

Posted on: Sunday, August 30, 2009

## Venice art exhibit dazzles

*At this year's show, you'll find the best works in smallest venues*

• Photo gallery: [The Venice Biennale](#)

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By Bonnie Friedman  
Special to The Advertiser

I'm going to just say it. On first pass, I found the 53rd International Art Exhibition safe, uninspired, precipitously close to boring. The theme — Fare Mondi (Making Worlds) — seemed ridiculously noncommittal, open to any silly interpretation. I realize these are sweeping generalizations.

I'm done whining. I'm grateful beyond measure to have attended my second consecutive Venice Biennale. With 77 participating nations and hundreds of exhibits, there's a lot of spectacular art. I simply needed to venture away from big venues, big countries, big names. Small is beautiful — and provocative and intellectually stimulating and amazing.

So, let's dive in. Which is appropriate because one of the most impressive displays is in an unused swimming pool. It's a striking venue for German artist Matthias Schaller's "Purple Desk," 30 photographs, all looking squarely at empty desks of Vatican Cardinals. Portraits without people. Opposite are three large "Disportraits." Astronauts' helmets wholly confining and utterly necessary for humans to travel beyond Earth.

The old pool-cum-gallery is about as far afield as one can go. It's on the tiny "outer" island of San Giorgio Maggiore, a quick vaporetto ride from Venice's most famous square. Made up almost entirely of a restored Benedictine monastery, it houses two more exhibits.

A John Wesley retrospective is staggering in scope and style of installation. (Leave it to exhibit sponsor Fondazione Prada.) The 80-year-old Angeleno's art looks simple. It is complex — strong, flat graphic images dreamlike and cartoonish, combining animals and eroticism, Art Nouveau style and Japanese iconography. With more than 150 works, it's the largest and most complete exhibition of Wesley's art anywhere, ever.

The critical reviews of British filmmaker Peter Greenaway's contribution were, to put it kindly, mixed. I found it thrilling. His reproduction of *Le Nozze di Cana* (The Wedding at Cana) is a stunning marriage of 16th century art and 21st century technology, allowing one of the world's greatest works to return to its original home. Painted by Paolo Veronese in 1562-1563, it hung in the

refectory until Napoleon plundered it 200 years later. Greenaway's digitized facsimile now occupies the space. He has breathed life into it with filmmaking techniques, dramatic lighting, conversation among the wedding party and guests, including Jesus. It's a breathtaking encounter in a massive space. You can walk around, sit, lie down, experience it from every angle. The day I went, there was a grand total of seven visitors.

Two big names need acknowledgement: Golden Lions for Lifetime Achievement went to California multimedia artist John Baldessari — he covered the front of the official Biennale pavilion with a gigantic photo of a palm tree-studded beach — and Yoko Ono. In the official venue, several of her



Several of Yoko Ono's 1960s poems are taped to the wall as part of a solo multimedia exhibit that also includes photographs, drawings, interactive installations and military hardware.

BONNIE FRIEDMAN | Special to The Advertiser

### DROP IN

The Venice Biennale — the world's largest contemporary art event — is held in odd-numbered years. It opens in June and most official Biennale exhibits remain open through November. Many others are open through September or October. You can do the armchair trip by going to [www.labiennale.org](http://www.labiennale.org) and/or by entering any country or exhibit name into a search engine. Some samples:

- Matthias Schaller, [www.matthiasschaller.com/](http://www.matthiasschaller.com/)
- John Wesley, [www.curatedmag.com/news/2009/07/16/john-wesley-at-fondazione-prada/](http://www.curatedmag.com/news/2009/07/16/john-wesley-at-fondazione-prada/)
- Le Nozze di Cana, [www.lenozzedicana.it/eng/index.html](http://www.lenozzedicana.it/eng/index.html)
- John Baldessari, [www.baldessari.org/](http://www.baldessari.org/)
- Yoko Ono/Anton's Memory, [www.imaginepeace.com/news/archives/6542](http://www.imaginepeace.com/news/archives/6542)



The Chihuly Glass display outside the Venezia Pavilion at Giardini is part of a tribute to the artists of Murano, past and

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1960s typewritten poems are taped to the wall. Very nostalgic. I was never a fan ... until I saw her solo show, "Anton's Memory." Photos, drawings, sculpture, video, audio, interactive installations demonstrate how we can make the world better. Yes, she still wants us to imagine and to give peace a chance. Emotionally exhausting ... in a very good way.

### MY OWN UNOFFICIAL GOLDEN LION AWARDS

- **Best Illustration of the Global Economic Crisis — Denmark and Nordic Countries — "The Collectors."** Nothing says "housing crisis" like a big For Sale sign. Except maybe the ransacked interior of a formerly luxurious "home." Never breaking character, fantasy Realtors from Vigilante conducted open house-style tours like the place really was for sale.

Next door, things are even worse. The gay homeowner drowned himself in his pool, leaving a page of his unfinished pornographic novel in his portable typewriter; his young "friends" slouching in bubble chairs, languishing in bed.

- **Clearest Statement on Climate Change — Latvia's two mixed media installations — "Fragile Nature" and "Season Sorrow."** In miniature, Miks Mitrevics contemplates the sun's manifestations and movements. In another room, Evelina Deicmane contemplates snow, extreme cold, how to survive in it. The sound of the snow is unreal; the warm room feels like a deep freeze.

- **Coolest Pavilion — Republic of Korea — "Condensation."** No, seriously, it was the coolest open-air pavilion in the Biennale Gardens — part of the installation created a misty, cool sensation. There's more to the work of Haegue Yang, certainly. A full-scale model of her Berlin kitchen and video essay about a declining neighborhood in Seoul and the abandoned Biennale Giardini in off-years are artistic statements about private and hidden spaces.

- **Most Breakable — "Glasstress."** If you're kind of clumsy (like me) and/or a Taurus (like me) or carry a big handbag (yup), be very careful. There is a LOT of glass and this exhibit has 45 of the best works. The artists pushed the limits of their imaginations and their medium to make a world fragile and delicate, strong and powerful.

The Venezia Pavilion at Giardini is also dedicated to glass — a tribute to Murano, its artisans past and present.

Subliminal message — the need/desire for transparency? I'm just sayin' ...

- **Most Enchanting — New Zealand — "Save Yourself."** Francis Upritchard's diminutive figures dancing, dreaming, thinking elicit joy and introspection. Modern and medieval in style, the simple tablescapes they inhabit are juxtaposed with the extreme opulence of the larger, grand palazzo setting.

- **Country Most Enjoying Itself and Most Entertaining to Others — Iceland, whose economy melted down first and faster than shave ice in August, sent young artist Ragnar Kjartansson.** He's into his third month of a six-month marathon to produce a painting a day of a friend/fellow artist sitting in a beach chair, in only a swimsuit, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, against the backdrop of the Grand Canal. Isn't it romantic? In another room, there's a video of the artist and a musical collaborator playing country music in snow-covered Canadian Rockies. Brrrrr. That's it. The End. No, really. It's the name of the pavilion. The End.

*Bonnie Friedman is a publicist, freelance writer and long-time Maui resident. She visited Venice in June.*

present.



Francis Upritchard of New Zealand created diminutive figures that are modern, medieval and enchanting.

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Fantastico! What a fun read and we loved the pictures!

Guido

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