

## CHRISTIE'S



# 2019 Venice Biennale: The pick of the pavilions

The 58th Venice Biennale Art Exhibition, which runs from 11 May to 24 November, promises to be the greatest show on Planet Art. Lee Marshall previews highlights from the 90 national pavilions at the Giardini, at the Arsenale and elsewhere

- 1 | **United States of America**  
*Martin Puryear: Liberty*

The choice of 77-year-old sculptor Martin Puryear to represent the USA can be seen as something of a lifetime achievement award, but it carries other messages, too. This is the first time that a public art institution, the Madison Square Park Conservancy, has been asked to organise the US participation (via curator Brooke Kamin Rapaport, who commissioned Puryear's monumental sculpture *Big Bling* for the New York park's al fresco art programme in 2016).



Martin Puryear, *Big Bling*, 2016. Installation view in Madison Square Park, New York. Pressure-treated laminated timbers, plywood, chain-link fencing, fibreglass, and gold leaf. 40 x 10 x 38 feet. Collection of the artist. © Martin Puryear, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery  
Photograph by Yasunori Matsui

Puryear also follows on from painter Mark Bradford as an African-American artist engaging elliptically with some of the big issues that affect his country.





Martin Puryear, new sculpture for the 2019 US Pavilion, in process, 2019. Photograph by Yasunori Matsui. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy

This time round, in a series of new sculptures inside a pavilion laid out by Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, and in a monumental installation outside, Puryear will, the organisers say, ‘meditate on liberty as an essential human theme’ while ‘representing his country both as an artist and a citizen’.

## 2 | **United Kingdom** *Cathy Wilkes*

The great debate about difficulty in contemporary art will no doubt be fuelled by Cathy Wilkes’s new work for the British pavilion, which has been curated by Tate Modern’s Zoe Whitley.

Often featuring mannequins and familiar household objects assembled in unfamiliar ways, the installations of the Glasgow-based Northern Irish artist defy easy readings while seeming to tell a story — one that exudes a sense of melancholy, loss and domestic fracture.

Melanie Keen, director of the International Institute of Visual Arts, believes that Wilkes will ‘present us with a fascinating reflection of what British identity might be in 2019’, while fellow selection committee member Fiona Bradley of The Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh sees the pavilion as potentially offering ‘a moment of stillness and quietness’ amid the ‘visual noise’ of Venice.

### 3 | Italy *Neither the Other nor This. The Challenge to the Labyrinth*

As the host nation, Italy is under more pressure than most to showcase its talents, which has led to inflated multi-artist shows in the past. This year’s curator, Fiorucci Art Trust artistic director Milovan Farronato, is taking the same slimline approach as Cecilia Alemani in 2017, with just three artists: London-based sculptor Enrico David, Milanese sculptor and installation artist Liliana Moro, and Chiara Fumai, a feminist performance artist who committed suicide in 2017, at the age of 39.



Chiara Fumai, *This last line cannot be translated*, 2017. Courtesy The Church of Chiara Fumai. Photograph by Oto Gillen

What will distinguish Farronato's pavilion is the layout: rather than being assigned separate spaces in the Arsenale warehouse of Tese delle Vergini, the three artists' works will be intermixed along a route inspired by an Italo Calvino essay on labyrinths. The layout will, says Farronato, 'enact the impossibility of reducing life to a series of clean, predictable trajectories'.



Enrico David, *Ultra Paste*, 2007. Installation. 540 x 560 x 300 cm. Courtesy Collection Nicoletta Fiorucci, London

He is interested in the differences as much as the similarities between his three chosen artists — for example, the contrast between Moro's 'precise, minimalist' work and the 'visceral' quality of David's sculpture. But all three, he adds, demonstrate 'a marriage of authenticity and autobiography', something he believes will be amply present in a work by Chiara Fumai.

4

France

*Laure Prouvost: Deep See Blue  
Surrounding You*



Turner Prize-winning artist Laure Prouvost would happily admit that her work is hard to grasp. She makes films in which every scene reads like a glimpse of a stranger’s dream, or a visual bubble rising from the unconscious mind. All her works — not just the films, but also the sculptures and the performance art — have a touch of Magritte about them.

