrical performance staged inside and around the pavilion, with linked events through the city. This *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Florentina Holzinger (b. 1986) is entitled *Seaworld Venice*, and its main point of reference is the climate catastrophe, focussing on water use and alluding to the perilous situation of Venice itself. At the back of the pavilion, two portable blue toilets feed the audience's own waste products into a tank in which one of the performers can be seen fighting with a thrashing hose pipe ejecting brown water or trying to control the flow by operating a fly wheel on an elaborate pump mechanism. In the heart of the pavilion is a weathervane, a revolving ladder structure ascended or descended by more naked performers, navigating inverted statues that seem to be casts of their own bodies. Other chambers contain other naked women performers – submerged with an aqualung, dancing, or maniacally driving a jet ski.

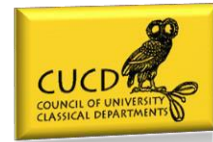
Aside from its pointed contrast to the Greek pavilion, I have included this work because it does make one direct reference to antiquity: a motto on the bell, cast by a foundry where the more usual product is bells for churches. The motto is the *sententia* from Cicero's *Verrines*, "o tempora o mores". Beneath it is an image in relief that recognisably reworks the iconography of The Last Supper. In an artistic practice so resolutely opposed to irony, I find it tempting to read Cicero's words as a reflection on the work itself and its context. The moral decline in question seems to me to be more apposite as a comment on the practice of art production and consumption on show here, rather than on the climate crisis.

In the first section of *In Minor Keys*, in the Central Pavilion of the Giardini, there is one room where two other artists are using Latin. South African painter Johannes Phokela (b. 1966) is showing a set of seven large paintings in a pale blue that recall the aesthetic of Portuguese *Azulejos*. Each has a Latin motto: they are the expanded canon of seven virtues, Chastity, Temperance, Charity, Diligence, Patience, Kindness,



Humility. Phokala's iconography owes more to Hogarth than to any Classical or neo-Classical influence. Opposite, in a group of paintings by Japanese artist and feminist activist Yoshiko Shimada (b.1959), there is an echo of the blue group on the opposite wall. A single woman, wearing pink clothing and a pink helmet, is shown in a pose that bears a resemblance to heroic figures on propaganda posters from Soviet Russia or China, and who could be read as a virtue figure. But she also takes iconography from Piero Della Francesca's *Resurrection* in Borgo San Sepolcro. The Latin motto reads "non est tuum decernere", which I took as an allusion to the censorship of feminist activism against which Shimada has battled for much of her career. The painting's title is *Resurrection*, and the struggle between the visual optimism of the figure and the silencing implied in the motto produces a powerful emblem of the idea of the feminist artist as pioneer. All the work by Shimada here dates from 2023. Also included is *Prophecy after the Pandemic* (2023), a video which records a performance work staged at the temple of Apollo at Cuma, as part of a project *Magma Vivo nell' Arte Contemporanea Giapponese*, produced by the Accademia delle begli Arti di Napoli in 2022. Women clad in pink robes, one bearing the motto 'The Witches are Back', dance and process through the same spaces immortalised by Roberto Rossellini when he placed Ingrid Bergman there in *Journey to Italy*, seventy years ago.

The Applied Arts Pavilion is a collaboration between the UK's Victoria and Albert Museum and the Biennale which has been running since 2014. It occupies a space on the ground floor of one of the smaller buildings in the Arsenale, and this year hosts a small exhibition by Gala Porras-Kim (b. 1985), who works in Los Angeles and London, often focussing on museums and collection culture. Like several other works this year, this show invites us to think and look differently about the fate of objects uncovered by archaeology and ending up in museums. Porras-Kim's work has interesting echoes, both thematic and aesthetic, with the show by Oriol Vilanova (b. 1980) in the Spanish pavilion. Vilanova has coated the interior walls with a huge number of old postcards, in neat rows running floor to ceiling. They are a mixture of landscapes and tourist destination with items from museum collections. There is one particular vertical band where objects against a red background draw the eye to the kinds of things normally seen in glass cases in archaeological museums: the applied arts of antiquity, some Classical, but also others from different periods and cultures. It is an engaging and



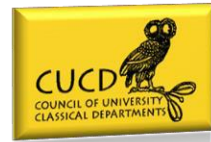
unique experience, and Vilanova’s title, *Los Restos*, evokes ideas of abandoned objects and experiences, souvenirs, and the desire to capture and preserve the past through photography. These ideas take on a new eloquence in this time and context. Porrás-Kim’s work adds fascinating further layers, as she has worked directly with the other types of material from the glass cases. In one instance she has gathered residues created by the activity of moths on textiles into a wall painting; a small monochrome of golden brown with a crazed and irregular surface. Another vitrine shows a near-cube formed of the dust gathered in the display cases of “the arts of Oceania, Africa, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in New York City.” One wall is taken up with an oversize drawing of a selection of objects from other museum cases, all united in being examples of dissociation from the original purpose and context. Among these are a few dislocated survivals from ancient Mediterranean cultures.

