

ArtSeen

Letter from VENEZIA

by Lucio Pozzi

One sculpture by Brooklyn-based artist Barry X Ball has trumped the Biennale and concurrent exhibitions in Venice.

Let me explain. There are two polarities in town. The Biennale proper is an affair conducted with dignity by the American curator Robert Storr, a painter and curator of notable sensibility. He has avoided the trap of sensationalism into which most of the international shows now fall. Nothing screams for the spectator's consideration but all is there to see for those who care to look.

The visitor's attention is activated by several underlying factors. The emphasis is not on the new and certainly not on emerging artists alone. Together with the work of very young artists, there are works made by older artists such as the Argentinian Leon Ferrari, who is 87 years old. His eclectic approach ranges from collages of paintings in old horror films combined with contemporary news images, to formalist arrangements of bones and ropes hanging from the ceiling, to a 1965 plastic Christ crucified to the wings of a US Air Force jet. The theme is a generic protest against the barbarity of Western civilization. Belgian Raoul De Keyser is 76 and paints delicate abstract paintings that have no obvious subject. His motto: "Do painters need to explain their work?" Louise Bourgeois, age 96, displays a series of ink drawings that she makes on her small desk in the rundown living room where she also holds her salon every Sunday. They are simple grids, which exude an unfathomable force of freshness and thought.

There is the expected impartial distribution of spaces between women and men, between the Euro-American and other cultural continents. There is also I believe for the first time in this large international art survey a prominent display of art by artists who have died, most notably the Sol Lewitt room, where two diagonally placed walls are covered with millions of pencil marks condensing a black sun in the center of one and outlining a white sun on the facing wall. It is moving to think that Sol selected this work while knowing that he would pass before its completion. Upstairs from it, "Autel de Lumière" (Light Altar), 1999, by Chen Zhen (1955-2000) mixes a baby bathtub with a kneeling stool and an industrial wheeled tray with hundreds of white and black candles into a melancholic and powerful ambiguous presence.

War as a reality and as a fear and as a cruelty is a pervasive but chilled-down-for-art's-display-sake theme. It's as if the international community of artists has suddenly discovered that violent death, injustice and abuse are part of our life. I found skulls everywhere in innumerable

artworks-the living room of death.

Euro-Americans look more at far distant countries and conflicts while they could look at the Bronx or Watts or the slums of immigrant London to find matters of emergency. The artists of countries where life is in constant danger seem more authentic even though they also submit to the unwritten international laws of art presentation as originated in New York in the sixties – the white box. The skull syndrome extends beyond the Biennale. Damien Hirst, always true to his boring and elegant didacticism, mixes them with images of pharmaceutical pills named after Catholic saints in a one-person exhibition in the center of town, and in front of Palazzo Grassi there is a giant skull of shiny pots and pans made by Subodh Gupta

I found Nancy Spero's "Maypole/Take no Prisoners," 2007, to be less manipulative and more dramatic. A tall aluminum pole has black and red ribbons streaming down from its peak. Hanging from the ribbons are cutout aluminum sheets, painted with the images of heads that drip blood or tears that could have been cut from their bodies. Because of its cheerful aspect, which is how the artist smuggles pain into this work, it is not an obvious sculpture and thus allows the viewer to access it from within his or her emotions.

Kim Jones also calls for attention. I find him one of the rare mono-themed artists who can remain intense while doing more or less the same thing year after year. He brought a work of pencil on paper from his studio and extended its designs for yards and yards on the walls of the whole room that was allotted to him. The drawings are infinitely expanding improvisatory renditions of imaginary battles taking place on frantically detailed maps of cities and fields. The scenes represented change as they evolve and you see the erasures and re-instatements of the fights as one or another of the opposing parties wins or loses. Jones does not represent his subject matter: he lives it intensely inch by inch while he draws it. At either end of the giant maps the artist placed jackets he wears while walking in the streets. Their backs are encrusted with sticks of wood holding gessoed fields onto which the same battle calligraphies have been obsessively marked.

Finally I liked Storr's inclusion of the meditative and contemplative together with the topical. I am among those who are convinced that exercises in pure form should not be denied legitimacy in times of social turmoil. Explorations of feeling not applied to any explicit esthetic, social or political purpose are as valid as art more focused on specific agendas. To censor them would mean to prepare for an authoritarian culture that denies one crucial part of human experience. It is important to sustain Robert Ryman's sensitive investigations of paint's density almost nearing the landscapes of Milton Avery in the same show where Jenny Holzer stencils on large canvases the coroner's reports on the contusions and lesions observed on the bodies of prisoners who died in detention in Guantanamo.

Across town, the exhibition Artempo (Arttime) deals with dimensions that are more timeless. It is

installed in Museo Fòrtuny, a large 'palazzo' hidden in an alley near the Rialto Bridge. Mariano Fòrtuny (1871-1949) was a Spanish-born designer and artist of high refinement, whose textiles were greatly admired during the Art Nouveau period. He established the factory to produce them in Venice. He was a rabid and refined collector of a million things. It is appropriate that his house would be chosen to host the art assembled by the Flemish collector Axel Vervoord.

