

APOLLO

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Politics, performance and porcelain – at the Venice Biennale and beyond

Tuesday morning in Venice, on the first day of the Biennale preview, is cold but bright. My first stop, the Ateneo Veneto, isn't itself part of the 56th International Art Exhibition. A lavishly decorated room holds an alien intruder: a white, minimalist porcelain box. This is the *Library of Exile*, a pavilion filled with 2,000 books by exiled writers – Ovid, Victor Hugo, Paul Celan, Salim Barakat – open to the sky and for now given shelter under the room's richly painted, sloping ceiling. The pavilion was created by Edmund de Waal as part of his exhibition 'Psalm' (until 29 September). You can make out phrases on the structure's external wall, scribbled on to a layer of porcelain: lists of the world's lost libraries, from Nineveh to Mosul; the sentence 'It's always personal – I'm making this for my great-grandfather Viktor who saw his library stolen in Vienna'. It's an assertion of the centrality, to De Waal's creative imagination, of the white page of the book, of language, as much as of porcelain; he describes it as 'the most significant sculpture of my life'.



Burnt Umber & Ultramarine (1973), Yun Hyong-keun. Collection of MMCA, Seoul. Photo: © Yun Seong-ryeol

For my final stop I run to catch a *vaporetto* to the Palazzo Fortuny. Here two exhibitions run side by side. A homage to the Fortunys (father and son) takes up part of the building, while in the more distressed rooms, which from 2007–17 saw the Vervoordts mount their biannual themed exhibitions, a retrospective of work by the Korean artist Yun Hyong-keun (1928–2007) unfolds (until 24 November). After all the earnestly issue-led art I have seen today, it is a treat to dwell on these impressive paintings. Yun began making his in 1973, when he was 45 years old, after his release from one of several spells in Seodaemun prison for political intransigence. Allied to the well-known Dansaekhwa movement of monochrome painting, his work has a peculiar intensity of expression. Made using burnt umber and ultramarine mixed with turpentine and linseed oil, painted on to hand-stretched cotton and linen canvases, his imagery is composed of the simplest abstract bands of colour, bleeding into each other, or overlapping, or carefully separated. There are no words, no arguments – just paint.