

Heat and promise at the Venice Biennale

By Roderick Conway Morris

VENICE
This year's Biennale, the 50th since the event was started in 1895, was the hottest in living memory — in terms of temperature, at least. With 550 artists exhibiting several thousand works in the main sites at the Castello Gardens, the Arsenale, the Correr Museum and numerous other venues around town, and scores more parallel shows, it was also the biggest ever.

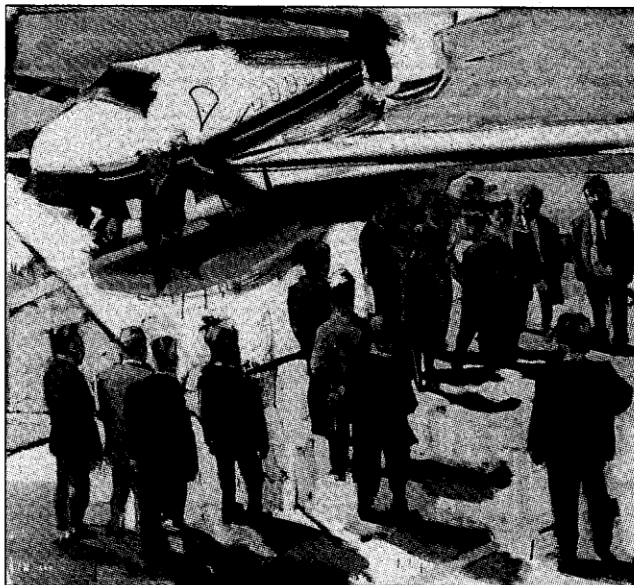
The thermometer hovered around 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 degrees centigrade), and with enervating levels of humidity throughout the three preview days the weather packed a punch that few exhibits could emulate. The public was admitted on Sunday, and the official sites and national pavilions will stay open until Nov. 2.

The prize for best pavilion went to Luxembourg, located at Ca' del Duca on the Grand Canal and entirely devoted to a combination of digital films and objects by Su-Mei Tse. The installation's title, "air conditioned," could hardly have failed to draw attention to the exhibit, and on my visit three women could be overheard exchanging approving comments in Venetian dialect on the coolness of the interior.

In fact, Denmark seemed unlucky not to secure the best pavilion award, given the originality and sheer enjoyableness, not to mention eco-friendliness of the project, which maximized the use of passing air-currents and the canopy of trees overhead. The Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson had radically remodeled the pavilion, a neoclassical building with a modern extension, with a series of wooden ramps, staircases, terraces and platforms. Inserted along the way are optical devices, from angled mirrors and kaleidoscopes, to a hidden fountain illuminated by a strobe light and a camera obscura that, through a tube piercing the ceiling, throws an image of a gently shifting "cloth" of the swaying branches and leaves of the plane trees above onto a circular table.

The experience is both intriguing and disorientating, cumulatively stimulating the viewer to reassess the solidity and reality of the interior and exterior surroundings.

The ingenious way Eliasson's creations have been inserted into the structure of the pavilion suggests how much they could enhance modern architecture. As Eliasson emphasized in an interview, artists' fascination with optical devices as a means of studying, interpreting and simply playing with the visual universe stretches back beyond the Renaissance. But he added that his own background had influenced his experiments. "I think there is a strong tradition of relating space and sensations in Denmark, and I have benefited from the high quality of Danish modernity, in architecture and furniture especially, but my interest in sensations of time and duration in our perceptions perhaps comes more from my Icelandic roots."



Hakan Gursoytrak of Turkey paints scenes of daily life, like "Airport."

Galerie MaxMetzler, Berlin

He examines the image of Africans in Venice, from their appearance in Renaissance paintings and Shakespeare's "Othello, the Moor of Venice" to "blackamoor" lamp stands and door knockers, right up to the present day in the form of the ubiquitous West African street vendors selling handbags. A history of the black presence in Venice has yet to be written, but this would make a stimulating point of departure.

The selections of the artistic director of the Biennale, Francesco Bonami — in the Italian pavilion at the Castello Gardens and at the Arsenale — contain a large number of installations, video and slide shows. But Bonami has also curated "Painting: From Rauschenberg to Murakami, 1964-2002," at the Correr Museum, a retrospective of works spanning these decades, representing, in his words, "the love-hate relationship existing between contemporary art and the medium of painting." His starting point is the award in 1964 of the painting prize to Rauschenberg, which caused something of a sensation at the time.

In fact, the most striking overall impression of the 50th Biennale is that painting, including various types of figurative painting, is making a concerted return. In many national pavilions, where installations of one kind or another have long predominated, painters have been given pride of place, or

countries, Russia and Singapore, suggesting that this revival in appreciation is not confined to any one region. Although some of these painters are young, quite a number are in their forties or older, began their careers at a time when traditional forms of painting were unfashionable and have clearly remained faithful to their original vocations through thick and thin.

One of the most arresting of the new painters on show appears in Bonami's "Clandestine" section in the Corderie (Rope Walk) at the Arsenale. This is 40-year-old Hakan Gursoytrak, one of the founders of Hafriyat (Excavations), a loose group of a dozen or so Turkish artists who meet to discuss common interests, compare works and organize exhibitions. Gursoytrak paints scenes of daily life, in oil on canvas, with verve and panache. "Hafriyat is particularly concerned with the meeting of traditional life and modernity and how this affects the lives of ordinary people," Gursoytrak said at the Arsenale. "I like to paint street scenes and people in public places. I often use newspaper pictures, even very small ones, as a beginning. My idea is that we all see these images, but perhaps we sometimes don't look closely enough. There can be more in them than meets the eye.