‘Yes, there is that side to me,’ she says. ‘I don’t like the word “surreal”, but I admit to a questioning, an irony, a self-derision. And I like it when people say things like: “Your movie stinks.” Can a pixel transcend itself and become a smell?’



Deep See Blue Surrounding You, film still, 2019. Courtesy Laure Prouvost, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Carlier Gebauer and Lisson Gallery

The film that Prouvost has made for the French pavilion is entitled *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*. It is a poetic, semi-fictional account of a road trip that begins in the grimy suburbs of Paris, moves to the region of northern France where Prouvost grew up, then proceeds via Marseille to

Venice. Along the way, we meet ‘a dancer, a magician, a priest, a rapper, a retired teacher, a gymnast, a terrible flautist, my grandmother...’

It’s a kind of woozy picaresque tale, a series of encounters en route to art’s island mecca. And there is a recurrent leitmotif — one that is hard not to call surreal — in the form of an octopus. It is a limp presence in mise-en-scènes from Nanterre to Murano. What does it mean? ‘I don’t know how the octopus became so dominant,’ says Prouvost, ‘but I think the metaphor is asking: how can we connect directly? The brain of an octopus is in its tentacles; it thinks through touch. And it doesn’t have memory, so it has to think and feel without reference to what it has thought and felt before. That is something quite attractive — to be right in the moment like that.’

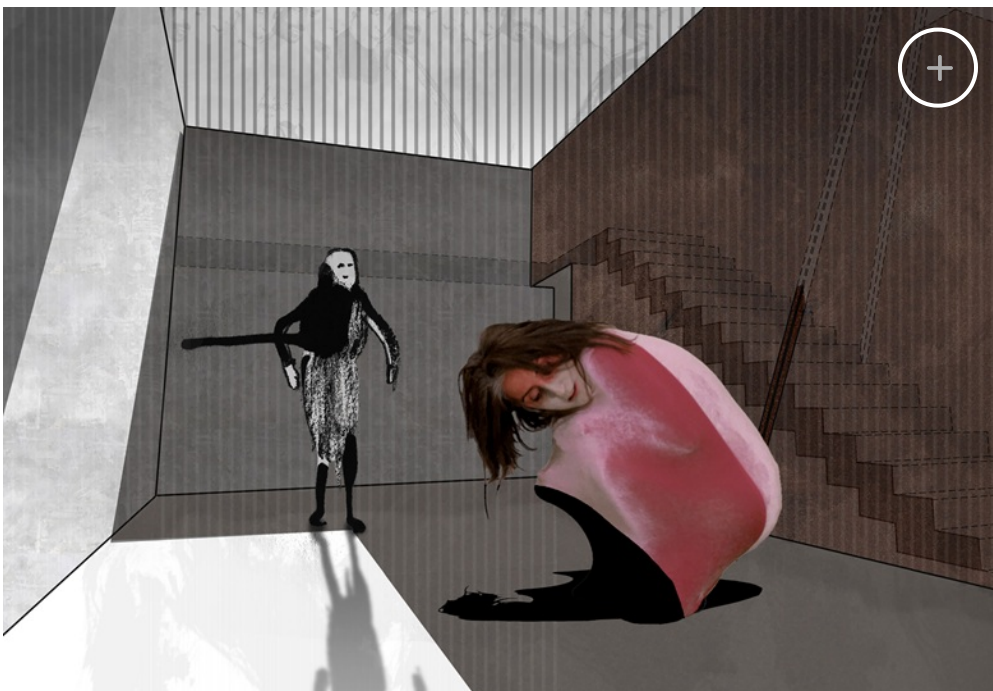
## 5 | Turkey *Inci Eviner: We, Elsewhere*

A refugee can be someone unhappily on the move, or a person stuck in one place. Much of the core reality of the experience is static: to be marooned on a border, lost in a city of tents, or held in a detention centre. This, at least, is what Inci Eviner seems to be saying with the new work she is showing in this year’s Turkish Pavilion.



Inci Eviner, photographed by Muammer Yanmaz

Titled *We, Elsewhere*, it is a kind of architectural installation through which visitors will move along ramps, across internal courtyards and around sharp corners. Along the way they will encounter strange noises, scraps of video, unexpected characters and objects. The effect will be baffling, disorienting, as it is clearly meant to be.



