

LIFE & ARTS



EXHIBITS

The Olympics of the Art World

The Venice Biennale is steering clear of politics this year and exploring light themes

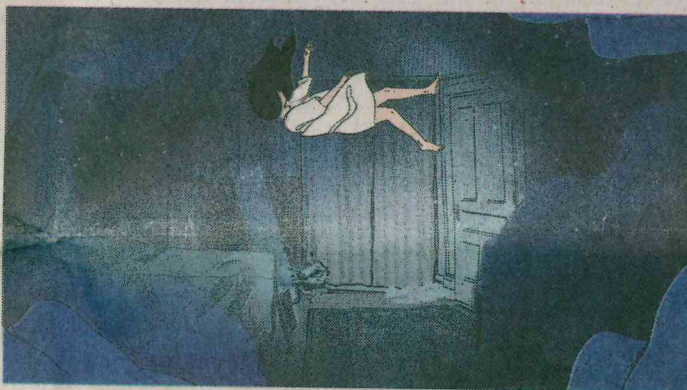
BY KELLY CROW

THE VENICE BIENNALE is trying to lighten up. Organizers of the century-old exhibition of contemporary art, which opens to the public May 13, encouraged artists in its main show to steer clear of geopolitical conflict and focus instead on playful themes—joy, fear, color, time and sexual freedom.

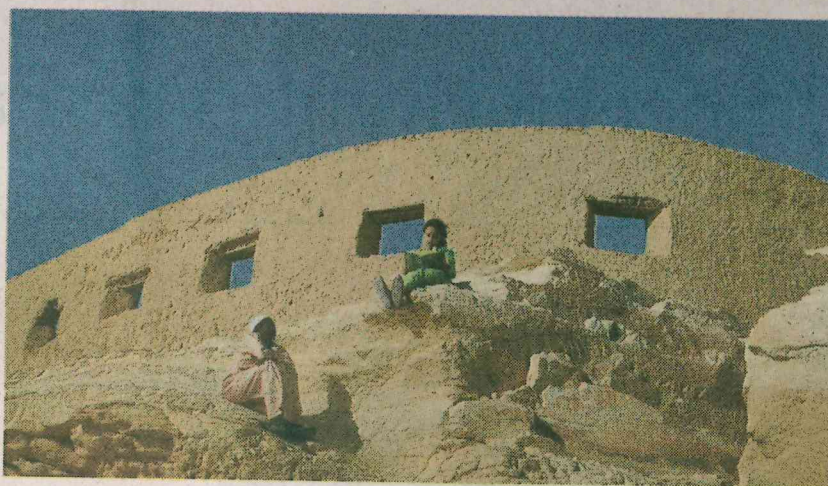
The tenor of the exhibition, which takes place in pavilions and piazzas all over town, is largely determined by the biennial's sprawling main show, "Viva Arte Viva." This roundup of 120 new and established artists was picked by the biennial's artistic director Christine Macel, a former Centre Pompidou curator. Her two predecessors focused on folksy, self-taught artists and political artists from marginalized regions—but Ms. Macel's choices suggest she's projecting a playful tone. She has organized her galleries like a book, with artists' stories unfolding in rooms under headings like "The Pavilion of Time and Infinity."

"In a world full of conflicts and shocks, art bears witness to the most precious part of what makes us human," she said in a statement, adding that she hopes to hold up the rollicking world of the artist's imagination as an antidote to geopolitical ills.

Rising stars this year include Julian Charriere, a Swiss artist based in Berlin whose



'Lake Valley,' left, is an example of work by Rachel Rose, whose work will appear at the Venice Biennale. 'The Mountain,' below, by Moataz Nasr, also will be exhibited at the biennial.



one-ton coconut cannon for the recent Antarctic Biennial was confiscated by German police. His last project in Venice caused a stir because it involved dousing the city's pigeons in brightly colored powder. This time, he is showing a more sober piece, "Future Fossil Spaces," a room of so-called ruins he's built using striated bricks carved

from the world's largest salt flat in Bolivia's Andes mountains.

Another up-and-comer is Rachel Rose, a New York artist whose haunting video work from 2015, "Everything and More," was inspired by an interview with astronaut David Wolf. Organizers

asked Ms. Rose to keep her Venice piece a secret until the biennial opens, said her gallery Pilar Corrias.

Edi Rama, an artist whose day job is prime minister of Albania, is more forthcoming about his contribution: a 62-foot-long sheet of wallpaper he's designed using colorful doodles he first drew on scratchpads and copies of government documents. Mr. Rama, a former art professor who taught art star Anri Sala, said he often draws during phone calls at work because he finds it "calming." "My drawings only became art

after they left my office," he said, "so to show them in Venice is a dream."

