



## **Pax Americana in the Serene Republic Venice Biennale 2007**

BY DAVID COHEN - Special to the Sun  
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VENICE— The Venice Biennale has been the Olympics of the visual arts since its inception in 1895. In odd years, countries choose their artist representatives for permanent pavilions in the Giardini or in rented spaces around town: scuoli, palazzi, churches, cultural foundations. In addition there are major curated exhibitions that offer overviews of the state of art: in the Italy Pavilion, the largest in the Giardini, which since the demise of fascism has become an international survey; in the Arsenale, where generally hipper talents are showcased in a mammoth, historic rope factory, and in a cornucopia of "collateral" satellite events.

This year, for the first time, the director is an American: Robert Storr, a former Museum of Modern Art curator and recently appointed dean of the Yale Art School. The title he has come up with is "Think with the senses, feel with the mind: Art in the present tense." While his selections and reasonings reflect a notion of art in troubled times, his generally neat, sober, focused festival is a deal less anarchic and querulous than biennials past. Pax Americana has arrived in the Serene Republic.

Actually, a division between the Giardini and the Arsenale, crudely speaking, is between war and peace. The rougher, former military-industrial buildings include such meditations on conflict as Mr. Storr's choices of Italian artists Paolo Canevari, whose "Bouncing Skull" (2007) features a child kicking around a skull in front of a gutted tower block in the former army HQ in Belgrade, and Gabriele Basilico's sumptuously ruinous cityscapes, "Beirut 1991" (2003). The mood in the work of both, however, is melancholy and poignant rather than desperate or macabre. Argentine Léon Ferrari, by contrast, went for the jugular with "Western-Christian Civilization" (1965), in which Christ is crucified on an American bomber. The inclusion of this early work at the opening of the exhibit reads as a political apologia by Mr. Storr.

Having, so to speak, atoned for his passport at the Arsenale, the American curator has no qualms in presenting many of his countrymen in the Italia pavilion, which is the heart of the Biennale. There are rooms devoted to Biennale familiars Robert Ryman, Ellsworth Kelly, Jenny Holzer, Louise Bourgeois, and Sol LeWitt, as well as newer introductions for an international audience such as Elizabeth Murray, Thomas Nozkowski, and Raymond Pettibon. Mr. Nozkowski's thoughtful, quirkily compact little abstractions — loosely intimating specific sources and improvising playfully upon art historical

precedents — epitomize Mr. Storr's thesis of art at the nexus of the sensual and the cerebral.

Two of the largest rooms are given over to German giants of the contemporary scene, Gerhard Richter (whose 2002 MoMA retrospective was organized by Mr. Storr) and Sigmar Polke. But where Mr. Richter might have contributed to the sense of political tension and terrorism with his Baader-Meinhof paintings, and Mr. Polke with his cacophonous, deliberately overloaded referential paintings, they are shown instead here in a serene mode, Mr. Richter with his enigmatically lush smudge paintings and Mr. Polke by a series of arcane, nearmonochrome sensual pictures using violet pigments on irregular stretches of fabric, as in "Neo Byzantium" (2005).

With so many Americans elsewhere, the actual American pavilion is given over this year to a deceased Cuban: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died of AIDS in 1996 at age 38. His spare, minimalist heaps of candies and stacks of posters that visitors can take away elegantly symbolize a dispersal of essence. The show offers a welcome moment of quiet and repose amid the clamor of the Biennale.

National pavilions are each chosen by a named commissioner, who is sometimes also that show's curator. While following their own tastes and local agendas they often respond to the mood set by the Biennale director. The British artist Tracey Emin has played down her carefully cultivated popular persona as the "bad girl" of the British art scene with an elegant, almost prim display. There is nothing like her earlier slept-in bed or tent embroidered with the names of everyone she has slept with. While her imagery continues to play on a harrowing personal mythology of teenage angst — evident in monotypes shown here taken from earlier sketchbooks and delivered in a knowingly pathetic, spindly line — sexual languor does not prevent her paintings from looking like polite salon abstraction riffs on Cy Twombly and Joan Mitchell.

Next door, in one of the strongest shows in the Giardini, France's Sophie Calle picks up Ms. Emin's self-pity and takes it in a totally different direction. When the artist was jolted via e-mail by a boyfriend, she sent his crass missive to over a hundred women chosen for their different professions and skills and asked each to interpret the letter and propose a reply. A statistician analyzes the length of 22 sentences in the letter; a clown reads aloud with personal asides, interpreting the letter in positive terms, grasping at straws, feeling the tenderness of his ellipses and parentheses; a pair of Talmudists debate its meaning dialectically; an actress — Miranda Richardson — reads it dramatically and then performs origami.

In harmony with Mr. Storr's breakdown of dichotomies, there are many shows that elide the personal and the political. Callum Morton is one of three Australians showing in different venues. In the grounds of a private foundation in the Dorso Duro that also hosted shows for Armenia, Latin America, Scotland, and the New Forest in England, Mr. Morton erected a macabre, battle-worn wreck of a modernist breeze-block house. This turns out to have been modeled on his childhood home, built by his architect father, scaled down to two-thirds actual size. The intrepid visitor enters this smoldering ruin

through a front door, only to discover an air-conditioned white marble elevator lobby attended by a custodian in a white jacket. Pressing the button actually releases various ominous sound effects.

It so happens that in the blistering Venetian summer any art work that offers creature comforts is guaranteed sympathetic attention. In Singapore's slick but thoughtful four-person show at the neo-gothic Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, for instance, Zulkifli Mahmud's "Sonic Dome: An Empire of Thought" (2007) has a huge circular bed visitors lie on to contemplate a halogen star-studded, sound-filled dome, the bed occasionally vibrating in harmony.

The sprawling Arsenale hosted two large areas for places hitherto excluded from the Biennale: Africa, whose curatorial panel was chaired by Mr. Storr, and the People's Republic of China. The Chinese offered four women installation artists, including Cao Fei, aka China Tracy, who filled an inflated tent with gentle pop music and computer animations, and Kan Xuan, whose video animations of transmogrifying Buddhist sculptures were placed amid the arsenal's rusty, pungent gas tanks. Africa was an odd show. While it is a step in the right direction to franchise the continent, the inclusion of a white Spaniard, Miguel Barceló; a dead American, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and the British artists Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare wastes wall space of deserving living Africans.

Actually, nationality is often a point of contention at the Biennale, whose organization remains a legacy of 1890s nationalism and imperial power. Often countries chose famous citizens who live abroad, or domiciled foreigners. Newly autonomous regions in Europe, such as Wales or Northern Ireland, now have their own shows. Wales, for instance, out in a former beer warehouse on the Giudecca, includes the sculptor Richard Deacon, who lives in London, and the painter Merlin James, who lives in Glasgow, Scotland, but who were both born in the principality. Their shows — sharing space with a thoughtful photography-and-video-based Lebanese national pavilion (Syria and Egypt also have pavilions, incidentally, as does Israel) — are definitely worth the vaporetto ride. Mr. James, in particular, rivals Mr. Nozkowski as a poster boy for Mr. Storr's notion of thinking sensually and feeling cerebrally. His self-referential yet authentic seeming paintings are delectably anxious about their own condition.