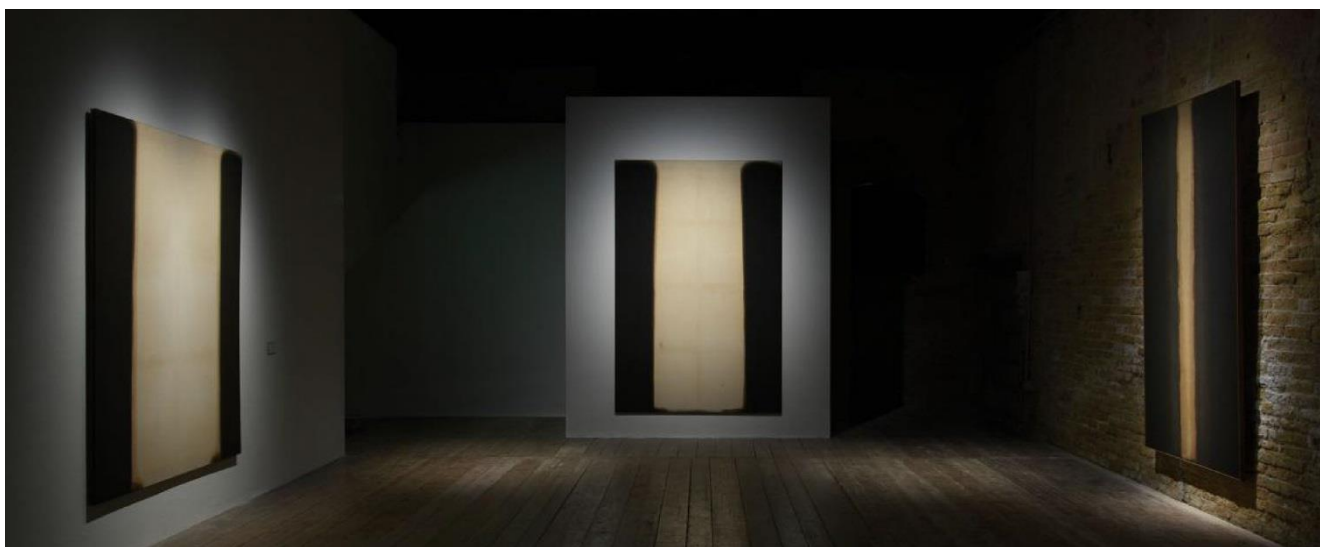


Frieze

Beyond the Biennale: The Shows to See Around Venice

The best of the off-site and collateral exhibitions during the 58th Venice Biennale



'Don't fret – it gets slightly better at the Arsenale,' was the refrain from the swampy afternoon in the Venetian lagoon where, outside the central pavilion at the Giardini, we were left mulling over what we had seen. We had been promised 'interesting times' but were delivered something like Pret a Manger in the form of a show: pre-packaged, eager-to-please, overstuffed and somehow very British (a significant number of participating artists have recently exhibited at UK institutions, even showing the same works as elsewhere). I had flinched from a cow coming at me on a railroad track; winced at a kind of bloody claw machine whacking furiously within a glass enclosure. This is why people mock contemporary art, I thought; it was a show about everything, and nothing at all. I ventured off-site.

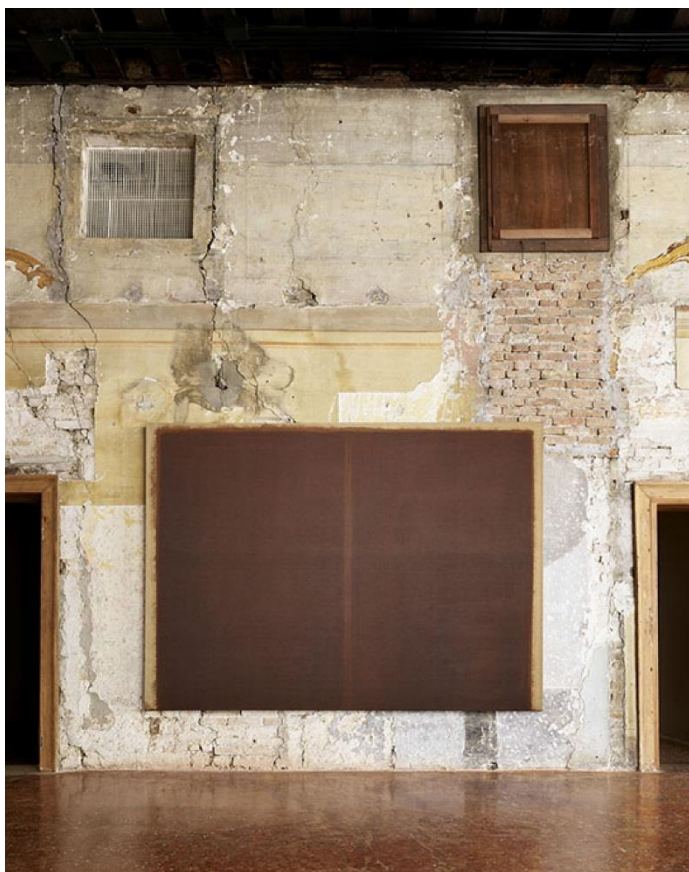
Video, which generally is less dependent on the exhibition format, seems to be where much of the magic happens these days. Those with time, and patience, could sit through the best of the Giardini as if it were a cinema: Larissa Sansour's perhaps heavy-handed yet well-executed film *Heirloom* in Denmark; Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's video and installation *Moving Backwards* in Switzerland; Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca's thumping Brazilian dancing (*Swinguerra*); Angelica Mesiti's new film for Australia (*Assembly*). With the Golden Lion-winning beach-set live operetta *Sun & Sea (Marina)* (all 2019) in Lithuania, time-based media are among the strongest works to be seen in Venice. Whether we need to subsume such pieces into the category of 'contemporary art' at all is a larger question; our 'interesting times' might not be especially good times for painting and sculpture.