"But I add elements, too. Caricatures and cartoons have been very popular in Turkey since Ottoman times and their subjects are often ordinary people and in fact low-life. So

the edges to reflect this kind of popular art."

Life as a spectacle, sometimes amusing, sometimes sad, sometimes absurd, sometimes provoking a spontaneous overflow of affection and sympathy for one's fellow beings, lies at the heart of Gursoytrak's vision, as does his conviction that art can be part of everyday experience. "Many Western artists seem to feel themselves alienated in some way," he said, "but I don't have that sensation at all. I feel very much part of the normal life of my country."

Inclined to a more solitary path, but no less interesting as an artist, is Raffi Kaiser, whose "Primal Landscapes" are on show at the Galleria del Leone on the island of Giudecca (until July 20). Kaiser was born in Jerusalem in 1931, studied in Florence and Paris and is now based in France. From the late 1970s, he embarked on a series of prolonged wanderings, initially in the deserts of Negev and Judaea, and later extended to the regions of China beloved by the painters of the Sung and Yuan dynasties, between the 10th and 13th centuries, the mountains of Japan, and more recently the Grand Canyon.

While on his peregrinations, Kaiser constantly sketches, but when he comes to execute his landscapes, he puts this material aside, composing from memory and trying to encapsulate the feelings these majestic scenes evoked in him. The pictures that result from this "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (to borrow the poet Wordsworth's phrase) recall Chinese and Japanese classical paintings but do not seek to imitate them. Created with a restricted number of fine, monochrome pen strokes, they achieve an austere beauty and timelessness.

Among the more eccentric and entertaining presences of this year's event have been the Chinese Chen Shaoxiong's computer simulations (at the Arsenale) of how future architects might design skyscrapers that could head, dodge and repel incoming airplanes; and at the Welsh pavilion (here for the first time, in a former brewery on the Giudecca), a World War II anti-aircraft searchlight, directed by Cerith Wyn Evans, broadcasting in morse-code into the night sky, in Welsh, an early 18th-century text, "The Vision of the Sleeping Bard." Also at the Welsh pavilion are Paul Seawright's powerful nocturnal landscape photographs.

One of the more irksome manifestations of post-modern art is that class of being who would never make an impact, let alone a living, as a writer with the plodding platitudes they plaster on walls, floors and ceilings, but who somehow qualify as "artists." The antidote to this was to be found in a fringe event at Gallery Holly Snapp, where "The Typing Explosion" — consisting of quick-thinking Rachel Kessler, Sierra Nelson and Sarah Paul Ocampo from Seattle — dressed in the garb of 1960s' secretaries, instantly hammered out witty, surrealist verses on demand on any subject put to them, as part of their world-wide mission to encourage

PEOPLE

A British aristocrat has complained that Prince William was driving too fast on his estate in western England. William was driving on unpaved roads when he came up behind Lord Bathurst's vehicle and passed it, as did the police car accompanying William. Bathurst honked his horn and set out after the prince's car, pursuing it for about 400 meters. "The rule is 20 m.p.h. on the road, but he was doing 30 to 40 when he overtook me," Bathurst said. William's police guard pulled Bathurst over and reportedly "spoke sharply" to him as the prince drove away. A spokesman for St. James's Palace said "this was a very minor incident in which no one was injured and as far as we are concerned the matter is closed." Bathurst said Prince Charles, William's father, had apologized to Bathurst's son, Lord Apsley. The matter appears to be closed.

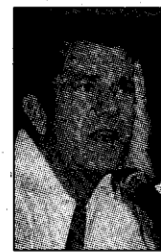


Lord Bathurst

EPA

A judge in Malibu, California, told Nick Nolte that he had heard an allegation that the actor violated his probation after his conviction of driving under the influence but that more investigation was needed. The judge, who noted that press reports on Nolte's behavior "were all positive," revealed no details of the allegation. The 62-year-old actor told reporters on the way into the courtroom: "I haven't been drinking. Nothing, nothing." Nolte was ordered in December to refrain from driving with drugs or alcohol in his system. The television program "Celebrity Justice" said that an anonymous tipster had told the court that Nolte was seen intoxicated and buying alcohol from a liquor store, then driving away.

George Wein, founder of the Newport Jazz Festival, is donating \$1 million to establish an endowed professorship in the African American Studies department at Boston University. The endowment will fund the George and Joyce Wein Chair at the school, where he worked his way through school by playing the piano in nightclubs, a BU spokesman said.



Mel Gibson

AP

The actor and director Mel Gibson insists his new film about Jesus Christ will "inspire not offend" Catholics and Jews. The movie, directed by Gibson, stars James Caviezel as Christ during the last 12 hours of his life and Monica Bellucci as Mary Magdalene. The reported \$25 million production will feature dialogue only in Latin and Aramaic with no English subtitles. Gibson said in a statement published in the trade newspaper Variety, "My intention in bringing it to the screen is to create a lasting work of art and engender serious thought among audiences of diverse faith backgrounds." He made his remarks at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which had been critical of "The Passion," apologized for attacking a film that is still unreleased. The film has not yet found a distributor.

Phil Collins, Little Richard, Van Morrison and Queen were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in a ceremony in New York. The drummer Roger Taylor and guitarist Brian May represented Queen at the ceremony, and Taylor accepted the award for the band, saying the group's frontman, Freddie Mercury, who died in 1991, "would have been proud."