

59th Venice Biennale, “The Milk of Dreams” by Quinn Latimer

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Axes

The Indigenous thinker and elder Davi Kopenawa notes of white people: “They sleep without dreams, like axes abandoned on a house’s floor. Meanwhile, in the silence of the forest, we shamans drink the powder of the *yãkoana* trees, which is the *xapiri* spirits’ food. Then they take our image into the time of dream. This is why we can hear their songs and contemplate their presentation dances during our sleep. This is our school to really know things.”³ In an exhibition devoted to material metamorphoses and earthly entanglements, it is not surprising to see, in 2022, an emphasis on Indigenous practices, as well as works by non-Indigenous artists invested in ancestral epistemologies. Amazonian and Sámi artists are well represented, as are many incredible artists from the Caribbean and the Americas, whose works draw on certain pre-Columbian iconographies: the wonderful Myrlande Constant of Haiti and her virtuosic glass-beaded Vodou flags of sirens, Chilean Sandra Vásquez de la Horra’s incalculably moving accordion-folded drawings of mythic female figures sealed with beeswax, and Mexican painter Roberto Gil de Montes’s admixture of Mexican modernism and Huichol iconography (his *Los poetas en el mar*, from 2021, took me home).

The late Macuxi artist, curator, and activist Jaider Esbell, who died by suicide last year, is represented by a series of six paintings, his electric brushwork of frogs, cows, and other visionary animal spirits, glowing, irradiating, from black fields. His loss is felt here, as well as in Delcy Morelos’s installation that fills the same room: *Earthly Paradise* (2022), a field of earth the height of a child, its scent deep and dank and wonderful, tangible even through my mask. Raised in Indigenous Embera territory, and educated in Cartagena, Morelos’s monumental earthen works—inspired by her study of Amazonian Witoto thought, evoking de Maria—suggest both end, here, and origin.

How these brilliant, complicated cosmological works float and figure among the more familiar modernist and contemporary art practices from the US and Europe is an issue that Alemani leaves unresolved, if not ignored. Indeed, the show’s contextualizing of bodily metamorphosis, hybridity, and human-nonhuman relations with the earth in their most exclusively Eurocentric guises—Surrealism, Donna Haraway, et cetera—is disappointing. The historical capsules, though excellent, underline this Eurocentric historiography, in a sense, even if the curatorial selection of artists in the larger exhibition expertly rebuts it.



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, *Las Cordilleras Encontradas*, 2017–21. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the Venice Biennale. Photo by Roberto Marossi.

Ones and Zeros

In Yanomami cosmology, *xapiri* are auxiliary spirits of the shaman. As Ailton Krenak has written: “They can be a hummingbird, a tapir, a jaguar, a monkey, a flower, a plant, a liana vine—all of them are people, and they interact with the shaman. These beings make exchanges, alliances, they invent and cross worlds; and, while they are in movement, they move everything around them.”⁴ Such is the case with the many artworks on view in which trees sprout from shoulders or legs become roots, torsos end in fins or curl into eggs, or arms become serpents flicking forked tongues into—what?—shadows.

Such hybridity, though, can be prosthetic as well. Technologies—of gender, apparatus, machine, performance, colonialism, expropriation, racial capitalism, language, painting—are everywhere, not often in the expected guises. There is little video, for example. Not much photography. Have you ever seen so much painting? everyone asked. Yet the rooms devoted to technology or its early aesthetic forms are brilliant: from the “Seduction of the Cyborg” capsule, with its eighties-era totemlike figures by Liliane Lijn, the thirties-era aluminum reliefs of Regina Cassolo Bracchi, and the bodily anagrams of Kiki Kogelnik, all less self-blazoning than self-creating, to works by Lucia Di Luciano, a founder of Gruppo 63, whose matrices of black-and-white paintings on Masonite kept my eyes glued to them. Like weaving, they suggest the warp and weft of labor, crossover, rigor, architecture, a suffocating psychological interior and architectonic exterior both.

A more elusive thread, which I will try to pull as tightly here as I can, links a reprise of finish fetish and its American West Coast ancestry to newer offspring. Monira Al Qadiri’s fantastic, nearly iridescent rotating sculptures; Teresa Solar’s enormous crab claws, gleaming like cars at golden hour; Christina Quarles’s stunning suite of paintings of fluorescently attenuated figures, her neon brushwork nervy and thick or latex-tight and almost airbrushed; Tishan Hsu, my first and only sculpture professor, whose unsettling series of sci-fi reliefs, at once screens and skins, are phenomenological and suffocating in equal measure. It all reminded me of a kind of California dream—not of my Southern California childhood but of those that preceded mine, for I was not then alive, as well as those that have now come after.

