

Tiki on the Lido

The Canadian contingent goes bush at the Venice Biennale

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Presented by



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There's Charlotte Casiraghi, Monaco's princess of the MySpace gen, at a party unravelled by gazillionaire Francois Pinault for his museum of the chic new wave, Punta della Dogana.

There's sinewy French Vogue editor Carine Roitfeld, with her Boticelli-haired Italian equivalent Franca Sozzani -- royalty of another kind! -- at a bash on a yacht to herald American star surrealist Bruce Nauman.

There's Oprah-ordained decorator Nate Berkus partying here, there and, finally, on the terrace of the Bauer Hotel, where all party roads lead in this town, at this time, every night.

Where art goes, so goes the wellcurated carousing. And, certainly, it was no exception in the land of Casanova, Bellini and the Grand Canal, where I spent the last few days soaking up the atmo from The Biennale, and crossing bridges with everyone from Naomi Campbell to Yoko Ono. Held every two years in beautiful, blast-from-the-past Venice, the festival is the Cannes of contemporary art, with the go-go-go-ness of a Grand Prix and the tribal tap-tap of Wimbledon.

Who's up? Who's down? What's art? What's not? Collectors, museum directors and auction house apparatchiks packed this part of Italy to find out. Like laundry fluttering from clotheslines along picture-perfect calles, the jet set also came, on cue, to hang. We're looking at you, Fiat heir Lapo Elkan, the late Gianni Agnelli's favoured grand-kid. Like people getting in, then out, of boats -- in Venice, this is an art form in itself; a kind of dressage of the sea-- the party-hopping only led to more party-hopping. Marc Jacobs, is that you? Again?

It all, the fun and the fabulousity, seemed so... well, pre-Madoff.

Leave it to the Canadians, then, to go for something more hoser than haute, right? The party held to mark our country's pavilion -- where Mark Lewis, an artist who traffics in celluloid, was waving the flag -- was akin to a bush party held along the edges of the Giardini.

"I feel like we're in Muskoka," said someone soon after we arrived. "Are Bob and Doug in Venice?" posed another, asking after those notorious brothers Canadian. "Finally! Beer! I'm so tired of drinking those Bellinis," we heard someone else, a money-guy, say.

"We did this all today," explained long-time Biennale-goer Popsy Johnstone, known in these spheres as a kind of Canadian art angel.

The party had a minor setback, you see, when the local powers-that-be refused to give a permit for the original locale for the party -- at the fish market, near the Rialto Bridge. Not too surprising for a city that is Byzantine, after all, and where it's been said that to fix a crack in a wall "one has to gather 27 signatures from 24 offices."

Oh, well. The Canadians rose to the occasion, keeping it real rather than Rialto. It may not have had the Palazzo tableau of the British party we attended the night before for artist Steve McQueen, or the high-calorie celebrity count of the Prada party we would attend the next night, but I ask: Did those parties have anything close to an "Algonquin Tiki Hut," an installation doubling as a bar? I think not.

Though the bash packed some major mojo on the dancefloor with one-man Canadian chamber-pop band Final Fantasy, much of the action, it's true, was tethered to the aforementioned Tiki Hut, the brainchild of artist Dean Baldwin. Among the revelers was Toronto hotelier Jeff Stober, who appeared here after a dinner at the famous Harry's Bar (he must have some fabulous restaurant karma, as he got in without a reservation!).

Of course, what comes with all these Canadians? That famously Canadian self-deprecation! One thing I did detect during my Venetian get-around is that a lot more non-Canadians had praise for our pavilion than did our citizens. Lewis is known for turning the prosaic into the profound, but his work here -- a trifecta of three simple videos, including one of an animated street fight -- was considered more trite than understated. Our actual pavilion, too -- relatively small, and said once upon a time to have been the "toilets" for the British pavilion -- rarely fails to trigger some national aw-shucks. But, like in so many instances, when we're harder on ourselves than outsiders are, I found others in thrall of both Lewis and us.

At one party, for example, I heard art-insider Cecilia Dean -- cofounder of Visionaire magazine and one-time Gap model -- emphatically instructing those around her to pony up to the pavilion. "Canada is great," I heard her utter. "I just loved Canada." - Read more from our man in Venice tomorrow.

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