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Emily Jacir, *Stazione*, 2008-09, proposal Venice vaporetto stop

Art at the Venice Biennale



The Venice Biennale is often called the art world's Oscars. Running for 114 years in one of the most beautiful cities anywhere, La Biennale showcases the best work by an international mix of established and emerging artists. For this issue, Artkrush teams up with [The Daily Beast](#) to provide an overview the national pavilions and special exhibitions spread throughout Venice. We also tap Flavorwire editor Caroline Stanley for an interview with street artist Swoon about her wildly adventurous Venice project.

- Paul Laster, *Managing Editor*

[back to top](#)

FEATURE

Art's biggest party »

The 2009 Venice Biennale



Ivan Navarro, *Nowhere Man VI*, 2008

More than a year in the making, the [2009 Venice Biennale](#) kicks off this week with high expectations. The ailing art world needs a shot in the arm right now, and everyone is looking to the 53rd International Art Exhibition, which runs through November 22, to provide it. Some 6,000 members of the international press and 30,000 museum directors, curators, collectors, artists, and dealers descend on "La Serenissima," the serene city, to view proud national pavilions and special exhibitions — turning the three days of previews and openings into one continuous party.

Daniel Birnbaum, the artistic director and curator for the 2009 Biennale, leads the charge with *Making Worlds*, a large group exhibition that takes place in the Giardini and the Arsenale.

Birnbaum's curatorial concept defines art as representing a vision of the world, rather than just another commodity. He sees key figures, including the venerable John Baldessari and the generally misunderstood Yoko Ono, who are being awarded Golden Lions for Lifetime Achievement, as influencing successive generations. Ironically, Mike Bouchet's planned social commentary — a full-size, typical American suburban house that was meant to float in a canal near the Arsenale — [sank during installation](#), making it a truer vision of the present-day world than the artist intended.

Challenging *Making Worlds* as the best international roundup in Venice is *Mapping the Studio*, curated by Francesco Bonami and Alison Gingeras, at the immaculate Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, which are run by the François Pinault Foundation. The latter building, which was once the Venetian Republic Customs House, was newly transformed into a state-of-the-art museum space by Japanese starchitect Tadao Ando. There are 300 works by 50 artists on view — including Jeff Koons, Maurizio Cattelan, and the Chapman Brothers — from the smart collection of French billionaire François Pinault, head of the Gucci Group and Christie's auction house. Alison Gingeras, who has worked with Pinault since 2006, told *Modern Painters* that the exhibition title "refers to the associative, intuitive thinking of an artist's process," which Pinault understands and appreciates, and she promises surprises in the "less conventional pairings."

[Keep reading for the full rundown »](#)

[back to top](#)

INTERVIEW

Swoon »***A salty dispatch from the high seas***

Photo: Tod Seelie

According to the [description](#) on its website, the *Swimming Cities of Serenissima* project is "a fleet of three intricately hand-crafted vessels that will navigate the Adriatic Sea from the Litoral region of Slovenia to Venice, Italy in May of 2009. Designed by the visual artist Swoon, the floating sculptures are descendants of the *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea* (Hudson River, 2008) and the *Miss Rockaway Armada* (Mississippi River, 2006 and 2007)." For those unfamiliar with Swoon's previous "floating sculptures," they're built from salvaged materials, crewed by other artists, and function like dreamy, creative utopias. It's pretty amazing, really. Flavorwire editor Caroline Stanley caught the artist during a brief moment of WiFi access to find out about life on the high seas.

Artkrush: What's the strangest piece of "junk" that's made it onto one of your boats?

Swoon: This year, we're making a found-object cabinet of curiosities in addition to all of the junk we build our boats from, so I would have to say that the vilest and strangest thing to come aboard has been a dog pelt found in Slovenia.

AK: How do you think living on the water changes a person?

S: You go a little feral on the water. Time operates differently. The basics of daily survival become harder, but you're surrounded by so much beauty that it makes it all worth it. Then there's how it changes you as an artist. This week, we've had kindergartners singing to us, families cooking us dinners that they haul to the docks in ten-gallon buckets, and amazing old ladies bringing lace for our show and fixing our sewing machine. This level of human connection and support has never happened in any of my other artistic projects, and it is so touching.

FP: Why do you think Venice has retained this mythic quality? What's the connection between that floating city and the ones you've created?

S: Venice shouldn't exist, but it does. There's a kind of beauty and joy that's very specific to seeing a seemingly impossible thing survive and flourish. I think that this is our secret, too. We shouldn't exist out here, but we do.

AK: How do you decide who gets to come on board the raft? Do you have a mental list of the kind of skills/talents that you're looking for?

S: There is a huge community of artists, each working sometimes on their own huge projects, and sometimes on ones instigated by their friends. This is the larger group that makes this sort of thing possible. Then, when project time rolls around, you just make a dream team list of people who can build and engineer and organize things and solve logistical problems and lasso pilings from a moving boat and charm curious onlookers and paste and paint and write a play and speak Italian, and on and on and on. Then you start saying, "Hey, um, what are you doing this June?" I'm still pretty amazed by it all.

AK: Where in the world do you feel the most at home?

S: There are two worlds that I need to occupy, each as much as the other — this transitory floating one, and the quiet, solitary studio where I make drawings and tiny scale models and dream of the next transitory place to make.

Swoon's Swimming Cities of Serenissima presents "The Clutchess of Cuckoo," a shadow-puppet play with live music, at the Vento di Venezia Hotel on the Island of Certo at 9pm on June 4-6 and 11-13.

[back to top](#)

NEWSWIRE

The best in Venice art-news coverage

[Venice Biennale: Steve McQueen interview \(Telegraph\)](#)

The British Pavilion pick discusses his approach to art making, life in Amsterdam, and his *Queen and Country* project, which could eventually place the portraits of fallen soldiers on UK postage stamps.

[Home Team: A pair of artists play house \(T magazine\)](#)

A look inside Elmgreen & Dragset's cleverly curated Venice exhibition, *The Collectors*, in the neighboring Danish and Nordic Pavilions.

[The sadness in Yoko Ono's latest work \(Financial Times\)](#)

The 76-year-old artist talks about her misunderstood artistic career, her Venice Biennale installation, and her shock at receiving the Golden Lion award.

[Mark Lewis brings his illuminating video art to the Venice Biennale \(CBC\)](#)

Canadian Pavilion pick Mark Lewis discusses his process, his reluctance to describe his work as "Canadian," and life after Venice.

[Making an exhibition of ourselves \(The National\)](#)

The United Arab Emirates National Pavilion Commissioner reviews the challenge of promoting the outmoded concept of nationalism at the Venice Biennale.

[From the valleys to Venice \(Guardian\)](#)

A revealing profile/interview of Welsh Venice Biennale representative John Cale, co-founder of the Velvet Underground.

[back to top](#)