

From Steve McQueen's spooky pavilion projections to John Cale's torture film, video art triumphs at the Venice Biennale

By Michael Glover

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AFP/GETTY IMAGES

On track: Maurizio Cattelan's untitled work at the opening of collector Francois Pinault's new space, the Punta della Dogana

Film. Film. Film. It seems to have spread like a stain through the Venice Biennale this year. The Brits have chosen filmmaker Steve McQueen as their official representative. The Welsh have John Cale, co-founder of Velvet Underground and newly into film, and Northern Ireland has opted for Susan MacWilliam, who makes films about the paranormal. Scottish artist, Martin Boyce has demurred, instead filling seven rooms at the Palazzo Pisani with giant stepping stones, steel chandeliers and over 20,000 fake leaves. Elsewhere, Fiona Tan is showing films in the Dutch pavilion and film-maker Mark Lewis is representing the Canadians.

The British Pavilion feels quite different from how it did when Tracey Emin was there in 2007. Then, the whole multi-roomed villa had painting and drawings on the walls, and it was opened up to the light. Now it's been transformed into a narrow, box-like cinema space with austere, tiered seating. Entirely appropriate for a man who takes film-making as seriously as McQueen does.

The title of McQueen's triplescreen projection is *Giardini*, and it's a moody, 30-minute rumination upon the nature of the very gardens in which the national pavilions are sited. What happens when the art world disappears? Everything gets dismantled. The gardens fall back into a kind of gentle dilapidation. Lean dogs scavenge amidst the debris. Birds and insects repopulate the space. McQueen shows this stripping away of identity. He also shows, primarily through sound, how the world of human kind is crowding around just beyond the trees. A cruise ship passes in the night. The roar of a crowd is heard, stage off. Venetian church bells bend in the air. Then, three quarters through the film, two men embrace in the darkness. This homoerotic strand is left hanging in the air.

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Over on the Giudecca, in a former brewery, Cale mistreats us to 46 minutes of fairly bemusing agitprop about his own tortured sense of Welsh identity. It is an oblique portrait of his mother country, spread across five screens that are positioned at irritatingly odd angles to each other. The film proceeds at snail's pace. It has fine visual moments. A phantom pianist slowly appears at the keyboard of an old upright piano. A stuttery handheld camera crawls across the floor of a disused slate quarry. At the end, Cale suffers waterboarding. But between these fleeting moments of dramatic interest, there are long minutes of tortured and unforgiveably unfocused self indulgence, which include even longer minutes when the screens are entirely blank and we pray for early release.

Frenzied film-making aside, the outstanding work in the *Giardini* this year is to be found in the pavilions of the United States of America, Egypt and Spain. That mad man Bruce Nauman brings his own particular brand of wackily serious gusto to the usually rather staid looking American pavilion. The frieze of neon signs on the outside of the building heralds the serious playfulness to be found within. JUSTICE reads one. It's overlaid by another, this in a different shade of neon, reading AVARICE. Nauman's show is an anthology of works from the Eighties onwards. Water pours over suspended upside down heads. A neon Double Poke in the Eye is exactly what it says it is. A clay hand modulates into a mouth.

Fifty metres away, the Spanish Pavilion is showing the large scale paintings of Miquel Barcelo. These robustly textured works feel like a mixture of desert scape and moonscape. The tenderest and most haunting work in the Giardini is way at the top of the gardens, in the little visited Egyptian Pavilion. Two artists, one a painter of monumental figurative works called Adel el Siwi, and the other, Ahmad Askalany, a maker of figures in straw, paint a picture of a society in transition, haunted by the ghosts of its past.

Some of the very best work is to be found in Making Worlds, the enormous themed show curated by Daniel Birnbaum, the Biennale's director. There are some wonderful works here. Tomas Saraceno has engulfed an entire room with the gossamer like filaments of the Black Widow Spider on a disturbingly giant scale. A suite of watercolours by Allesandro Pessoli plays quixotically with Christian themes. And Nathalie Djurberg has made a room full of gloriously repulsive flower and plant like forms, drenched with colour, that menace just as much as they delight.

This year the single most spectacular addition to the Venetian cultural landscape is the transformed Customs House, known as the Punto della Dogana, at the very end of the Grand Canal. This prow-like sliver of a building, remodelled by Tadao Ando, now houses the pick of Francois Pinault's collection of contemporary art. No visitor to the Biennale should leave without seeing the likes of Rachel Whiteread, Jeff Koons and Sigmar Polke penned so elegantly between the Grand Canal and the Zattere.

Five must-sees

Tteia

Lygia Pape's work that hangs at the entrance to the Making Worlds show in the Arsenale, is an immaterial sculptural delight. Golden threads are shot through with light, and hang leaning like insubstantial columns.

Fifteen Pairs of Hands

Bruce Nauman gets a firm grip on the United States' Pavilion.

Section of World Map

Oyvind Fahlstrom's puzzle in the Making Worlds show runs like a board game across the canvas.

Orbite Rosso

Grazia Toderi's two-channel video projection of an imaginary cityscape merged with an imaginary skyscape.

Untitled 2007

Look out for Maurizio Cattelan's horse wildly butting at the wall in the Punta Della Dogana