This exhibition is a most eccentric yet single-themed equation filtered by an attentive and daring imagination that intentionally seeks the silver thread of quality through time and place, without falling for the dictatorship of the new, the local, and the formulaic. You will find in it phallic sculptures from different epochs and different civilizations together with anatomic representations and deadly fetishes of all kinds. Dozens of objects, small and large, are put around in the stuffy brocade-lined rooms. The lighting is theatrical, playing on light and shadow to produce an itinerary of surprise for the visitor. There are tablets on which faded sepia photographs of the displays are mounted, each object in them numbered for caption recognition. To view this show is the opposite of scanning the Biennale. This is a treasure hunt where recent art is mixed with ancient artifacts in a magical network.

A small color photograph by Hans Bellmer strengthens a painting by Francis Bacon near the entrance. Patterns of slashes and holes on canvas, by Lucio Fontana, become less of a provocative gesture and more a delicate calligraphy reminiscent of Mark Tobey's gestural webs, which is nearby. I am sure that had Mr. Vervoord been able to put his hands on a painting by Jackson Pollock, he would have been able to extricate its decorative power, rather than trumpeting the rhetoric of macho power so mistakenly attributed to it in the artistic folklore of our time.

When placed near a crusty red texture of 1957 by Gutai artist Saburo Murakami and a 1960 earthy encrustment by Jean Dubuffet, even Mr. Attitude, Andy Warhol, comes out as being in touch with the primal grit of earth in a "Oxidation Painting" of 1978 made by pissing on metal powdered acrylics on canvas. In this show, there are also examples of other art practitioners, whom I am not alone in considering as merely brilliant representatives of a tired avant-garde, come to be seen as having echoes of transcendental power.

Tony Cragg's tricky double-faced black marble carving of the human face profile which appears changed when viewed from different angles doesn't hold when compared to the esoteric tiny anonymous wooden "Hand/Feet" (no author, time and place of origin credited) – a hybrid toad-like shape of feet supporting the fingers of a hand that made me think of Michael Rees' and Bradley Rubenstein's metamorphic imagery. The same can be said about Jan Fabre's shiny insect concoctions when compared with Louise Bourgeois' hanging double penis "Janus in Leather Jacket" 1968, or Medardo Rosso's evanescent wax portrait of a child, "Ecce Puer" 1906, but this show rubs off some magic on Fabre too. Many absolute pure mystical works like Roman Opalka's desperate numerations or Alberto Giacometti's "Cubist Head" 1934-35, counteract the universal

grotesques shown in glass cases along the walls.

It is in this dual context, of Biennale and Artempo, that I saw Barry X Ball's installation as a bridge between two attitudes. It was exhibited at the Michela Rizzo Gallery, in a narrow street just behind the famed "Prigioni" (Prisons). The gallery owns two spaces. In a large room on the second floor of a nearby building, Ball placed some works from the past years. They revealed Ball to be a refined assemblagist of themes and materials, steeped in cultural references and quotations, of the kind that makes scholars gloat but whose essence remains anchored in the canons of late postmodernity. But it was in the smaller street-level room that this artist jumped into a realm that awakened in me the subtle vibration of discovery. The title of the piece is too long and fantastic to copy. It suffices to quote the beginning: "paired, mirrored, flayed, javelin-impaled, cable-delineated-pendentive-funnel-suspended, squid-like, priapic / labio-vulval, Janusian meta-portrait lozenges of the artist, screaming, and Matthew Barney, in two guises: determined combatant and recently-deceased, resigned stoic. (...)", 2000-2007. The title continues then to describe the Baja California Mexican onyx marble the piece is carved in and indicates several other material and imaginary connotations of the work.

I feel this sculpture contains the characteristics of both the Biennale and Artempo shows. It is attempting to bypass the shackles of current discourse. It is both mystical and grotesque, both transcendent and upsettingly earthy. I read it as having been made in a state of lucid, calculated obsession the resulting image of which triggers in the spectator a sense of unease while also giving reassurance because of its completeness. Let me describe what I think I saw. Two pieces of onyx are suspended from the ceiling in a way that pierces the void over which they float. Gilded stainless steel javelin-like tubular shapes that are spiked at either end traverse both vertically. 30 tiny micro holes have been drilled on all sides in the upper part of each javelin. In them are inserted very thin cables that radiate towards eyelets fixed to the ceiling from which the heavy sculptures thus hang. The marble is carved in great detail. Both parts consist of two back to back portraits linked as one head. One can see on their surface the horizontal lines of the computer-guided point that carved them before the sculptor started retouching and refining by hand. Barney's faces face one another while Ball's faces look outwards. Barney's face is serious, eyes open as if looking into space, Ball's eyes squint because he is screaming. Underneath, the necks morph into hanging folding cloths. The heads end at the top with a kind of exploded opening from which the upper part of the javelin comes out. Intricate reliefs carved in curlicues with crosses and heraldic imagery reminiscent, as the artist says, of decorations on Renaissance armor decorates the surfaces of the heads and necks. The inside of Ball's open mouth is smooth and shiny.

It took Ball seven years to finish this piece. With other artists, often refinement becomes boring, and excessive symbolism and cultural references become pedantic, but the labor-intensive attention Ball pours into his art conveys to me a sense of disquiet, a bridge between death and life. I read here a desperate tenderness for the human condition exalted to the millionth degree, a

daring frozen outlook spanning primitive rituals and cartoonish sci-fi banality.