

VENICE BIENNALE



At left, a giant rag doll with its internal organs spilling out, created by Paul McCarthy, is an exhibit at this year's Venice Biennale. Below, a nearly eight-foot, or 2.4-meter, sculpture of a blond woman in a blue suit by Charles Ray. The Biennale is often considered a barometer of the state of contemporary art.

Ripples of rumination

VENICE

Talk turns serious at Biennale after frenzy of spending at auctions

BY CAROL VOGEL

They park their hulking yachts with names like “Lady Nag Nag,” “Wally’s Love” and “Sea Force One” on the choppy waters of the lagoon just outside the main entrance to the Venice Biennale. Every two years, scores of superrich collectors arrive here by sea, joined by museum directors, curators, artists and auction-house experts. They come to see and be seen and to take the temperature of contemporary art today.

But amid the glamorous parties and the people-watching — celebrities like Elton John and Tilda Swinton were here, along with Milla Jovovich, who performed in a glass box atop a Byzantine-style palazzo — there was also serious talk about the contrast between this Biennale and the recent spring auctions in New York, in which Christie’s sold nearly a half-billion-dollars’ worth of art in just one night.

That frenzied moment of spending seemed like another world altogether compared with this year’s Biennale, which opened to the public on Saturday and is about discovery and looking closely, not conspicuous consumption.

“Half the people I’ve seen here seem to be en route from the art fair in Hong Kong to Art Basel,” said Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Yet this Biennale is anything but commercial. Massimiliano has managed to bring together a surprising and interesting group of artists in an exhibition that is both thought-provoking and engaging.”

Mr. Campbell was referring to Massimiliano Gioni, the Biennale’s 39-year-old artistic director, who has chosen “The Encyclopedic Palace” as the theme of this year’s supersize event. It is taken from a symbol of 1950s-era Futurism — an 11-foot, or 3.3-meter, architectural model of a 136-story cylindrical skyscraper — that was created by a self-taught Italian-American artist named Marino Auriti and was intended to house all the knowledge of the world. While Auriti’s dream was never realized, his model serves as the centerpiece and symbol of the exhibition.

Mr. Gioni said he chose “The Encyclopedic Palace” because it best reflects the giant scope of this international show and what he called “the impossibility of capturing the sheer enormity of the art world today.”

In addition to Mr. Gioni’s Biennale, which includes 158 artists, nearly double the number in the two previous ones, there are pavilions representing 88 countries. Many occupy spaces in the Giardini, the shaded gardens that have been home to the Biennale for more than a century. Others can be found in the Arsenale, the nearby medieval network of shipyards, or scattered around the city in cloisters, palazzos, medieval warehouses and disused churches. Among the first-timers is the Vatican, whose group show examines the biblical story of creation. There are countless collateral events too, like an exhibition by the artist Rudolf Stingel, who covered the Palazzo Grassi with his own Persian-inspired carpeting on which he hung his abstract and Photo Realist paintings.

By the time the Biennale ends on Nov. 24, officials estimate nearly 500,000 people will have come to see it.

But it is Mr. Gioni’s show that anchors the Biennale. In two parts — a central pavilion in the Giardini and in the Arsenale — it features self-taught and outsider artists alongside superstars like Ryan Trecartin, Robert Gober and Danh Vo.

While there are paintings, drawings and sculptures dating back 100 years, there are also works made just months ago. In a circular darkened room at the entrance to the pavilion in the Giardini are 40 pages of Carl Jung’s “Red Book,” an illuminated manuscript on which he worked from 1914 to 1930. Off this space are galleries displaying an eclectic array of artworks including Shaker drawings, modern miniatures inspired by late-16th-century Mughal drawings by the contemporary Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi; abstract canvases by the Swedish painter and mystic Hilma af Klint and meticulously carved wild and mythical animals dating from 1870 to 1900 by the woodcarver Levi Fisher Ames.

In the central gallery there is also an enigmatic performance piece by the British-born artist Tino Sehgal, the winner of this year’s Golden Lion award for best artist in the Biennale; two or three individuals sit on the floor improvising their own music, humming and chanting while responding to one another in movement and gestures.



As crowds poured into the show for the three-day invitation-only preview last week, museum curators could be seen taking pictures of the wall labels with their smartphones because there were so many artists they had never heard of.

Everyone had theories about what they were seeing and why.

“It’s saying that something in this old art needs to be incorporated into contemporary practices,” said Leah

Dickerman, a curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Tobias Meyer, director of contemporary art at Sotheby’s worldwide, called the show a “game changer.”

“It finally addresses the theory of contemporary art that is based on Jung, on the unearthing of the subconscious,” he explained. “The art world right now is all about Pop and global BIENNALE, PAGE 11

Rumination rather than commerce at Biennale

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culture and dispersing images via the Internet whereas this is about exploring the deepest sense of oneself and the genesis of art. It is the antidote to Warhol and Koons.”

In past years the scrappy raw spaces of the Arsenale seemed endless and confusing. But this year Mr. Gioni enlisted the New York architect Annabelle Selldorf to reconfigure the space into a coherent museumlike suite of galleries where visitors could see an intriguing selection of paintings, sculptures, videos and objects. There are remnants from a 200-year-old church imported from Vietnam by Mr. Vo and a lounge-like space where new videos by Mr. Trecartin — a surreal mash-up of college kids behaving badly — play continuously. The winner of this year’s Silver Lion award for a promising young artist, the Paris-based artist Camille Henrot, has a video about the history of

the universe that is shown at the beginning of the Arsenale exhibition.

The American photographer Cindy Sherman organized a section where visitors are greeted by a giant rag doll, created by Paul McCarthy, whose internal organs are spilling out. Nearby is a nearly eight-foot-tall sculpture of a blond woman in a blue suit by Charles Ray as well as photo albums by Norbert Ghisoland of early-20th-century portraits that were discovered in the family attic by his grandson in 1969.

Many of the standout pavilions were inspired by Mr. Gioni’s theme of reflecting on the past, as is the case with this year’s winning national pavilion, from Angola. Located in two floors of the Palazzo Cini Gallery at San Vio, a museum that is rarely open to the public, are walls covered with old master paintings of madonnas and saints. Beside them on the floor, for the taking, are neat piles of 24 large-format photo-

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graphic posters by the artist Edson Chagas depicting the complex contradictions of a post-independent African metropolis.

In the Russian pavilion, the artist Vadim Zakharov created an environment based on the Greek myth of Danae, who was locked in a room by her father, a king, yet impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold. Only women are allowed in the first-floor gallery, where they are handed clear plastic umbrellas to protect them from a shower of gold coins raining down from the ceiling, and every woman was allowed to take a coin. “It’s about how money corrupts,” said Udo Kittelmann, a curator from Berlin who helped or-

ganize the pavilion, “and the hope for the future of women.”

Crowds stood in rapt attention at the Romanian pavilion, where five dancers acted out artworks from past Biennales. Using performance as a vehicle for questioning identity and history, they posed as paintings by masters like Chagall, Matisse, Mondrian and Klimt. They also re-enacted installations by artists including Mona Hatoum and Yinka Shonibare as well as sculptures by figures like Rodin and Vito Acconci.

“We went into the archives and looked at everything from 1895 and have included works that were political but also things we liked,” said the dancer and choreographer Manuel Pelmus, one of the artists who created the work. “It’s our way of writing our own history.”

ONLINE: MORE VIEWS OF THE BIENNALE

For a slide show of photographs of the event, see global.nytimes.com/art