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

by Felix Claus

The Venice Biennale is a biennial celebration of contemporary art comprising various events. At its heart is the curator-led exhibition in the Giardini and the Arsenale; there are also exhibitions by participating countries, both in the Giardini (the so-called pavilions) and in the Arsenale, as well as at various locations throughout the city. In addition, other associated "collateral" events take place in the city, organised by museums (such as the Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia), foundations (such as the Fondation Pinault at the Palazzo Grassi and at the Punta della Dogana), galleries and the artists themselves (such as Anish Kapoor). The event offers an overwhelming array of options that forces you to make choices; this year it runs until 22 November.

In his biennial *CUCD Bulletin* articles "What is there of Interest to Classicists at the Xth Venice Biennale", Matthew Fox has explored the reception of classical antiquity in contemporary art at the Biennale. A key question is whether contemporary artists have completely shaken off the classical past, or whether they still do refer to antiquity in one way or another. The answer is nuanced, and certainly this year there are few direct or indirect traces of it to be found in the main exhibition "In Minor Keys". Matthew Fox's observation in his 2026 article is therefore correct (*CUCD Bulletin* 55: 2026.04, pp. 28–34). This general absence is certainly linked to the very broad (read: predominantly non-Western) global selection of artists made by the late curator Koyo Kouoh and her team.

Nevertheless, there are still various classical connections to discover in the exhibitions at the national pavilions and the collateral events. Below are some of my findings, which I am pleased to share with readers at Matthew Fox's request.

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I'd like to begin with the exhibition "We Thought We Were Alone" by the Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen (b. 1965) at the Palazzo Rota Ivancich. It includes two (or possibly three) works that refer very explicitly to ancient artworks: "The Three Graces", "Medusa", and (perhaps also) "Think Twice". "Think Twice" is a two-headed sculpture (partly human, partly animal), reminiscent of the depiction of Janus heads in classical antiquity. I like to compare Koen Vanmechelen with the renowned Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933). Like Pistoletto, Vanmechelen creates art to improve the world around us. Something is fundamentally wrong with our world; art must draw attention to this and bring about change. Both artists 'use' iconic works of art from antiquity to convey their message. The centrepiece of Vanmechelen's exhibition is undoubtedly the sculpture of "The Three Graces". Quite a few contemporary artists have already ventured into reinterpreting the three Graces, such as Kehinde Wilkey (b. 1977) and Fabio Viale (b. 1975), but Vanmechelen takes a bold – not to say vandalistic – approach to Antonio Canova's graceful Graces. The two outer figures have been given iguana heads, whilst the central figure has a golden egg for a head. What is going on here? The explanation can be deduced from the exhibition's title. As the artist himself says in the exhibition brochure: "For centuries we thought we were alone. We imagined ourselves at the centre of all things." The time has come, the artist continues, to live (afresh) in harmony with nature, in reciprocity and hybridity.

The 'hybrid' figure of Medusa has played an important role in Vanmechelen's work for many years. Since 2015, she has appeared in two forms: either with the face of a beautiful Black woman (who is the portrait of his wife and muse) or – as here in the exhibition – with the face of a woman whose head has been severed in mortal terror (alluding both to "The Head of Medusa" (c. 1613–1618) by Pieter Paul Rubens and to the sculpture series "The Severed Head of Medusa" (2008–2017) by Damien Hirst). In both cases, however, the artist has added chicken heads to the snake-like hair of the Medusa head. Snakes and (eggs from) chickens have medicinal properties or serve as the basis for vaccines. For Vanmechelen, Medusa is therefore a metaphor for hope and healing. This is also what Michelangelo Pistoletto does with his "Venere degli Stracci", which presents the ancient goddess Venus as a symbol of rebirth, "rigenerazione". What both artists do is, each in their own way, reinterpret a mythological figure from classical antiquity (the monster Medusa on the one hand and

the goddess Venus on the other) within today's social context as a symbol of a better world, which Pistoletto beautifully describes as “Il Terzo Paradiso”.