Charlotte Prodger's commission for Scotland, *SaF05* (2019, co-produced with If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution), drove this thought home. It's a smart, elegant,

alliterative film that draws on environmental imagery, diaristic vignettes about sexual encounters and queerness, slow cinema and the tersely emitted stock language of tagging and machinery (timestamps, coordinates, avataristic acronyms, of which the title is one). Prodger is an expert at exploiting splits between content and form, where what is happening is not what we are seeing: her metaphor for this is a termite mound, in which something is built negatively, out of holes. With slow, dramatic shots of nature, overlaid with a series of short voiceover narrations, it's a captivating portrait of avataristic selfhood in our science fiction of the present. Ultimately, Prodger's film is a portrait of alterity: the alterity of transformation, sexual, technological, environmental and visual. In one magnificent sequence, we hear the croaking, desperate tunes of free jazz, set to an abstract, moon-like image, until the saxophone seems to neigh, horse-like; in another, we see the shadow of a drone, filming a termite mound, zooming out slowly. (Nearby, Shu Lea Cheang's Taiwanese pavilion, curated by Paul B. Preciado, also uses film as a surveillance technology, to comment on what Preciado calls 'technopatriarchy'.)

The battle is constant. The high-quality 'Nation Time', a show of the black arts collective AFRICOBRA, at Ca' Faccanon – which follows their presentation at MOCA in Miami – demonstrates the persistence of protest, and the way demonstration and dissent can find a garishly generative outlet through art-making, crafts, music and fashion. The collective was founded in Chicago's south side in 1968 in the wake of the Chicago riots and the Civil Rights movement in the US; works by the group's members are multi-genre, eclectic, vibrant, fun and free. (The exhibition title is from Amiri Baraka, who wrote the seminal black power poem 'It's Nation Time' in 1972.) With his sculpture *Word Warrior-ess June Jordan* (2003), Napoleon Jones-Henderson pays tribute to the eponymous Harlem-born poet and activist, also drawing from Egungun fabric traditions, costumes and shells. Jae Jarrell's fashion designs and textile works oscillate between art and application, aiming to get art out of the white cube, onto the body and into the street. The exhibition crackles with vibrant, energetic sculptures, prints and everything in between, showing the imbrication of celebration and dissent in the context of black arts movements then and today.

There's clearly still a lot of work to do here, as Venice hosted several vast, uneven painting shows, most by white men. Luc Tuymans's grand, self-involved show at Palazzo Grassi made me think that his recent talents might lie more in curating others than in contributing meaningfully to contemporary painting; Georg Baselitz at the Gallerie dell'Accademia was mostly forgettable. The same can't be said for Jörg Immendorff at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia which, for all of Immendorff's flaws, is ludic, roving and darkly funny: incorporating postpop Ben-Day dots and transfer techniques, with the whimsical surreality of German neo-expressionism, and even some protest-themed works. I found the show excellent.



Yun Hyong-keun, *Burnt Umber*,
1987, oil on linen. Courtesy: Private
Collection, South-Korea;
photograph: Laziz Hamani

From toxic to tonic: as figurative painting continues its creaking comeback, it was a slight curveball to see some exquisite abstractions in Helen Frankenthaler's 'Pittura/Panorama' at the Palazzo Grimani Venezia, Arshile Gorky's brilliant retrospective at Ca' Pesaro and a hauntingly moving show of paintings by Korean Dansaekhwa painter Yun Hyong-keun. My heart almost stopped when I entered the Palazzo Fortuny, where Hyong-keun's elongated, deeply gloomy abstractions demonstrate an almost religious commitment to reduction. Hyong-keun's works are spare, yet mean so much: his are hollow paintings, realized in umber and ultramarine, which seem to stare at you with a sense of apocalyptic blankness. It's not too much to read overtones of death given that Hyong-keun's life was marked by the historical calamities of the Korean War. These looming, ominous, hood-like forms evince collapse, withdrawal, ambush, entropy and fire. Read into them what you will, but it's hard not to intuit a sense of existential anguish when viewing these works – upstairs, we find drawings, photos and private journals that belie the sparseness of the canvases. Hyong-keun's ability to pare a difficult existence into deceptively rudimentary shapes on raw canvas shook me to the core – I'm still trying to figure out why.