Materiality and archaeology are at the heart of another section in the Arsenale, showing work by the Lebanese collaborators Joana Hadjithomas (b. 1969) and Khalil Joreige (b. 1969). There are large sculptural works, wall pieces, video screens, and a slide show of texts, using three old-fashioned carousel slide projectors. The works are all different ways of presenting in visual form the products of archaeological excavation. But they look away from the things that such excavations usually unearth: objects, built structures, the remnants of past habitation. Instead, there are cores taken from drilling at archaeological sites in Paris, Lebanon, Athens, and Venice; blown-up images of the *spolia* cleared during excavations; tapestries based on the display of similar material. At the heart of the display is the presentation of the recent history of the remains of the ancient city of Orthosia. This site, previously known only from the textual and numismatic record, was discovered in 2007, with the annihilation of the refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared in Northern Lebanon. The camp was established in 1949 to accommodate 30,000 displaced Palestinians and was destroyed by a bombing campaign by Lebanese government forces, in response to attacks by the Fatah al-Islam militant group that had emerged in the camp in 2006. Video works show how the clearing of the camp after the bombing revealed the hidden remains of the ancient city, which itself had been destroyed by a tsunami in 551 CE. The commentary and testimony of the camp’s residents present not just the excavations themselves, but

also the political processes which led to it being reburied, as a new layer of foundations was laid to allow rebuilding and resettlement.

The threat to ancient cultural heritage in the Middle East is also important in the work of Saudi-Palestinian artist Dana Arwatani (b. 1987), who has constructed a neo-Classical/Byzantine mosaic on the floor of the pavilion of Saudi Arabia, but using an eclectic range of iconographies and construction techniques, and ceramic tiles much larger than the tesserae of their ancient forebears.

There are a few works in this biennale which make reference to ancient mythology without any obvious appropriation of Classical iconography. Yto Barrada (b. 1971), in the French Pavilion, has taken inspiration from Saturnian mythology, but that has left no discernible trace in the work itself. In the Brazilian pavilion, mid-way between the Austrian and the Greek, *Aracnes*, by Rosanna Paulino (b. 1967) is a site-specific installation that has been evolving for thirty years. Its main feature is a low wall of reinforced concrete, with the reinforcement bars protruding a metre or so above the top of the wall. These are interlaced with white thread, and white fabric and paper elements, some with printed images, are placed among them, like so many wrapped insects for the later consumption of a giant spider. Outside the pavilion is a large ceramic pot, the work of Adriana Varejão (b. 1964) which blends pre-Columbian ceramic traditions with Attic red figure to produce an eye-catching hybrid, the figure in red also representing a mythological blend, a kind of snake with incipient hand. Irish artist Alice Maher (b. 1956) has a display of huge drawings of the four Sybils but using none of their ancient or Renaissance iconography. These are naked women all sitting, and partly wrapped, in huge piles of their own hair. *The Sibyls* (2025) pairs each drawing with a dark mirror on the floor in front, and a number of mysterious cast items, looking like nuggets of moulded mercury. An earlier work of Maher's, *The Daughters of Ouranos* (1996) is on show in one of the boat sheds at the back of the Arsenale. Originally shown in a temporary exhibition in a park in Paris, these orange resin heads sit half-submerged in the old dock, an engaging intervention in one of the most scenic parts of the huge structures of brick and water that make up the Arsenale's exhibition spaces.



I did not have the time this year to venture into the collateral events that take place alongside the official biennale exhibitions. But I was made aware of two classically inflected paintings by the New York-based artist Sanya Kantarovsky (b. 1982). One depicts Narcissus and the other, A centaur. They can be seen in his show *Basic Failure*, at the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti in Palazzo Loredan, like the rest of the Biennale, until November.

As in previous editions, the world's largest display of contemporary art presents an excess of riches and defies unified reading or response, despite the diligence of the programming and the themes identified by the curators. And although examples of Classical reception are a marginal concern this year, where they do crop up, they continue to demonstrate the multi-valent potential of the ancient world for today's artists. The emphasis in particular on ramifications of museum practice and heritage management shows that the ideological and methodological discussions in those areas are also having an impact on the practice of today's creators.

For more detail on the organisation of the biennale, I refer readers to my [report on the 59th edition \(CUCD Bulletin 51, 2022\)](#).

The official Biennale Website is <https://www.labiennale.org/en>.

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