A sketch from *We, Elsewhere* by Inci Eviner

'I am building a halfway house to cope with the world's grave



problems,’ says Eviner. And she casts the people inside this space — presumably including visitors to the pavilion — as ‘perpetrators of thought-crime, soldiers on duty, civilians and displaced persons’. In other words, the structure will function as a kind of sub-Orwellian way station, where mundane human misery collides with equally mundane man-made bureaucracy.

But this is not a museum diorama, or a pious attempt to immerse viewers in the refugee experience; it is more allusive and poetic than that. Everywhere inside the work there are glimpses of other spaces, and this feature is perhaps the ‘elsewhere’ of the title, a metaphor built into the structure of the piece. You can slip through the cracks — both in the sense of passing through a barrier to a better place, and that of becoming invisible to the bigger system.

## 6 | **India** *Our Time for a Future Caring*

India has only staged an exhibition at the Venice Biennale once before, in 2011. But to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi, the nation is returning to the Arsenale with a group show. In the words of the collector Kiran Nadar, founder of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (which has curated and financed the exhibition), *Our Time for a Future Caring* will ‘reflect strikingly different responses to the figure and philosophies of Gandhi’, exploring ‘history, memory and identity’ in the process.

It begins with a selection of Nandalal Bose’s tempera-on-paper Haripura Posters, depicting ordinary people at work, which Gandhi commissioned as art that would be accessible to everyone for the 1938 Indian National Congress session in Haripura, Gujarat. Bose, who went on to illustrate the Constitution of India, died in 1966.



Jitish Kallat, *Covering Letter*, 2012. FogScreen Projection. Installation dimensions variable. Image courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art. Collection: Artist

But there is contemporary work, too, including the video installation *Covering Letter* by Jitish Kallat, which projects onto a curtain of cascading fog Gandhi's letter to Hitler, written six weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War. 'Dear friend,' it begins. 'Friends have been asking me to write to you for the sake of humanity...'

As the artist says, 'It's a seven-line plea for the sake of humanity, something that urges the reader to rethink what he or she can conceive of to change the world or rethink the way they live their life.'

## 7 | **Mongolia** *A Temporality*

The world's most sparsely populated sovereign state is behind what could turn out to be one of the most fascinating off-site pavilions at this year's Biennale. In a former bakery halfway between the Giardini and Arsenale, Mongolian artist Jantsankhorol Erdenebayar will work with German

sound artist Carsten Nicolai, aka Alva Noto, and four throat singers from his country's National Philharmonic Orchestra.



Jantsankhorol Erdenebayar, photographed by Qiu Yang

Co-funded by the Goethe-Institut, *A Temporality* aims to adapt this ancient vocal art form to modern times — so performers will interact with elements of the urban, man-made world rather than the animistic, natural environment of the steppes, where throat singers often travel miles in search of the right resonance and backdrop.

## 8 | **Russia** *Lc.15: 11–32*

The Russian pavilion in the Giardini is, in essence, a tiny satellite of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, the first major national institution to curate a pavilion at the Biennale. Taking as its starting point Rembrandt's well-loved masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, the



museum's general director, Mikhail Piotrovsky, has put together an exhibition entitled *Lc.15: 11–32* after the relevant passage in Luke's Gospel.

The main space features an installation by the film-maker Alexander Sokurov (best known for *Russian Ark*, his 2002 feature about the Hermitage), who is creating a space that is at once one of the most famous halls in the museum and an artist's studio, from whose windows one looks out onto 'the turmoil and war that surrounds the modern world'.

And in another large-scale, immersive work downstairs, the artist and stage designer Alexander Shishkin-Hokusai draws inspiration from the Dutch Golden Age and from mechanical curiosities such as the Peacock Clock, a life-size gilded automaton of a peacock displaying its tail feathers, along with an owl and a crowing cock, made in Britain in the 1770s.

## 9 | **Australia** *Angelica Mesiti: Assembly*

The focus of a solo show at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris which closes just as the Biennale opens, the video, sound and performance artist Angelica Mesiti is enjoying something of an *annus mirabilis* in 2019.



