

Abramovich, Pinault Watch as Kapoor's Apparition Spooks Venice

By Martin Gayford - Jun 5, 2011 7:00 PM ET

The 54th is not the best of [Venice Biennales](#), nor the worst. It must be the biggest ever.

While new nations are represented -- including [Andorra](#), [India](#), [Iraq](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) -- overall the impression is of homogeneity not diversity.

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“Ascension” by Anish Kapoor, installed in the church of San Giorgio Maggiore at 54th Venice Biennale. Photograph: Oak Taylor-Smith/ Arte Continua, via Bloomberg.

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“The Black Arch” by Raja and Shadia Alem is on show at the Saudi Arabian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Photo by Andrea Avezzu for Kingdom of Saudi Arabia/ Venice Biennale via Bloomberg.

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“Fait d’Hiver” (1988) by Jeff Koons. The work is on show at the Fondazione Prada, Venice. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York, Photo: Fondazione Prada via Bloomberg.

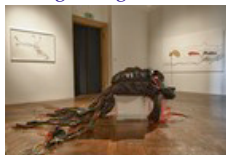
True, there is sometimes a local accent. For example, the [Saudi Pavilion](#) shows “The Black Arch” by the sisters Raja and Shadia Alem, a striking work that fuses lights, mirrors, moving projection and music in a modern fashion and with a nod to Islamic art of the past.

The big point, more obvious with every Biennale, is that modern art -- which only a few decades ago was a largely Western fad -- is now a pan-global language.

Another theme is the alliance between contemporary art and modern merchant princes. Roman Abramovich’s black mega-yacht was in town, docked near the Biennale gardens and surrounded by a security fence. The billionaire French businessman [Francois Pinault](#), now de facto the modern art Doge of Venice, gave the grandest and most stylish party (in the cloisters of San Giorgio Maggiore).

Pinault’s two substantial museums, at the [Palazzo Grassi](#) and [Punta della Dogana](#), are nonetheless slightly outshined by the [Fondazione Prada](#), which opened a Venetian headquarters at the 18th century Ca’Corner della Regina.

The roster of artists at these venues often overlaps. To my eye, the Prada display edges ahead for visual flair. It contains a witty juxtaposition between a Jeff Koons ceramic featuring pig, woman and penguin -- “Fait d’Hiver” (1988) -- and an array of antique porcelain.

[Enlarge image](#)

“Isidla,” a sculpture by Nicholas Hlobo, is being shown at the Venice Biennale. The work is included in the Future Generation Art Prize. Courtesy PinchukArtCentre, photo by Sergey Illin. Source Bolton & Quinn via Bloomberg.

Turquoise Minimalism

“Turquoise Enamel” (1967), a single blue-green minimalist sculpture by [Donald Judd](#) almost filling a small room at the Fondazione Prada looks glorious. A large room of Judds at the Dogana makes little impact.

Still, the Dogana exhibition, “In Praise of Doubt” (until Dec. 31) has its moments, notably Ed Kienholz’s “Roxy’s,” a detailed recreation of the interior of a 1940s Las Vegas Bordello. This pioneering piece must have seemed way, way out when it was first exhibited in the 1960s.

Four decades later, art-as-architectural environment is another leitmotiv of this Biennale. Mike Nelson’s perfect facsimile of a moldering Turkish khan within the [British Pavilion](#) created a sensation (and long waits for those standing in line to be admitted).

Standing in line is also required to climb the Starn brothers’ “[Big Bambu](#)” (until June 18), a 50-foot (15 meter) haphazard structure of bamboo poles lashed together like the nest of some gigantic bird.

Growing Sculpture

A team of rock climbers works on site, so that it is constantly growing, a visual metaphor for the random, organic way in which human affairs work (if they do work).

The Austrian Erwin Wurm’s squeezed “Narrow House” (2010), beside the Academia Bridge, is based on the dinky Alpine dwelling in which the artist grew up, though it is only as wide as a corridor. There’s a metaphor there too, for the constrictions of conventional life.

Anish Kapoor, in contrast, exhibits a work with almost no physical substance, “Ascension” (2003), in the church of San Giorgio Maggiore. The work consists of vapor, which when all goes well, is shaped by fans and a massive suction nozzle in the dome into a diaphanous, spiraling column. The artist calls it “an apparition.”

The menacing winged figure that looms over the exhibition at the Arsenale is a different kind of apparition, dreamed up by the South African [Nicholas Hlobo](#). His work -- stitched from such materials as tire-rubber and leather -- is also on show in "The World Belongs to You" (until Dec. 31) at the Palazzo Grassi and in Victor Pinchuk Foundation's Future Generation Art Prize at the Palazzo Papadopoli (until Aug. 7).

Hlobo is someone to watch out for, though his ominous creation, part Wagnerian dragon, part pterodactyl, only mildly overshadows the sparkle and buzz of the Biennale.

The Biennale continues through Nov. 27. Information: <http://www.labiennale.org>; the Biennale awards are on <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/news/54-awards.html>

(Martin Gayford is chief art critic for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The [opinions](#) expressed are his own.)

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