

51. Venice Biennial
June-October 2005

Collective art memory

Constant comparisons come up between the unbearable temperatures of two years ago and this year's milder climate, between current use of space and ways of installing the pavilions, between budgets, entertainment, selected artists and between one lavish party and the other. But without comparison stands the fact that this year two Spanish women, Maria de Corral and Rosa Martinez, curated the two major exhibitions.

The Biennial takes place at the same venues every other year and this seems to work as a type of memory game. Possibilities to compare and evaluate how things progress from one Biennial to the next are endless! And since art world memory is short, it may actually serve as a much needed and helpful exercise.

Maria de Corral is the curator for the Italian Pavilion in the Giardini where the exhibition is entitled "The Experience of Art". Contrary to what may be an immediate association, the Italian Pavilion does not usually present Italian artists but serves as the challenging venue for an invited curator. The space itself is a labyrinth - visitors may easily miss some of its content unless following the map closely. This year the pavilion hosts works by 40 artists and de Corral is attempting to explore five specific ideas: nostalgia; the body and its redefinition; power, domination and violence; ironical socio-political critique; the use of archives.

Spanning over generations and media, the curator cannot help but display her love for painting. Presented are, for example, the works of Philip Guston, Bernard Frize, Marlene Dumas, Antoni Tàpies, Juan Uslé and Joan Hernández Pijuan, among others. For an international art audience that may not be familiar with the internal power structures and hierarchies of the Spanish painting scene, this seems like a superfluous statement in this context.

The exhibition does not present an overall theme. Rather, the works selected by de Corral are meant to "allow the viewer to recreate his own aesthetic experience". Given its title, "The Experience of Art", in combination with the fact that a lot of contemporary art isn't that concerned with aesthetic values, it would somehow seem appropriate to present more artists whose work investigates senses other than the visual.

In this eclectic selection we find some fantastic pieces. For example the video by Chen Chieh-jen of a woman reminiscing about her days as a seamstress in a factory, Jorge Macchi's suspended disco ball indicating where the light may fall (had it been illuminated), William Kentridge's multi screen installation and Tania Bruguera's construction where used tea bags clad the walls and small (tea-bag sized) video monitors display people at work.

Among the highlights is also the floor installed by Maider López near the Pavilion entrance. It is both functional and pretty. These grey plastic floorboards with red edges move slightly under the feet of the visitors. López also worked in another part of the pavilion, painting and measuring the space methodically and presented the measurements as writings on the wall. This experience is staged exact and precise, and it would have been interesting to see more of that type of work at the exhibition.

In the Arsenale, Rosa Martinez gathered 49 artists on the 9,000 square meters. The title “Always a little further” is based on the utterance of a character invented by the Venetian writer and comic designer Hugo Pratt. This title is meant to carry ideas of being open to chance and to taking risks. The very first works in this exhibition, the by now famous tampon chandelier by Joanna Vasconcelos along with large wall posters by the Guerilla Girls, indicates that not that many chances has been taken and that the risk is at a very low level. As an admirer of Vasconcelos’ work, unfortunately the chandelier looks totally dated in this context. And especially so when hung in the same space as the Guerilla Girls. If this is a meant to be a “feminist” statement, it got off on the wrong foot from the very beginning.

The long hall of exhibition space works something like a trail, and includes great works by for example Pilar Albarracín, John Bock, Leigh Bowery, Carlos Garaicoa, Cristina García Rodero, Olaf Nicolai and Valeska Soares. Martinez calls it a “fragmentary trip, a subjective and passionate dramatisation to discover the zones of light and dark in our convulsed world”.

The chaotic exhibition presented in the Arsenale two years ago has been erased from memory. The new version is clean and well installed. On the façade of the Italian Pavilion, Barbara Kruger proclaims “Admit nothing, blame everyone”. This was the one chance given to two female Spanish curators to shape parts of our collective art memory. They did not make the most of it. **Cecilia Andersson**