

A heavy-metal interlude to an Art Lite Biennale

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VENICE, Italy Looking for Jimi Hendrix, I found the other Venice Biennale.

The official Biennale – one hesitates to call it the "real" Biennale – is bigger than ever with some 77 countries this year showing uncountable artists and spending incalculable millions on innumerable parties offering undrinkable wine.

Wall Street's recession has proven to be no drain on Grand Canal action during the international art fair's first week. Earlier American military transgressions are seemingly forgiven too in what has to be the most apolitical of Biennales – at least the least rhetorically enraged – dating back to its founding in 1895. Doesn't "Making Worlds," the title given the summer-long fair by German-based director Daniel Birnbaum, sound like something nice children are urged to do at playtime?

Bruce Nauman landed the Biennale grand prize last weekend for the American pavilion, although the cowboy minimalist from Galisteo, N.M., is also showing work at two other sites around the city. New Yorker Yoko Ono and Californian John Baldessari had their "lifetime achievements" recognized.

Prizes eluded Mark Lewis, Canada's Biennale representative. His *Cold Morning* (2009) – a quartet of short films exploring the interrelated extremes of human emotion and contemporary Toronto architecture – was displayed in the cramped Canadian Pavilion in a manner barely worthy of an instructional video at an industrial convention.

Lewis's other work on show here, *Backstory* (2009), a subtly cheeky documentary look into the technology behind the Hollywood dream, was on for a few nights only just off the student-centric Campo Santa Margherita in Venice's western Dorsoduro area. *Backstory* will likely be the artist's signature imprinted on this Biennale.

But hearing a stinging guitar whine helped me forget all this Biennial politicking and second-guessing. I followed its high-pitched reverberation north up the narrow Fondamenta S. Gioachin one sweaty recent afternoon. Just past a cramped workers' bar I knew I was at the right place when I saw "Distortion +".

Invited by the sign to creep up a rickety set of stairs in an old ruined house, I eventually found my way to a back room, its floor thick with dust from cracked walls.

Pressing my foot down on a black foot pedal linked to a single Marshall amp in the centre of the uneven wooden floor activated Hendrix's infamous *Star Spangled Banner*.

The interactive performance piece is just one element in "Distortion +", a punky group show curated by James Putnam that included Gavin Turk's "interactive pottery workshop," an ad hoc "bikini bar" in a tiny back garden, and signs in English in official-looking red cabinets reading, "If You Hear the Word `Art,' Reach for the Gun." Sure enough, there was a gun.

But that wasn't the interesting part. The interesting part came in discovering that the Hendrix-riffing *Feedback* (2004) was by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, British Columbia-based artists whose earlier piece, *Paradise Institute* (at the Biennale in 2001) helped launch their careers internationally. Officially, the work is part of a "collateral event" at the 53rd annual Biennale. Unofficially, coming across it so far from the much-ballyhooed main drag felt like stumbling into your local pub to find Bob Dylan going through a few old tunes.

Of course there is no single Biennale. Press response is inevitably determined by various sets of skewed priorities. There's the nationalist angle. The British media is of course particularly taken with English artist Steve McQueen's dual projection in the British pavilion, where some 30 minutes of *National Geographic*-like nature close-ups are sealed with a gay kiss.

But when it came to sending up national signals, no Biennale entrant approached the quintessential Canuck moment when a group of Toronto artists and curators paddled a flotilla of canoes – shipped together from Canada in a container with sponsoring insignia attached to each craft – up the Grand Canal at 3 a.m. one night a while back (as reported in the *Toronto Star* last week).

There's the sexual angle, always an easy sell, particularly in the staid confines of the Giardini, where nations vie for international attention in a clubby manner straight out of the League of Nations handbook.

At the Nordic pavilion, buff naked guys were part of an installation suggesting a swinging modern single's condo. In retaliation, the German pavilion featured a robotic kitchen cat.

Feminists will likely be cheered by a Biennale "special mention" going to the late Brazilian artist Lygia Pape, whose lengthy, beam-like structures tilting up from a darkened floor in a pitch black room suggest spotlights displayed over top of a city.

Pape's work greets visitors at the very entrance of the Arsenale's gigantic, 38,000-square-metre interior space, itself two-thirds the size of the space allotted to work in the Giardini. Yet to me, her piece would best be part of the decor in one of the upscale condos going up in Yorkville.

Art-star seekers didn't have far to go either. Along with Nauman, a good many other established artists were found among the welter of new works and new commissions at the Biennale, as well as in the city itself.

Of course, every Biennale is a something-for-everybody enterprise. Anything else would

keep the tourists away. But more than most, this Biennale goes out of its way to be nice with so much Art Lite – unless you go looking for Jimi Hendrix.

The 53rd Venice Biennale continues to Nov. 22: www.labiennale.org.

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