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A Venice Biennale Informed by the Pandemic Will Spotlight Women

For the 59th edition of the longest-running survey of contemporary art, Cecilia Alemani selected mostly female artists, many of color, from around the world.

Robin Pogrebin – February 2, 2022



Shuinai Ashoona, *Untitled*, 2021, Graphite, colored pencil, and ink on paper.

Courtesy of Shuinai Ashoona and West Baffin Eskimo Cooperation

In the two years that the New York-based curator Cecilia Alemani had to organize the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale — during which the pandemic forced a one-year delay and 400 studio visits had to happen on Zoom — the world changed around her.

People grappled with large existential questions about the purpose of life, problems of inequity and the health of the planet. There were moments of dystopian doom and hopeful reinvention.

These issues informed Alemani's iteration of the Biennale — the world's longest-running major survey of contemporary art — the details of which were revealed on Wednesday.

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There is a majority of female and gender-nonconforming artists, a choice that Alemani, in her official announcement, said reflects “a deliberate rethinking of man’s centrality in the history of art and contemporary culture.”

The artists in the Biennale deal with environmental concerns, communion with nature, identity politics and ecological activism. There are Black artists from Haiti, Senegal, Zimbabwe and the Republic of Congo.

More than 180 of the 213 artists have never before been in the Biennale, which opens to the public on April 23 and runs through Nov. 27, with 80 national exhibitions at the sprawling Giardini park (anchored by its Central Pavilion), the Arsenale, a former shipyard, and elsewhere around Venice. Five countries will be participating for the first time: Cameroon, Namibia, Nepal, Oman and Uganda.

As if in direct contrast to the enduringly hot U.S. art market, very few of the artists are recognizable American names and those stars that do pop up are largely women, among them Barbara Kruger, Nan Goldin, Louise Nevelson, Ruth Asawa and Simone Leigh, who is the first Black woman to represent the United States in its national pavilion.

Alemani, the director and chief curator of High Line Art, took as a starting point the 2017 children’s picture book, “The Milk of Dreams,” by the Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington, which features characters like Humbert the Beautiful, who befriends a crocodile, and Señor Mustache Mustache, who has two faces, eats flies and dances.

These stories of transformation, first painted on the walls of Carrington’s home in Mexico City, inspired Alemani’s vision for the Biennale. “Carrington was talking about how do we define life, what distinguishes us from other creatures, can we imagine a world in which the body can be transformed and become something else?” Alemani said in an interview.

She organized the biennale around three themes inspired by the artists themselves. The first is the representation of how bodies can transform. In a variety of mediums and techniques, artists “are trying to expand outside the canvas,” Alemani said, in some cases with mechanical devices that interact with various forms of life.

A video by Egle Budvytyte, for example, portrays a group of young people lost in Lithuania’s forests; the Swedish Sami resistance artist Britta Marakatt-Labba uses embroidery to render snowy scenes of nature; the Surrealist artist Bridget Tichenor (1917-1990) used the Renaissance technique of tempera painting to create images of magical realism.

The second theme is the relationship between individuals and technology — “how the culture is processing polarities between, on the one side, thinking that technology can make our lives and our bodies better, eternal and invincible,” Alemani said, “and on the other side, fearing machines taking over and the presence of artificial intelligence.”

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That fear was exacerbated by Covid-19, she added, which highlighted “how mortal and finite we are. In a time when we would love to be with others and to share with others, all of our relationships are being mediated through digital screens.”

A new video by the media artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson explores the birth of artificial organisms, while the Korean artist Geumhyung Jeong conjures robotic bodies that can be reassembled.

The third theme is the connection between bodies and the Earth. In particular, Alemani said she was inspired by the scholar and feminist theorist Silvia Federici, who imagined a world without hierarchy or domination — one where man is not at the top of the pyramid — but instead a world “of symbiosis and enchantment.”

“The idea of enchantment is something you will see quite a bit,” Alemani continued, “especially in the Arsenale, which is itself a factory of the marvelous.”

Important to Alemani are five smaller, historical sections she calls time capsules, or “shows within the show,” aimed at fostering connections, providing layers and context. “I was very interested in creating a dialogue between different generations,” she said.

These capsules will bring together the work of 90 mainly 20th-century artists.

In a gallery in the Central Pavilion, the first of the five capsules features work by female avant-garde artists, including Eileen Agar, Leonor Fini, Carol Rama, Dorothea Tanning and Remedios Varo.

Another capsule was inspired by “Materializzazione del Linguaggio,” the first historical retrospective of women’s art mounted at the Biennale in 1978. It includes visual poets exploring the relationship between images and words, namely Mirella Bentivoglio, Mary Ellen Solt and Ilse Garnier (now in her mid-90s). There are experiments such as hand-sewn tapestries by the French Surrealist writer Gisèle Prassinos and anagram poetry by Unica Zürn.

Other homages to artists who are no longer living include Hannah Höch of Germany, Aletta Jacobs of the Netherlands and Amy Nimr of Cairo. “It’s not just a young artists show,” Alemani said. “An exhibition like the Venice Biennale should not necessarily capture the last two years, an obsession with the new.”

Alemani said she is interested in “reinscribing” those who have been omitted from the contemporary art canon — those whose stories “were not told” — including the Inuit artist Shuvinai Ashoona, the Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi and the Indigenous Venezuelan artist Sheroanawe Hakihiwe.

Alemani herself is the first Italian woman to organize a Biennale and she has deliberately included numerous female Italian artists, including Ambra Castagnetti, Giulia Cenci and Chiara Enzo, to

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give them some overdue recognition. “This show happens in Italy, not in New York, and the situation with gender is different,” Alemani said. “I realize that an exhibition doesn’t change things, but it could hopefully have symbolic value.”

“If I look at the history of 127 years of the Venice Biennale, the percentage of women participation is dramatically low,” she continued. “I want to give space to voices that have been silenced in the past.”