# Venice's Contemporary Masterpieces

Artist and writer **Matthew Rose** takes us on a tour of modern art in an old-world city at the Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana museums

Walking through Venice is one of the greatest aesthetic pleasures on offer anywhere. Labyrinthine and mythic, the city, a collection of floating jewels dotting the Adriatic, celebrates not only our collective cultural history but also civilization's beautiful mind.

For more than 1,000 years, Venice thrived in the arts, materializing as the world's most magical city. Wandering along its canals and climbing its stone footbridges, my eyes graze over the salteaten façades and massive worn wooden doors. I put my hand into the deep well of time, and then discovering a little *campo*, or square, it's a moment I get to keep all to myself. There's a gorgeous quiet to all this, and all sounds—lovers, children, my own footsteps—waft into a deep silence. "La Serenissima." one of Venice's nicknames, is apt.

And yet the city continues to reinvent itself: The newest work of magic here is American artist Charles Ray's eight-foot-high white-painted steel





boy examining a frog pulled, as it were, from the lagoon. Boy With Frog was made specifically for the point on the quay of the rehabilitated 17th-century customs house Punta della Dogana, François Pinault's vast new art museum. The Punta della Dogana and the Palazzo Grassi form the François Pinault Foundation, twin spaces devoted to exhibiting the massive contemporary art collection belonging to the French luxury-goods magnate.

When I walk through the Punta della Dogana to see the recent "Mapping the Studio" exhibition, Ray's *Boy* stands outside braving the wintry elements and *acqua alta* (high waters), guarding the giant triangular building while, inside, Maurizio Cattelan's headless horse is moored into a high brick wall. This isn't your ordinary art space.

I meander through a dozen and a half cavernous spaces, climbing stairs and entering rooms to discover strange new worlds, such as the thousands of tiny handmade soldiers in nine large vitrines by Brit enfants terribles Jake

Above: Aerial view of the Punta della Dogana. Left: Paintings by Otto Muehl hang on a wallpapered wall—titled *Castor*—by John Armleder on the second floor of the Palazzo Grassi.

and Dinos Chapman or the giant paintings by the late German pop master Sigmar Polke. Positioned on the exposed brick walls of the customs house, the works fit right in with the original beams and raw wood roof trusses.

Japanese architect Tadao Ando, famous for his poured concrete, designed and oversaw the renovation at a cost of about \$27 million. I occasionally have the thrilling sense of sneaking through Pinault's personal warehouse, a delicious and off-limits space. For an aesthetics junkie like me, it's heaven.

Pinault has almost singlehandedly turned Venice into a contemporary art park. In 2009, "Mapping the Studio" pulled in nearly 500,000 visitors; since their renovations (Palazzo Grassi in 2006, and Punta della Dogana in 2009) both museums have drawn some 1.3 million art lovers. It's easy to see why.

Pinault's collection, possibly the largest of its kind in the world and estimated at \$1.4 billion, is stocked with thousands of works by Jeff Koons, Raymond Pettibon, Cindy Sherman, and Cy Twombly, among others. Many of these artists worked closely with Pinault either in the acquisition of the works or in their installation. Japanese superstar Takashi Murakami performed a Shinto sake ceremony after installing his artworks in the Punta della Dogana. Ray, who doesn't speak French, says, "We communicated very well through art. A lot of things don't require words."

"Mapping the Studio" curators Alison M. Gingeras and Francesco Bonami filled the two museums with some 300 works of art. "Rather than building the collection from what Pinault sees in auction catalogs or gallery showrooms," Gingeras told *Artinfo* about the collection and the collector, "he relies on direct encounters with the artists in their own environment."

Routinely included in lists of places you must see before you die, Venice, contemporary and ancient, is something of a global artwork and epic poem, softly eroded by salt and time. My advice: Go. See the art, walk, and listen; then refuel with a bite to eat and a glass of red to keep you going and thinking. \*

The Punta della Dogana's next exhibition, "In Praise of Doubt," opens Apr. 10 and runs until Dec. 31. At the Palazzo Grassi, "The World Belongs to You" opens June 2, coinciding with the Venice Biennale, and ends Dec. 31. For details on current exhibitions, call 011-39-041-523-1680, or visit www.palazzograssi.it.

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Above: Takashi Murakami's 727-272 was commissioned for the Palazzo Grassi. Below: "I hoped the boy would someday become a citizen of Venice," says Charles Ray about his *Boy With Frog* at the Punta della Dogana.

## OUT AND ABOUT IN VENICE

#### WHERE TO STAY

### Ca' Sagredo Hotel This

14th-century palazzo is a national monument. Rooms overlook the Grand Canal. 011-39-041-241-3111, www.casagredohotel.com.

Cipriani On the tip of the island of Giudecca, this Orient-Express hotel offers several waterfront restaurants, an Olympic-size pool, and a private boat for touring the city. 011-39-041-520-7744, www. hotelcipriani.com.

Hotel Danieli The Tourist with Angelina Jolie and Johnny Depp was filmed here. 011-39-041-522-6480, www.danielihotel venice.com.

Palace Bonvecchiati Contemporary four-star hotel convenient to Piazza San Marco and the Rialto bridge. 011-39-041-296-3111, www.palacebonvecchiati.it.

#### WHERE TO EAT

Cantinone Già Schiavi Sit outside on the quay while you watch life drift by at this wine bar and café. 011-39-041-523-0034.

**Da Fiore** Located in a former tavern, the fine-dining restaurant is consistently ranked among the best in the world. 011-39-041-721-308, www.dafiore.net.

Harry's Bar You can't go to Venice without stopping at Harry's for a Bellini—the peachy Champagne cocktail was invented here in 1948. 011-39-041-528-5777, www.cipriani.com.

