

Venice Biennale

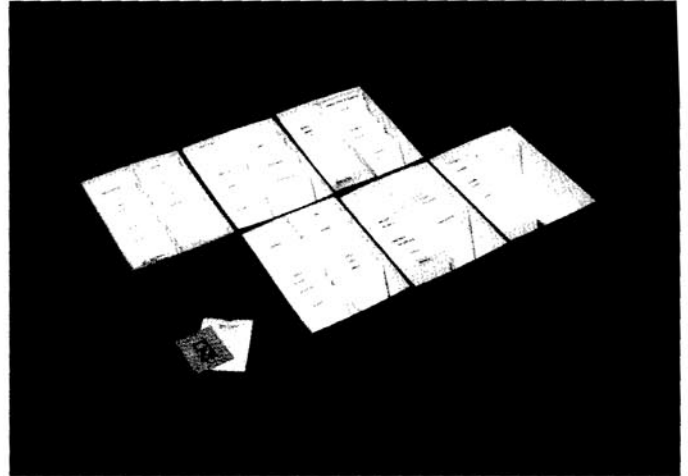
Venice Biennale

Douglas Maxwell

Getting into the preview days of the Venice Biennale is kind of like getting past the bouncer at one of New York's most elite nightclubs. Unless you have been approved or sanctioned by the powers that be, you simply have to wait. Fortunately, the night before the first preview day, I had dinner with the commissioner and curator of the Georgia pavilion who happened to have a first day pass that trumped even my press credentials. So, with my traveling companions—some very astute and elite collectors with first minute credentials—we began the biennale adventure by embarking on the Arsenale, the vast former navy yard.

Let me digress to say a general word about the Venice Biennale. It is an international exhibition that includes pavilions from about 50 countries, both onsite and offsite of the Venice Biennale proper. So, during the first week of previews and including the opening, Venice becomes akin to an Epcot Center for the contemporary art world. Unlike other art fairs, however, such as Basel next week, the focus of this biennale is not exclusively on what the art costs or the insanity of the art market as of late.

In fact, sometimes the discussions are about the curatorial focus of the exhibition. The Arsenale and the Italian Pavilion comprise the curated show, "Think with the senses/fell with the mind (art in the present tense)," organized by the American curator Robert Storr, and the Arsenale has never looked better or



more professional. Storr has given each artist sufficient space to show off his or her work, yet, in some cases, this is not necessarily a strength. Often the works, mostly photo-based, could be interchangeable and are often indistinguishable from one another. The overall theme, not surprisingly, is about war, environmental degradation and death around the world. Here, artist after artist displays photos that are quasi-journalistic from an anti-war point of view. The implications of gloom, doom, death and destruction are rampant. One of my companions, a London dealer, was moved to comment, "If this kind of material is at the Venice Biennale (never known for controversial political material), then they probably just pile the bodies up at Documenta (know for it)." Certainly, the repetition of the material by artists coming from different countries points to the global concern about the state of the world, but on the other hand, history has always been consumed with a world at war, and its effects.

Still, certain works stand out from the crowd. Most notably *Bouncing Skull*, a video by the Italian artist Paolo Caneveri. Shot in Belgrade in 1999, it captures a boy presumably practicing soccer amongst the rubble in front of a bombed-out building. Closer examination reveals that the ball is a skull. The film is hypnotic and terrifying. What's with the boy? Have the horrors he has been subjected to made him completely disassociated, or is he just so hardened to the realities of his life that he is just making do? For those of us who haven't been in a war zone like that, the visual image seems surreal. The continuous loop reinforces the mundane way the boy seems to treat the skull as an ordinary everyday object to be used to improve his soccer skills.

Emily Prince's comprehensive piece, *American Servicemen and Women Who Have died in Iraq and Afghanistan (But not including the wounded, Nor the Iraqis Nor the Afghanis)*, is moving and beautiful—a rare combination for a piece so highly charged. Using the internet, she has logged pictures of every American soldier killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. From the picture, she made individual drawings and further cataloged them by ethnicity and skin tone using slightly differently colored paper (e.g., white for Caucasians, beige for Hispanics and darker brown for





African-Americans). She then uses the drawings to create a map of the United States with each drawing placed just so that it forms the state from which that the dead soldier came. One point she drives home in this work is that the horrors of war are experienced in a direct correlation to one's own proximity to them.

Just so I don't leave the impression that all was depressing gloom and doom in the Arsenale, I will mention three other notable works: Christine Hill's *Minutes*, an ongoing project in which she compulsively sorts and organizes the objects in her everyday

life; Italian Tatiana Trouve's *Technica Mista*, a strange combination of tech and non-tech-looking materials used to make sleek, abstract sculpture and Ghana's El Anatsui, an artist who has made the most magnificent and monumental tapestry out of the metallic material used on wine bottles.

Next, on to the Giardini. □

Opposite Page, Top to Bottom: Emily Prince. / Christine Hill, Accounting Portable Office (detail), 2003. / This Page: Paolo Canevari.