Consider, too, Alemani’s gift for technically brilliant opening lines. After the Arsenale’s expert pairing of Leigh/Ayón, in the Giardini Andra Ursuța’s luminous hybrid vessels, cast of her own body, all pastel fetish and gorgeous fragmented horror, some mystic self-blazoning for the twenty-first century, are surrounded by walls of Rosemarie Trockel’s knitted pictures and wool works with titles lifted from the likes of Duras (*Destroy, She Said*, 2007). Women’s work, indeed.

Signs

Simultaneously precise and overwhelmingly opaque, “The Milk of Dreams” can feel as suffocating and surreal as a dream that does not stop. *Too much*, one yells, tossing—and by one, I mean me, and everyone else. Not a real complaint. I’ll be thinking of this show for a long time. Much has been made of the number of women-identifying artists, and the small percentage of men. I didn’t miss them. My fear, though, is that in two years the market—its neocolonial-corporate oligarchs, their fortunes in tech or bombs or gas and oil or real estate or indentured masses on temporary-to-nothing contracts, and the racial-patriarchal capitalism in which they all continue to operate—will reassert itself. “The Milk of Dreams” will become known as “the women’s show” or “the show of Indigenous cosmologies and gendered technologies” (it already is). It will become a kind of dream—that form we are normalized to forget—taught by feminist professors to select grad students, rediscovered by scholars every couple of decades, like the pavilion curated by Annemarie Sauzeau in homage to Carla Lonzi at the 1993 Venice Biennale, which I discovered in only the third decade of my life, while Hans Haacke’s German Pavilion of the same year has been part of every curriculum I’ve been taught since puberty.

Indeed, each morning of my past week in Venice, as I walked a set of narrow pastel streets and chalky bridges to the Arsenale and Giardini, I kept passing signs: *STERLING RUBY*, one body-sized poster read. *ANSELM KEIFER*, a cathedral-sized banner, blanketing the edifice of an actual cathedral, announced. I walked faster. To ignore such signs—this is more than denial, I think. Years ago, in a fit of pique after seeing an artist talk by Ruby in Geneva, in which he casually assigned his quick success to all

the humble women artists who had taught him, I wrote a poem which I titled “It’s Hard for a Man (Making Women’s Work) in the World.” Is it, though? Not really.

Ghost Ships (A Coda)

A week ago, on the dawn train from Zurich to Venice, watching the sun run like an egg over the Alps, and the lakes turn into slippery, silvering mirrors, I remembered watching another sunrise, years ago, in the city I was traveling to. Was it a dream? Yes and no. I was sitting on the edge of the lagoon in front of the Giardini after a party, my cold legs dangling over oily waters. The sky was blue-black and then lighter blue, like a bruise. Pink seeped out into a thin blood sentence at the horizon. In front of me rose a huge black yacht, parked in the narrow canal to shallowly challenge the colonnaded pavilions of nation-states to a death match. More death star than the stardust we are made from. An artist pointed out the yacht’s enormous dark windows to me, which he said repelled photographs: any picture you took would come out blank; like some Stalin-era photographic disappearance, I thought. This artist’s own country had been invaded, terrorized, and occupied by the same regime that made this yacht and its oligarch and his parking spot possible. That yacht of disappearing images is now, a decade later, in international waters evading sanctions, the same narcotic, telegrammic, violent sun bleaching its black decks. Its owner has given up his football team, fled east, and was recently poisoned trying to negotiate peace between his murderous regime and its present target, or so the gossip reads. So real, surreal.

There is no way to balance wars with exhibitions, and yet—art emerges regularly from their valences of violence. The key perhaps is not to ignore it, not to render it “unspeakable,” nor to cater to those who would fund it. They depend on our silence, and our ready acceptance of their mediocre artists-as-investments. For the backers of art and the backers of war are often one and the same. War against peoples and war against the earth—also one and the same, as the exemplary Sámi Pavilion, and its Indigenous artists, would and did declaim in its opening days. “What happens to the land, happens to the people,” as their maxim goes. Pauliina Feodoroff’s *Matriarchy* performance, in which she and other Sámi women laconically circled the rectangular glass Nordic Pavilion offering small objects (a feather, a knife, a set of bells) to the crowd of spectators to see—*with our own eyes*—underlined this point, somehow. Look at this, and this, and this, they seemed to suggest, quietly, virtuosically, ludically. And we did.