

Confessions of a Biennale Virgin

Text by Sue Hubbard

Although I've been an art critic for more than twenty years, I admit to being a biennale virgin. I've been to Venice before but never to the biennale, which is almost as phantasmagoric as the sinking, labyrinthine city itself. Chaotic, glitzy and impossible to manoeuvre, it nonetheless yields up, among the dross, some wonderful surprises.

The 57th Venice Biennale, entitled *Viva Arte Viva* and curated by Christine Macel, opened to the public on 13 May. Marcel has called it an exhibition “designed with artists, and for artists”. In a world shaken by terrorism, economic crisis and right-wing populism she believes strongly in art for art's sake. A single theme was thought to be too limiting so she worked closely with artists putting their practices centre stage. *Viva Arte Viva* is divided into nine “Trans-pavilions” including the Pavilion of Earth and the Pavillion of Shamans.

My first full day was spent in the Giardini trying to make sense of so much creativity. In the Central Pavilion and Pavilion of Artists and Books, Macel seems to be saying that in this frenetic contemporary world we need time to think. There are wall-mounted book assemblages by John Latham and beautiful, quiet book-works by Liu Ye, as well as 30 years of small notebooks by Abdullah Al Saadi packed into sardine cans and cigarette packets.

In the British Pavilion, Phyllida Barlow has produced a massive, complex installation. There's an apocalyptic feel to this monumental work that evokes something of Joseph Beuys's *The End of the 20th Century*. A sense of things collapsing and falling apart. When I caught up with her she said she'd been working on it throughout the Brexit debate, which had deeply depressed her. From there it is a quick hop to the German Pavilion where Anne Imhof brings together in a spare, brutal space, a choreographed performance that confronts the “rapid and fundamental political, social, economic pharmaceutical and technological changes that we are currently facing” with her brand of “hard” realism. While in the US Pavilion, Mark Bradford's pertinent contribution feeds on his understanding of the crisis in US social and political life. In April he opened a shop in the Frari district of Venice where prisoners make and sell products alongside a local co-operative that has coloured his abstract and collage-based works.

Questions about displacement, “them and us”, colonialization and the refugee crisis abound. In the Australian Pavilion, Tracey Moffatt's work exists somewhere between fiction and history. Using photography, video and film Moffatt constructs theatrical scenarios and has created two new photographic series—*Body Remembers* and *Passage*—and two videos—*Vigil* and *The White Ghosts Sailed In* under the collective title *Horizon*. Evocative and poetic they deal with loss, longing and a desire for a sense of home.