Deeply hidden in the heart of Venice lies the Palazzo Bonvicini, home to the Fondation Valmont. Three rooms are dedicated to the exhibition “Penelope. Her Journeys”. Three artists each present an installation that sheds light on the figure of Penelope from Homer’s *Odyssey*: Kimiko Yoshido’s “Après le massacre, la reconciliation”, Stephanie Blake’s “Penelope, the Storyteller”, and Gayle Chong Kwan’s “The Lotus Eaters”. Together, these installations portray a completely different Penelope who, in contrast to the Homeric image of the virtuous and faithful wife awaiting the return of her husband Odysseus, is presented as a self-assured woman who takes her destiny into her own hands. In this sense, the exhibition ties in with developments in contemporary literature (think, for example, of Margaret Atwood’s retelling in *The Penelopiad*) and film (the character of Penelope in *The Odyssey* by Christopher Nolan). It is also worth noting that “Penelope. Her Journeys” is presented as the third part of a trilogy. “Odysseus” and “Telemachus” have previously been featured at the Fondation Valmont.

Medea is also the title of another collateral exhibition. The Georgian artist Tamara Kvezitadze (b. 1968), no stranger to previous biennials, is holding a solo exhibition entitled “Medea – Fragments of Memory” at the Palazzo Bragadin (which I have not personally visited). Reportedly, Medea does not appear in the exhibition literally as a mythological figure. Rather, her life story – marked by love, heartbreak and displacement – serves as the starting point for a reflection on the impossibility of a stable and continuous life. Fragmented and shifting sculptures give expression to this human condition.

AMA Venezia is a ‘gallery’ where the Belgian art collector Laurent Asscher displays the latest acquisitions in his collection. This year, you’ll find the humorous work of the American sculptor Ray Charles: “Everyone takes off their pants once a day” (2024). The title says it all: you see a woman taking off her trousers. She is still wearing her knickers. Charles is known for ‘parodying’ ancient sculptures, as he has done with “Lo Spinario” from the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome, and also with the equestrian

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statue of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. In both sculptures, the artist portrays himself; they are, therefore, 'self-portraits'. Here, the sculpture ironically mimics the pose of Aphrodite (bent, slightly spiral-shaped) stepping out of her bath.

Nalini Malani (b. 1946) is currently one of India's leading female artists; at the Venice Biennale, she is exhibiting at the Magazzini del Sale. Malani is known for drawing inspiration from Greek and Hindu mythology. She is particularly captivated by the fate of women who are persecuted and neglected by history, such as Medea (once again) and Cassandra from Greek mythological tales, and the character of Gita from the Ramayana epic. In the exhibition "Of Woman Born", she reflects on the story of Orestes, who kills his mother in revenge for his father's murder. The result is a 9-channel iPad animation, a powerful ethical indictment of violence. Malani is set to have a major retrospective in the second half of next year at the Tate Modern in London. For the Classicist, the exhibition may be a fine opportunity to discover how a non-Western artist (Malani is of Indian origin) blends Greek mythology with Eastern traditions. At present, however, we do not yet know which works she will exhibit in the retrospective.

Finally, I would like to return briefly to the Arsenale. Near the floating "Filles d'Ouranos" by the Irish artist Alice Maher stands the impressive sculpture "SimbiSiren" by the African-American artist Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972). In my view, the sculpture is both a reference to an African water spirit and a reference to the Greek siren. Note the unusual hybrid name. Incidentally, this is not Mutu's first attempt at such a concept: in 2019, she installed seated African women in four niches at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, whom she called "Caryatids". Likewise in Venice, Mutu creates a hybrid being in which Western and African traditions merge – a hybridity that is also reflected in the work's title.

Overall, therefore, although classical antiquity is not very present in the core exhibition this year, its presence can still be felt at various points through the wider Biennale programme.

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