

## Easy-peasy

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How will a five-year-old deal with a long weekend at the Venice Biennale? Over a hotel breakfast, Italian-style (sugar-coated croissants, jam-filled croissants), my daughter and I agree a *modus vivendi*. Morning – Lido; afternoon – shows; evening – Lido. Suits me.

Evan and I look out on parallel universes, mine extending a few feet above hers. I am checking out the sunglasses, she the Pet Patrol flip-flops on the same revolving display. At a kiosk I decipher the vaporetto ticket price list; she puzzles over the cover of a comic which promises “Con Bloom Spy Magic Power”. Your guess is as good as mine. If museums really wanted to introduce children to art, they would simply hang it all lower down. The ground is still her picture plane and stage. There are lizards, tractor prints in the sand, the sinister foam left behind by the tide. Cracks in the road, which we have to follow. I suggest to her that we might be eaten by “masses of bears” hiding round the corner. She says, “Yeah, yeah, that was in *Charlie and Lola*”. A. A. Milne recycled for kids today, or isomorphic inspiration? Does it matter? I realize I can learn something from this kid.

At the head of the long queue for Mark Bradford’s hyped US pavilion is Valerie Kabov, the redoubtable gallerist from Zimbabwe. She consents to a chat-and-cut. Despite, or perhaps in part because of, the excruciatingly detailed paean in the *New York Times* (“An Artist’s Mythic Rebellion . . .”), Bradford’s show underwhelms. Some of the paintings are lovely, shimmery fragmented images, but a tedious movie and an assortment of mundane 3D works, including one vast belly-like structure hung from the ceiling, transform the pavilion into a half-cock Gesamtkunstwerk. No, I’m wrong. Evan likes the belly and wants to crawl underneath it.

Geoffrey Farmer’s Canadian pavilion is wrecked and open on several sides. Every minute or so, a fountain blasts water up through a hole in the roof, where it runs down and falls back. Dotted about are various objects – an abandoned duvet, a praying-mantis-like figure with scissors in his back, a contraption formed around a grandfather clock case – and numerous 4-by-2 timbers. It’s all meticulously explained: the praying mantis is Allen Ginsberg, the scattered wood refers to a truck crash: a compendium of memories, then. I can’t help loving this one. Neither can Evan; she says she wishes she’d brought her boots to jump in the puddles. Round the back, more 4-by-2s propped against a wall. Little jets of water beam out of tiny holes drilled in the wood. Evan wants to drink it. Don’t you dare. No, no, explains an attendant. You’re supposed to – all the water’s been filtered.

In the Finnish pavilion a movie by Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen satirizes, well, Finland. It's enchanting. Evan comes out declaiming "Finland, Finland. Finland – good", with a perfect accent. Gal Weinstein's Israeli pavilion smells nice. There's a floor covered with coffee dregs and a giant sculpture of a missile launch fashioned out of fibre which resembles charred candyfloss. It looks, I am told, like a "fluffy-fluffyhorn". She is fascinated by the projections in Grisha Bruskin's Russian pavilion: surging crowds, goose-steppers and authoritarian monsters. You can survey Takahiro Iwasaki's Japanese pavilion through a hole in the floor, your head thus becoming part of the installation. Evan insists on queuing. Phyllida Barlow has packed the British pavilion with rough slabs and crude towering forms slathered with concrete. This post-apocalyptic Barbican-on-acid is enlivened by walls made out of plywood panels, crudely brushed in brightish colours, tie-dye-style cloths and other colourful things. I'm thinking: what do we call this in 2017, post-povera? I check with Evan. She weighs up the brushwork with a craftsman's eye. "Easy-peasy."

Anne Imhof's "Faust" in the German pavilion wins the Golden Lion: outside, dobermans; inside, a secondary glass floor, several feet off the ground, creates an observable space underfoot where black-clad performers with model-like looks indulge in wacky stuff, e.g. throwing fake Molotov cocktails. The pavilion becomes a state, the performers "body, sculpture, commodity"; the transparent floor implies total surveillance. A performance lasts five hours. But it's all strictly non-participatory: they are their own elite doing their own thing; your place is among the lumpenbourgeoisie, and your role to spectate. Seems pretty good, but Evan says the music's too loud, so we clear out.

The Biennale's main show, entitled *Viva Arte Viva*, curated by Christine Macel, is "intended as an experience, the extrovert moment from the self to the other, towards a common space beyond defined dimension". One has to admire a curator who, in the age of Trump, ISIS and Brexit, stakes everything on the airy-fairy. From the Giardini, you pass into a central hall, organized by Olafur Eliasson, where for 250 euros you can acquire an ecologically sustainable lamp made in situ by a refugee or migrant. Last time round, Okwui Enwezor organized the singing of all of Marx's *Kapital*: is it now de rigueur for Biennale curators to wear their hearts on their sleeves to this degree? As art, Eliasson's "Green light" project receives *nil points*; even as Relational Aesthetics it's clunky. And, "common space" or not, it evokes a colonial sweatshop.

