

London Evening Standard



Rachel Maclean, *The Lion And The Unicorn*, 2012 *Rachel Maclean*

It is the art world's biggest event. The one that turns Europe's most unique city into a Mecca for art pilgrims from across the globe. It can define the currents and trends of art for the following years, and propel artists from the fringe to the mainstream of international art. It is the most loved and hotly anticipated of all the biennials. And for a few days at the beginning of May, it will prove it has the most glamorous and lavish of openings.

British artists have long made waves at the Biennale, from Frank Auerbach's Golden Lion in 1986, to Haroon Mirza's Silver Lion for most promising young artist in 2011. And there is much to look forward to among the offerings from UK-based artists this year.

The most famous living British artist has already stuck his oar in the city's canals, of course. In unveiling his opus, *Treasures From The Wreck Of The Unbelievable*, across the collector François Pinault's two grand Venetian venues earlier this month, **Damien Hirst** avoided his enormous endeavour getting lost amid the 120-artist Biennale show, the 85 national pavilions and dozens of so-called "collateral" shows open across the city. It gets a second reveal at the Biennale.

The artist in the British pavilion this year is a kind of anti-Hirst. In contrast to his monumental mythological bling, Phyllida Barlow's work is made of humdrum stuff: wood and board, polystyrene, plastic sheeting, gaffer tape, rope and other detritus, often covered in rough plaster and with expressive painterly passages.

She doesn't so much fill the spaces she occupies as subvert them. Her sculptures block entrance ways, teeter over you like towers, lurk in corners, forlornly or threateningly. This is perfect for the neo-classical politeness of the British pavilion, especially as she's the first artist to fill the pavilion since the Brexit vote. This won't be tub-thumping political art, but it might well reflect on the absurdity of nationalism in a location where artists often uneasily fill their countries' pavilions.

Rachel Maclean, Scotland + Venice's choice for 2017, more overtly addresses contemporary issues, albeit through retellings of fairy tales. *Spite Your Face*, the young artist's new film for the Biennale, uses the Italian story of Pinocchio, with his lie-detecting nose, to reflect on our post-truth world. Maclean has honed a richly imaginative filmic language in recent years: seductively grotesque, confectionary-hued yet dystopian.



Expect unspeakable things to be done with noses as she takes on the self-styled "alt-right" and their conspiracy-driven mythologies. If Maclean isn't on next week's Turner Prize shortlist, it's a travesty.

One artist who's already been nominated for the Turner Prize is James Richards, Wales's artist for the Biennale. Where Maclean assaults the senses, Richards's multimedia installations are more poetic and slow-burning.



James Richards, *Music For The Gift*, 2017, production still. Archive image courtesy The Schwules Museum, Berlin. (James Richards)

Alongside a sound installation and photographic works is his new film based on photographs and collages he discovered in the archive of Albrecht Becker – a photographer, theatre designer and actor once imprisoned by the Nazis for his homosexuality.

This year's main show, *Viva Arte Viva*, is organised by the Centre Pompidou curator Christine Macel, and has a smattering of artists living and working in the UK. The works that feature are largely under wraps, but it does include a video by Cerith Wyn Evans, whose light installation currently occupies Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries, and work by the late John Latham, whose enormous influence is currently the subject of The Serpentine's spring programme.

Glasgow-based Karla Black - whose immersive, colourful environments are made of everyday materials such as make-up - features, as does the London-based Italian artist Salvatore Arancio, who makes strange and fantastical sculptures, films and prints. And two London-based veterans, Rasheed Araeen, born in 1935, and David Medalla, born in 1942, are gaining long-overdue wide recognition.

So what does this say about British art now? Notably there are no zeitgeist-defining shows of new British art in Venice this year, like General Release, an exhibition at the 1995 Biennale that featured, among others, artists including Douglas Gordon, Fiona Banner, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Gary Hume and Jane and Louise Wilson, all

of whom went on to greater fame. But what is in Venice is evidence of a hugely diverse UK art scene, with powerful work being made in different art centres and across different generations.



Damien Hirst makes a triumphant five-star return in Venice

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