

Success in Venice? Canadian artists add their projects to a crowded Biennale

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Ydessa Hendeles, *Grand Hotel* (detail), 2022.
ROBERT KEZIERE/COURTESY YDESSA HENDELES

Ask Canadian art collector Bruce Bailey why he's mounting his own independent show in Venice in the middle of the Biennale, and he scribbles a Latin motto on his business card and passes it over. *Res ipsa loquitur* – the thing speaks for itself.

Bailey's show, in the old church of San Samuele in the centre of Venice, features anti-heroic war art from his collection, starting with the full 82-etching suite of Francisco Goya's macabre *Disasters of War*. Several years in the planning and prescient in its theme, the show couldn't be more timely, but it still has to compete with the vast art offerings, both official and independent, that flood Venice at Biennale time.

Bailey is not the only Canadian who has launched his boat into these busy Venetian waters. Ydessa Hendeles, the Toronto collector and curator turned installation artist, is also here, with *Grand Hotel*, a show of found objects about migration and luxury travel in Europe's violent mid-20th century. It is curated by Canadian Wayne Baerwaldt, produced by Toronto gallerist Barbara Edwards and organized by the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



Francisco Goya, 1st edition of *The Disasters of War*, Plate 3 entitled *The Same*, 1810–1820, printed in 1863.
HANDOUT

Grand Hotel is one of 30 collateral events specially invited to the 2024 Biennale, which also includes Kapwani Kiwanga's installation at the official Canada Pavilion in the Giardini, the Biennale's original home in a park at the mouth of the Grand Canal. Canada's is one of 89 national pavilions located in the Giardini, or at the Arsenale, the repurposed shipyard to which the exhibition expanded in 1999, or just scattered around town in rented spaces.

Meanwhile, Bailey's *Beati Pacifici* (Blessed are the Peacemakers) is one of about 120 other independent shows that spring up all over Venice as the art world welcomes its version of a Fringe festival – attached to what is already one of the largest art exhibitions on the globe, and certainly the most prestigious. This year, the extras also include a display of Edward Burtynsky's environmental photographs curated by former National Gallery of Canada director Marc Mayer at M9 - Museo del '900. It is a museum dedicated to 20th-century art and located off the island, on the mainland at Mestre, a populous hub only known to tourists if they happen to approach Venice by car or bus.



Ydessa Hendeles, *Grand Hotel* (detail), 2022. COURTESY YDESSA HENDELES

On the one hand, it seems like every art lover in the world comes to Venice, creating a huge potential audience; on the other, it can be hard to get attention in this throng. So far, Kiwanga's installation, featuring millions of tiny glass beads on the walls and facade of the pavilion, is gaining solid media coverage (including a spot on *The New York Times*' top 10 list for the event) and some good word of mouth, justifying Canada's decision to go with an international artist this time out. (Kiwanga grew up in Canada but now lives in France, where her work is celebrated.) *Grand Hotel* has been declared a must-see collateral event by *Forbes* while Bailey is also getting media attention, not least because Margaret Atwood helpfully wrote a new poem for his display. These latter two unofficial Canadian contributions aren't the most talked-about shows of the festival but are certainly gaining respectful attention.

Bruce Bailey's *Beati Pacifici*

Bruce Bailey's show offers two 17th-century series of etchings that were important precedents for Goya's devastating record of the military violence and civilian suffering brought about in Spain by the Napoleonic wars of the early 19th century: Bailey includes *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War* by the French artist Jacques Callot and Romeyn de Hooghe's prints of atrocities committed by the French in Dutch villages in 1672. Moving forward, he displays prints that the German Expressionist Otto Dix made in 1924, after the horrors of the First World War.

But this is not simply a show of historical art: Bailey makes some strong comparisons with contemporary works. The most chilling is achieved by including Dutch artist Folkert de Jong's *The Wolf* of 2007. A wicked figure with a lupine head on a human body made of pale-blue polystyrene foam and splattered with a caramel-coloured goop, it waves a U.S. flag and stands beside the Goya, as though gloating over the continuance of war.

Bailey also includes two notes of optimism, Paterson Ewen's stupendous *Comet*, a work of gouged plywood dated to the 1970s and 1980s, and Jack Chambers's glowing and dreamlike

Five Shepherds of 1961–62. The cosmic and the bucolic seem a bit off topic, but yes, these are two classic Canadian paintings that look spectacular against the gilt panels on which the collection is displayed.

For this show, Bailey is a collector turned curator, but Hendeles has gone further, graduating from that sequence to carve out a role unique in the art world. Since 2011, she has increasingly moved beyond collecting and curating work by other artists to assembling found and historic objects as artistic installations. “I’m not an object maker; I make exhibitions,” is how she puts it.

Ydessa Hendeles’s *Grand Hotel*

Grand Hotel, which begins with a photo of Hendeles’s parents posed with their car on a summer outing in Germany only 18 months after their release from the Nazi camps, is not an autobiography but a poignant arrangement on the themes her family history suggests. Hendeles is the only child of Polish Holocaust survivors who resettled briefly in Germany before immigrating to Canada where they found the security and wealth to which they aspired. She would use that wealth to bankroll the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in Toronto but closed it in 2012, gradually moving her professional life to New York, where she now lives in the famed Dakota building while still maintaining a studio in Toronto.