*Viva Arte Viva* is a sophisticated curatorial product. There are nine separate sections, and within these one may trace multiple themes. For example, the theme of the artist asleep. Mladen Stilinović (“his practice . . . was deeply inhabited by laziness and nothingness”) is photographed lying on a bench in a gallery; Yelena and Viktor Vorobyev’s mock-up bedroom entitled “The Artist is Asleep” “proclaims non-productivity as vital to art”; Franz West is photographed on a divan in a series of works dubbed “Otium”. So far so paradoxical, possibly also so boring. So contemporary? Not really. Circa 1900, at his big show in Bond Street, attended by the Royal family, Toulouse Lautrec installed an armchair and demonstratively slept through the entire *vernissage*. Surely, then, with Lautrec originates this idea that the artist dozing is in fact an image of his protean power? Does anyone know this? Does it matter?

This is the first truly feminist Biennale, in the sense that so many of the artists in Macel’s show are women. Feminism is sometimes overt in the works, sometimes not. Evan wants to loll against Sheila Hicks’s vast balls of coloured twine. Can’t blame her, but not allowed. Zilia Sánchez’s canvases in shades of white and grey feature pointed projections, like smooth little volcanoes or, dare I say it, schematic breasts or vaginas, an interpretation encouraged by titles such as “Eros” and “The Amazons”. This sexualization of 1960s-style formalist canvases is cute. Edith Dekyndt’s “One Thousand and One Night” consists of a rough rectangle of dust on the floor illuminated by a slightly off-kilter rectangle of white light; periodically, the dust is swept – a reference to women’s work? – to match the projection, creating an illuminated cloud. I found it exquisite; Evan dances around the light, enjoying her own shadow.

Part of the way through *Viva Arte Viva*, Evan decides she might as well be rewarded for her efforts. She will look at a picture, turn around, and recite the colours. If she remembers them all, she gets a Haribo. Who says art criticism doesn’t pay?

Taus Makhacheva’s “Tightrope” features a tightrope walker ferrying paintings between twin mountain peaks. It makes for some dramatic shots, and gives an insight into the collection of the local Lebanese restaurant, er, Museum of Dagestan. The film, as might perhaps be expected, “explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, local and global, pre-soviet and post-soviet times”. Macel’s mode of thought, discovering the world in a grain of sand, or infinite metaphors in every staged offbeat gesture, is quite inspiring. Evan and I go outside into a water garden, she tracks down a recording of a ribbiting frog to a fake rock in the corner, and then sits down to finish her tub of ice-cream, which has turned to soup. Now I’m thinking, aha, melted ice-cream, metaphor for global warming.

Beyond the Giardini and the Arsenale venues there is a whole lot to see, including an interesting assortment of British artists, among them James Richards, Shez Dawood, Rachel Maclean and John Smith. To coincide with the Biennale, François Pinault is staging Damien Hirst's magnum opus, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, at two Grand Canal-side venues. The conceit is that a trove of ancient art has been discovered in a shipwreck. Does Hirst know that Komar and Melamid had a similar idea in 1978? Does it matter? Outside we encounter two massive sculptures, both depicting, in different poses, a man on a horse being squeezed by a giant serpent. The horsemen have slapstick "Oooh, I'm being crushed to death" faces. The artist's comic-book conception of form, executed by hired hands, cannot stand the obvious comparisons: the antique Laocoon, or innumerable pieces of baroque sculpture. The gap between the intention and the result is vast, ergo – bathos. Is Hirst the Bernard Buffet of our time, a middle-aged enfant terrible with owt left to say except to bang on about death? As a chum, the curator Nadim Samman, put it on Facebook: Hirst. Show. Ever. But I check with Evan outside the Punta della Dogana. What do you think? "Nothing." Outside the Palazzo Grassi? "Nothing." We venture inside, where a stupendously huge headless figure in fake bronze inhabits the atrium. Whaddaya think? "Nothing." That's my girl!

One wonders about collectors such as Pinault and all the second-rate works they must assemble along with the masterpieces. Do they covertly deaccession? On the Lido, Evan has been through the stages of collecting in about half an hour. First she stuffs all her pockets indiscriminately with shells. Next, her storage overflowing, she decides to sort them out and "only choose the most beautiful" ones. Then, surveying the pile of rejects, she wonders whether I'd like to swap my beautiful ones for any of these. Finally, she says she'll gift her collection to mummy.

We've missed loads of recommended shows. The Italian pavilion. The Prada foundation. The Fortuny palazzo. No more time. We tootle back up the Grand Canal to the bus station. We pass a giant pair of hands, emerging from the water, which appear to be holding up a building, by Lorenzo Quinn, son of Anthony. I check it out: it's a comment on global warming. Evan gives it a giggle.

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