Angelica Mesiti, photographed by Zan Wimberley

Non-verbal communication is Mesiti's abiding theme — she has explored everything from signing to the whistle language of certain remote rural communities — and her new multiscreen installation for the Australian pavilion, curated by Juliana Engberg, will continue to mine the seam.



Angelica Mesiti, ASSEMBLY, 2019 (production still). Three-channel video installation in architectural amphitheatre. HD video projections, colour, six-channel mono sound. 25 mins. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts on the occasion of the 58th International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Australia and Galerie Allen, Paris. © Photography: Bonnie Elliot

The fourth female artist in succession to represent Australia at the Biennale, Mesiti will, she says, use ‘polyphony, cacophony, dissonance and harmony’ in the Venice work ‘as metaphors for the range of dynamics within a democratic system’.

## 10 | Brazil *Swinguerra*

Equally at home on the experimental fringes of international film festivals as they are in art galleries, Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca make music videos with a difference. Focusing on the folk and street music traditions of the Brazilian northeast, their two-channel video installation *Swinguerra* delves into a popular team-dance phenomenon practised on sports fields on the outskirts of Recife.



Artists Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca. Photograph by Chico Barros

Mixing documentary realism and fictional tropes, the film, says curator Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, ‘presents a profound



and empathetic panorama of contemporary Brazilian culture, at a moment of significant political and social tension’, but also invites ‘multiple readings and interpretations’.



A still from *Swinguerra* by Wagner & de Burca

Barreiro, who directed the 2018 São Paulo Biennial, believes Wagner and de Burca ‘are among the most promising artists in Brazil today, exploring media, representation, race and identity in a new way’.

## 11 | Switzerland *Moving Backwards*

The new video and performance installation by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz uses the act of moving backwards as a metaphor for the state of the world today. Promising a ‘vast and immersive installation reminiscent of a nightclub’, the Berlin-based duo have developed the piece with five performers to create what curator Charlotte Laubard describes as a ‘dense choreography generated by body movements, film loops and animated objects’, which ‘interact with the public and establish interrelations that challenge our modes of perception and identification’.



Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, photographed by by Bernadette Paassen

Lorenz and Boudry are building a reputation as queer artists whose works are immersed in the history of what they term ‘the other’ in ‘official’ and underground culture.

## 12 | **Germany** *Natascha Süder Happelmann*

At the press conference held in Leipzig to announce this year’s German pavilion, politically engaged installation artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian may or may not have been the figure with a rock for a head whose statement was read out by a spokesperson.

Sadr Haghghian builds shape-shifting into her art and the media that surrounds it: she has adopted the pseudonym Natascha Süder Happelmann for her Venice show and regularly presents the CVs of other artists who subscribe to the bioswap.net website as her own.

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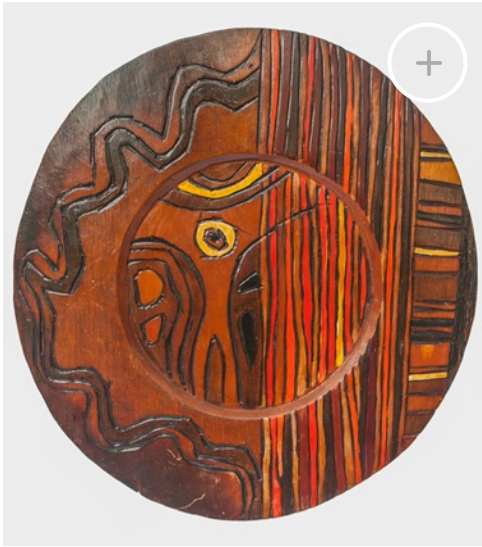
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More details of the pavilion emerged subsequently, including a video in which a rock-headed figure is seen walking in a part of northern Puglia associated with recent protests by underpaid agricultural migrant workers; and it was announced that the artist's presentation will be supported by audio input created by six international composers and musicians.