Along with giving younger artists their breakout moment, Venice gives curators a chance to validate older artists who may have been overlooked. Expect a reassessment of Irma Blank, an artist born in Ger-

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many in 1934 who now lives in Italy and is known for transcribing entire books and newspapers into slender script that's unreadable—a gesture that turns language into line. Her dealer Alison Jacques said Ms. Blank will show some of her earliest pieces from the late 1960s. Sam Gilliam, a Washington-based painter, is also making a return appearance 45 years after he became the second African-American artist to show in the biennial. This time, his dealer Kurt Mueller said Mr. Gilliam is making a “spectacular” new painting that nods to his earlier Color Field breakthroughs.

In addition to the main show, 85 nations are participating with their own shows around town, including first-timers Nigeria and the tiny Pacific island of Kiribati. Malta is back after a 17-year hiatus. Dozens of art foundations, museums and private collectors are also arranging separate exhibits citywide—a collective effort that is expected to draw 300,000 people to Venice over the next seven months, organizers say. Exhibitions run through Nov. 26.

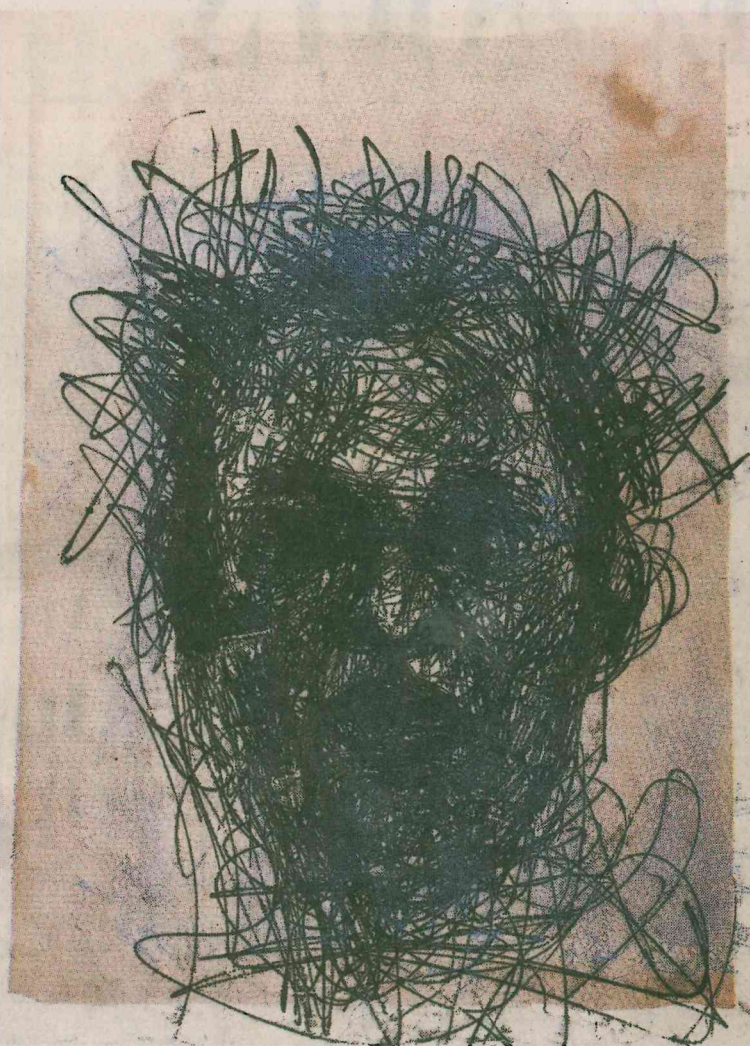
The national pavilions will feature plenty of social critique. Tunisia enlisted a German company known for making most of the world's encoded security papers to design an imitation travel document. Curator Lina Lazaar said Tunisian migrants who had previously been unable to secure their own visas to Italy intend to hand out 100,000 of these “freesas” at kiosks citywide. “Because of Venice, we were able to get them in,” Ms. Lazaar said.

James Lee Byars' 65-foot-tall “Golden Tower” structure will also go up along the Grand Canal near the Accademia museum; it was gilded by the same Italian firm that gold-leafed Versailles, and Byars' dealer Gordon Veneklasen said, “It's meant to remind us that art can transform humanity.”

Here are some other national highlights.

U.S.A.

Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford is already a museum mainstay, but that doesn't mean he took a casual approach to representing the U.S.



A bronze sculpture that will be exhibited in the Canadian pavilion by Geoffrey Farmer, right. ‘Untitled’ by Admire Kamudzengerere, above.

“The significance of Venice rises up over you like Atlantis in the ocean,” Mr. Bradford said. His response: “I started swimming.” Pavilion curator Christopher Bedford said the artist, who is known for sanding and layering found paper into abstracts, “wrung himself out” for the occasion with new sculptures like “Spoiled Foot.” This red, cellular blob will be suspended from the ceiling in a way that forces viewers to inch around it, an uneasy scenario that Mr. Bradford said matches his current sentiments about his country.

