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ABROAD Small World Crammed on Biennale's Grand Stage



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Gymnastic rings used for a performance by the dancer William Forsythe. More Photos >

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN Published: June 10, 2009

VENICE — The preview for the Venice Biennale ended this weekend, and after the news media, collectors and dealers left, I wandered to the back of the Arsenal...

It contained a tumbledown brick pavilion with rusting metal doors, open to the breeze and tucked in the shadows. The smell of jasmine and honeysuckle filled the warm air...

Organized by Daniel Birnbaum, this 53rd version of the venerable Biennale is tidy, disciplined, cautious and unremarkable. If any show can be said to reflect a larger state of affairs in art now...

The Biennale's ostensible theme is "making worlds." Mr. Birnbaum has explained in a news release that this means "an exhibition driven by the aspiration to explore worlds around us as well as worlds ahead..."

Mr. Birnbaum has also said his show is "about possible new beginnings," to which end he has included works by the Gutai group, Japanese avant-gardists from the 1950s and '60s...

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they were news. Devising quasi-utopian projects of hippie-ish experimentalism by often fugitive means, they aimed to engage more than an art audience and to spread joy. They saw themselves as liberationists, optimists, fabulists and troublemakers without exactly being ideologues, who shared an almost alchemical knack for transforming scrappy materials and tests of sensual awareness into fine modernist forms.

Here they bring cool pleasures to several parts of the Biennale's main exhibition. Pape's moonbeams of gold thread — a large, ethereal concoction in a vast darkened gallery, titled "Ttéia," from 2002, two years before Pape died — counts among the few coups de théâtre on view.

But the Biennale is meant to be a survey of new art, and while conscientious young artists now dutifully seem to raise all the right questions about urbanism, polyglot society and political activism, their answers look domesticated and already familiar. They look like other art-school-trained art, you might say, which is exactly what Pape and Matta-Clark and the Gutai group didn't want their work to look like, never mind that the art market ultimately found a way to make a buck off what they did, as it does nearly everything, eventually.

Here, notwithstanding how far-flung their origins, almost all the artists in Mr. Birnbaum's show seem to have prominent galleries behind them in New York and Europe, which is not necessarily a problem, but it's hardly proof of larger worlds being explored, either.

As for the national pavilions, video and film works from Canada (Mark Lewis), Serbia (Katarina Zdjelar) and the Netherlands (Fiona Tan) play for the spotlight. But Bruce Nauman commands center stage unlike any American representative since perhaps the young [Robert Rauschenberg](#), 45 years ago.

A miniretrospective of Mr. Nauman's career now occupies the American pavilion. It spills over into university buildings on the other side of the Grand Canal, where a new work, "Days/Giorni," is split between two large rooms. Rows of paper-thin, white loudspeakers, twin gantlets, broadcast voices intoning the days of the week in syncopated varieties (English at one site, Italian at the other).

It claims center stage partly because, among the usual competitors, Britain's entry, [Steve McQueen](#), has phoned in his work, which is a video about the Biennale's leafy Giardini in off-season. Claude Lévêque, representing France, has constructed an inexplicable monstrosity in the form of a cross-shaped prisonlike cell with black flags blown by electric fans, of no apparent meaning. Germany, eschewing nationalism, abdicates its pavilion to a British artist, Liam Gillick, who has installed bare pine kitchen cabinets. It is the lamest German entry in decades, by wide consensus.

Aficionados instead made a kerfuffle over "The Collectors," by the Berlin-based team of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, jointly occupying the Danish and Nordic pavilions. An installation about a broken-up family and their dead gay neighbor (his corpse floats in a pool outside the Nordic pavilion), it's an inside joke, an elaborate stage set, clever but shallow.

Mr. Nauman's work manages to be funnier, in dark ways that plumb psychic depths foreign to the likes of Elmgreen & Dragset. Formal panache lends visual rigor to what Mr. Nauman intends, at a glance, to appear jury-rigged and kind of dumb. The needle-stuck-in-the-groove annoyance that he also cultivates demands, like any grueling endeavor, a degree of sacrifice, which may try even the most sympathetic viewer's patience.

But the effort is its own reward, a Beckett-like concept in line with Mr. Nauman's philosophy. From the start [John Cage](#) and the Minimalist composers have also been lodestars to Mr. Nauman, whose art often makes odd music out of grating sounds, psychotic rants and everyday speech. "Days/Giorni" takes mindless recitation and turns it into a sort of polyphonic choir.

I mentioned, at the start, discovering Mr. Forsythe's pavilion in the garden because it summoned to mind stumbling for the first time on the Biennale as a student in Italy years ago and finding, late one hot summer day, far from the crush of tourists and churches, in the silent, whitewashed pavilions of the tree-lined Giardini, a work by Mr. Nauman. Its strangeness seemed then, as his art still does, both a rebuke and a universe to be explored.

The memory of it made me wonder about the other big event taking place here, timed to coincide with the Biennale. [Francois Pinault](#), the billionaire French collector, has installed part of his collection, like choice spoils of war, on long-term view at the Dogana, Venice's former customs house, which the city has turned over to him and the architect [Tadao Ando](#) has refurbished.

The building's renovation is a sober and airy arrangement of thick wood beams and concrete, with half-moon windows gazing onto bobbing yachts of Russian oligarchs in the sparkling lagoon. The view is apt. Mr. Pinault's relentless assortment of trendy blue-chip works from the last decade or so, lighted like so many cadavers in a medical school operating theater, reeks of pre-crash money and Bush-era cynicism. Their installation creates the weird, antiseptic aura of Dr. No's lair.

It came as a relief to retreat back to the Giardini and give Mr. Birnbaum's exhibition another shot. In the quiet after the opening, things emerged. Simon Starling's kinetic sculpture, a projector beaming onto a wall a black-and-white film about the construction of the same object at a metal fabricator's in Berlin, made satisfying whirs and clanks. Tony Conrad's large rectangles of yellowing paper, framed by slashes of colored pigment, post-Minimalist haikus from the '70s, slowly faded like aging dogs in the late afternoon light.

[Yoko Ono](#) had posted on a typed sheet of paper, tacked to a gallery wall, an injunction titled "Cleaning Piece III," from 1996.

It read:

"Try to say nothing negative about anybody.

"a) for three days

"b) for 45 days

"c) for three months

"See what happens to your life."

That seemed like a signal to return to the garden behind the Arsenale, just before it closed, when the sun was still high in

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the sky.

The last visitors wearily trudged out. The rusty doors to the pavilion were still open. The young woman had left, and a distant belch of a ship's horn broke the silence. No one was watching.

So I tried out Mr. Forsythe's rings.

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