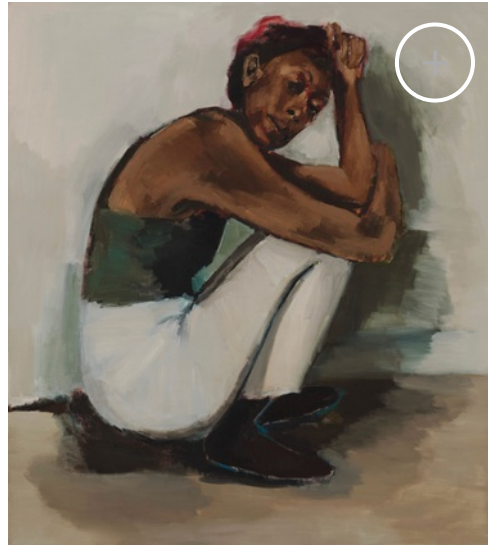
### 13 | Ghana *Ghana Freedom*

This is a first for the West African republic, and it's making the most of the opportunity. The late Okwui Enwezor, who curated the Biennale in 2015, was brought in as strategic adviser, and architect Sir David Adjaye has designed a series of interconnected ellipses inspired by Ghanaian mud houses, to be inserted in the Arsenale.





El Anatsui, Crucifix, 1974



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Radical Trysts. 2018. Oil on linen. Courtesy Corvi-Mora, London and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo © Marcus Leith

Fielding six artists — El Anatsui, Ibrahim Mahama, Felicia Abban, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, John Akomfrah and Selasi Awusi Sosu — the pavilion intends, says curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim, to chart the artistic energies of a country ‘finally moving out of the “postcolonial” moment into one we have yet to envision’.

## 14 | **Korea** *History Has Failed Us, But No Matter*

In this show, curated by Hyunjin Kim, three female artists reread the official history and culture of East Asia through the lens of gender diversity. Fresh from her 2018 Korea Artist Prize, Siren Eun Young Jung presents new work inspired by Yeoseong Gukgeuk, a 1950s form of theatre with all-female casts that was later suppressed by the military regime.



Hwayeon Nam, *Dancer from the Peninsula*, 2019. Multi-channel video installation, dimensions variable. Photograph by Gim Ikhyun © Hwayeon Nam

Video artist Hwayeon Nam unveils an installation dedicated to a controversial dancer and choreographer who died in mysterious circumstances in North Korea, while Jane Jin Kaisen debuts a film that reworks the myth of Princess Bari, a shamanic goddess held up for centuries as a model of filial self-sacrifice.

15 | **Malta**  
*Maleth/Haven/Port – Heterotopias of Evocation*

As a child, Trevor Borg saw something in the murk of Ghar Dalam, a prehistoric cave in southern Malta. He and his friends would gawp at the bones of animals, including dwarf elephants and hippopotamuses, now extinct on the island. ‘We used to hope that other creatures might have existed here,’ says Borg, a lecturer in digital arts at the University of Malta.



Trevor Borg, photographed by Claudine Borg

Those youthful impressions inspired *Cave of Darkness* — *Port of No Return*, one of a trio of linked pieces by different artists featured in Malta's pavilion. Borg's is a kind of walk-through cabinet of curiosities displaying some 400 objects, including bones, pottery, weapons and jewellery. 'Like a huge find,' he says. 'And it's all going to be painted white. Because this is a re-imagination, it's a white lie.'



While touching on autobiography, Borg's work connects with a larger narrative of displacement and sanctuary in the Mediterranean, a theme shared by Vince Briffa's film installation and a sculpture and video piece by the Cypriot artist Klitsa Antoniou. Collectively they create an immersive experience.

16 | **Applied Arts Pavilion Special Project**  
*Marysia Lewandowska: It's About Time*

*It's About Time*, a new work by artist Marysia Lewandowska commissioned by Ralph Rugoff, curator of the International Art Exhibition, uses the rich archival materials of La Biennale and the V&A to examine the apparent absence of women from the historical narratives of exhibitions and museums. The project focuses on records of meetings held by the Mayor of Venice, beginning in 1893, which led to the creation of La Biennale two years later.





Museum at Work. Film still positive, 16mm rushes, 1978, BBC. Photo: Marysia Lewandowska. Design: Luke Gould

*It's About Time* reimagines the circumstances in which La Biennale came into being, setting up new conditions from which the 'unheard voices' of women can emerge, while offering an alternative history of the event. The resulting sound and film installation questions the political and social mechanisms responsible for shaping the cultural spaces of the exhibition and the museum, by attending to omissions and silences.

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