Ydessa Hendeles, *Grand Hotel* (detail), 2022. ROBERT KEZIERE/COURTESY YDESSA HENDELES

Using everything from portraits of Russian royals who issued antisemitic decrees to the pearl ornaments or lavish cosmetic cases they might have owned, *Grand Hotel* places the insecurity of repeated migration against a background of elegant international travel, creating a highly unusual reflection on post-Holocaust trauma. Beginning with images of the impoverished *shtetl* life from which Jews emigrated, the show culminates with a collection of suitcases. These are not the battered luggage dumped into heaps at Auschwitz but generous steamer trunks and fancy hat boxes: Beneath glamour lurks a deathly anxiety.

The one Canadian reference is a Volkswagen Beetle, with an Ontario plate, a custom pearlized paint job and Louis Vuitton cases strapped to the roof, all ready for a little holiday somewhere close to home: Canada was the first country where Volkswagen – launched by Hitler to design a car for the masses but rapidly repurposed to build military vehicles – established a subsidiary in the postwar years. *Grand Hotel* deals subtly with many hard ironies.

But what does it say for contemporary Canada? To what extent can a country bask in the reflected glory of success in Venice or use the Biennale to build its international reputation? Bailey has noted that the Biennale was established in the 19th century as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and his exhibition does show a bit of old-fashioned national pride with its healthy mix of Canadian and international artists and a discreet Canadian flag on its signage.

The Ontario licence plate is Hendeles's nod to the place that made room for her parents: Over the years, her exhibitions and donations from her collection to Canadian art museums showed her gratitude, although one had to wonder if Toronto really understood how lucky it was. Today her unusual shows are more often seen in Europe.

Kiwanga, meanwhile, is a global citizen. She selected Gaëtane Verna, former director of the Power Plant in Toronto, as her curator for Venice and credits her as the person who introduced the artist to Canadian audiences, but Kiwanga's career is in Europe and her work remains resolutely internationalist. The installation in the Canada Pavilion, inspired by Venice's historic maritime trade and dedicated to questions of value across cultures, includes beadwork from Zimbabwe but no direct reference to the importance of beads in Indigenous cultures in what is now Canada.

Today, in a globalized world, the Biennale's notion of a competition among national pavilions seems increasingly odd, while the question of national content can feel equally awkward. How do these ambitious projects in crowded Venice reflect on Canada? The answer may be not at all.

"I don't see it as representing Canada," said Kiwanga, her nation's official competitor in the so-called Olympics of art. "I didn't think of the national question so much. That's a matter for other people. For me, it means being part of an artistic family."

Beati Pacifici: The Disasters of War and Hope for International Peace continues to Sept. 29 at the Chiesa di San Samuele in Venice. *Grand Hotel* is at the Spazio Berlendis to Nov. 24.

Best pavilions

In the Giardini

Australia: Aboriginal artist Archie Moore won the Golden Lion at this year's Biennale for his breathtaking installation on the Australian pavilion's high walls. There, he has chalked up a real and speculative family tree going back 65,000 years, the time humans have continuously inhabited what is now Australia. On the floor, there is a grid created by stacks of government documents, mainly inquest records, marking the deaths in detention of the continent's original people.

U.K.: John Akomfrah's *Listening All Night to the Rain* in the British pavilion is the most significant and impressive video work at the Biennale. In an immersive symphony of sound and imagery divided into eight cantos, Akomfrah reflects on British politics and colonialism through

the experiences of migrant communities. Dotted across multiple screens, the cantos include historic news footage, images of Scottish and Yorkshire landscapes and passages where found objects including old photos are shot through gently streaming water.

Japan: Inspired by jerry-rigged drip-catching buckets in the Tokyo subway, Yuko Mohri has created a Rube Goldberg machine that makes sounds as water circulates through various plastic tubes, glass vessels and suspended drop sheets. In a second piece, rotting fruit emits electrical current, which is then used to create sound.

At the Arsenale

Italy: Massimo Bartolini has created a labyrinth of metal scaffolding with several large sound machines at its core in a piece that is both immersive and contemplative, requesting the visitor slow down and listen.

Malta: In a low-tech year, Matthew Attard's *I Will Follow the Ship* stands out for its sensitive use of digital imaging. The artist traces historic images of sailing ships with an eye-tracker to plot a connect-the-dots reproduction of the original, before letting them sail on watery backdrops.

Hong Kong: Water is a recurring motif this year, intriguingly deployed at Hong Kong's collateral event just outside the entrance to the Arsenale. Inspired by pet shops and his father's seafood restaurant, Trevor Yeung reflects on our relationship with controlled and natural ecosystems as he directs the viewer through a narrow passageway between stacks of empty aquariums where the only inhabitants are bubblers and decorative gravel.