

Save Yourself – **A look at the outside pavilions**

Save Yourself. We are in big trouble: who will rescue us? Regardless of the title, borrowed from New Zealander artist Francis Upritchard's installation, this statement sounds perfectly fitting to the present situation of contemporary art. Is it a command? A plea? A suggestion?

The young New Zealand artist's show at this Venice Biennale is held at the second floor of Mangili-Valmarana palace; an historical residence on the Grand Canal that houses in Claudio Buziol Foundation and its program of studies and exhibitions of young talents, designers and artists since 2008. The exhibition location in the ancient palace's three rooms was chosen by the artist herself, who wanted to create a "world" of her own, or better, her disquieting vision of the world, which is peopled with strange small sculptures, a sort of primordial elves, characters rooted in her childhood in New Zealand, but, at the same time, visibly connected to her European present, "...like a piece of medieval art restored and repainted by a revolutionary futurist artist caught in the middle of a wild dream'. (Francis Upritchard)

These characters, that seem to have come out of a Bosch's or a Brueghel's painting, are at ease in the sumptuous rooms of the Venetian palace. Ironic and sardonic, some of them grotesque in expression and in attitude, they all live in a setting created by the artist herself, among hand-made lamps, painted objects and tree trunks, projecting themselves in the elegant ancient mirrors in the rooms. Perhaps they allude to the illusion of an ancestral vision as a safety point to contemporary man? They are small worlds inhabited by anti-heroes, full of faults, where there is not a dominant culture, but certainly the raising consciousness of a dialectic comprehension of our past.

In this Venice Biennale, Francis Upritchard is not the only artist that looks to the past and that, through the traditions and uses of her homeland, searches for a context that is not only accusation, but, above all, a testimony to the existence of a link between "worlds" that are distant, in time and space.

It is from this last point of view that we should also interpret the experiment carried out by Owanto, alias Yvette Berger, the artist chosen to represent Gabon, the African state at its first participation to the Venice Biennale. It is the "beacon of memory", the mother's name emerging and becoming the

Francis Upritchard,
Richard,
New Zealand



Owanto,
Where are we
going?
Gabon



artist's name. "Where are we going?" is the question that the artist is asking herself. Owanto's look toward Africa is disenchanted and, at the same time, optimistic, because her land has a lot to give, not much in the economic, scientific or technical fields, but in the ethical one.

The street signs, the schematic-



represented light boxes, start from those basic and simple social ideas that are slowly dissolving in the western world, such as the family unity, and, above all, the recurrent woman's image that is rooted in the ancestors' deep spirituality.

The recent past, the memory of Singapore's golden age of cinema is the core of the original exhibition conceived by curator Tang Fu Kuen, who called visual artist Ming Wong to create "Life of Imitation" in Palazzo Michiel Dal Brusà. It is like being in the entrance hall of an old movie theater of the 50's, breathing an old-fashioned atmosphere. The big Murano chandelier, antique and sparkling, the comfortable sofas and the ticket booth bring us back in time. A poster honoring Pier Paolo Pasolini welcomes the visitors: "Devo partire domani" (I have to leave tomorrow), produced by Ming Wong, based on Pasolini's "Teorema". The story narrates that Singapore in 1965, before becoming independent, was the leading city of the Southeast Asian film industry: the cultural richness of the city resided in its multi-ethnicity. Many movie theaters were opened at the time, but they fell into disuse when the film industry



collapsed. The operation of restoration and documentation carried out by the artist and the curator is intended to revisit the rich, but forgotten heritage of their country, using different video-languages, performance, interviews, photographs, manifestos and posters.

This autobiographical desire to

understand the past, to recover values linked to one's own homeland seems to be a leitmotif accompanying many art expressions in this 2009 edition of the Biennale: from Gonkar Gyatso's work that revisits the traditional Tibetan thangka paintings achieving language synthesis, to the boisterous reconstruction of Pascale Marthine Tayou's tribal village, showing that one of the deepest contradictions of our time concerns the preservation of our past. This idea emerges ironically, violently, nostalgically, aiming, however, to establish an immediate connection with the new generations. In its most successful expressions, it becomes a cultural enrichment that explores new dimensions of expression, innovative materials and techniques along with more traditional ones.



Ming Wong,
Cinema Polaroid,
Singapore