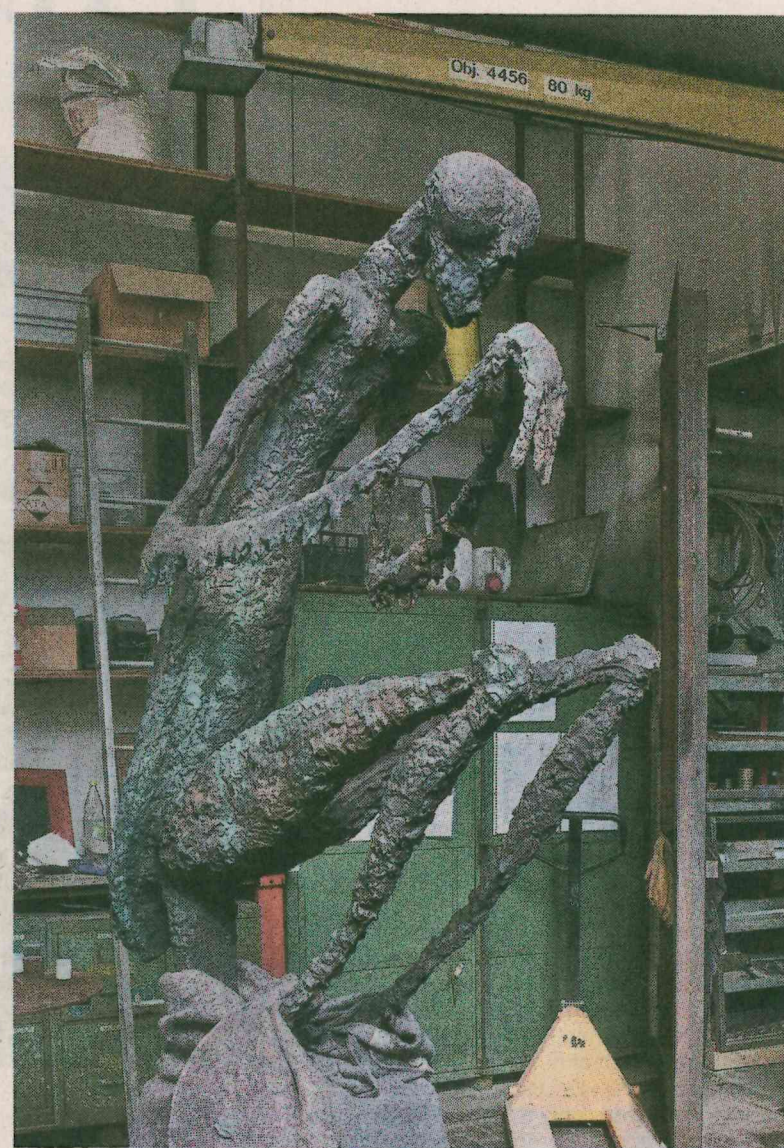
CANADA

Canadian artist Geoffrey Farmer is known for attaching paper cutouts of people and places that fascinate him onto spindly wooden sticks

and arranging the multitudes into a sort of sprouted, visual encyclopedia. But for Venice, he wanted to “shift to something new,” so he teamed up with a Swiss foundry to help him turn the Canadian pavilion into a “fountain,” he said. Mr. Farmer's new bronze sculptures still delve into dense histories: This time he reveals a traumatic secret involving his grandfather.

POLAND

When Los Angeles-based artist Sharon Lockhart went to Poland eight years ago for a show, she fell hard for its people and has since traveled back nearly two dozen times to make films and mentor teenagers she befriended at a home for young women in Rudzienko called the Youth Center for Socio-



Therapy. For Venice, she said she enlisted 47 girls from the center to comb through back issues of “Little Review,” a popular children's weekly that ran in Poland in the 1920s and 1930s. The girls picked 29 issues to be translated into English, and Ms. Lockhart will distribute them, once a week, at the Polish pavilion. (She and the girls are writing and editing their own new issue of the “Little Review.”)

ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe's artists are gaining major traction among collectors in Africa and beyond right now. They are holding a group show of works by modern master sculptor Sylvester Mubayi and young upstarts like architect Dana Whabira and painters Charles Bhebhe and Admire

Kamudzengerere. Mr. Kamudzengerere produced a series of expressive portraits printed on Harare phone book pages in a nod to a belief that people too often get reduced to numbers and statistics.

EGYPT

Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr has carted dirt and bricks from home to build an immersive backdrop for his latest multi-screen video installation, “The Mountain,” which chronicles the day—and night—of a fictional Egyptian village. As the hours tick by, its residents appear to grow increasingly suspicious, but the reason seems unclear. His dealer Mario Cristiani said Mr. Nasr wanted to show “fear from a poetic point of view.”

FROM LEFT: ADMIRE KAMUDZENGERE/CATINCA TABACARU GALLERY; IACOPO SERI/NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA