

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jason Farago, "The Venice Biennale Plays It Safe, and Gets Lost in Fog," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2019

## The New York Times

### The Venice Biennale Plays It Safe, and Gets Lost in Fog

By Jason Farago

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The installation "Thinking Head, 2017-2019" (2019), by Lara Favaretto, envelops visitors at the entrance to the central pavilion of the Giardini della Biennale in Venice. Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times.

VENICE — Every other spring I come to this waterlogged city, take the vaporetto to a garden in its eastern edge and walk into a large white building. This year, I had some trouble making it out. Here in the Giardini della Biennale, the principal site of the world's most enduring exhibition of contemporary art, the Italian artist [Lara Favaretto](#) has enveloped the white central pavilion in a dense cloud of artificial fog. The words "La Biennale," above the colonnade, fade into formlessness.

Let Ms. Favaretto's cloud stand as the logo for this diffuse biennial, which brings together many of the biggest names in art today but never quite coheres. [Ralph Rugoff](#), the London-based American curator, has fashioned a show that aims to take stock of our foggy shared present, when shared narratives have collapsed and we struggle to find our bearings. His show is handsomely installed in some places, and elsewhere weirdly indifferent to display. It's up-to-the-minute but also safe and detached. The 58th Venice Biennale is a lukewarm, nebulous edition, and I wish I knew what it wanted.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Visitors watch "Global Agreement" (2018-19) by Neil Beloufa in the Arsenale exhibition space of the Venice Biennale. Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

It's a young biennial, and includes some of today's greatest talents under 40, including [Neil Beloufa](#), a young French-Algerian artist; [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#), the Nigerian-born painter based in Los Angeles; [Ed Atkins](#), the British video artist; and [Kemang Wa Lehulere](#), a rising star of South Africa. For the first time in my memory, every artist here is alive. Mr. Rugoff has forsworn any reanimations of neglected older figures, whom curators often use to shape a biennial's plan of attack.

But the 79 artists and collectives here are almost all known quantities. A dismaying percentage of the art has already been shown in New York, Los Angeles, London or Berlin, and the globalism of the biennial's last two editions has been jettisoned for Western institutional preapproval. I walked out having discovered precisely two exciting artists I didn't know: [Handiwirman Saputra](#), an Indonesian whose disjunctive sculptures — including off-kilter columns and pink loops that are like giant rubber bands — enact surprising contrasts of scale, shape and surface; and the promising young Indian photographer [Soham Gupta](#), who shoots empathetic, night-swallowed portraits of those living on the margins of Kolkata.



One view of Kaari Upson's "THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS OUTSIDE" (2017-19) at the Arsenale. Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times



Ms. Upson's exploration of housing from another angle. Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

A biennial jammed with the art world's present winners could work, I guess, if it organized and analyzed them for new audiences — many, after all, will be discovering them for the first time. That hasn't happened in this light-touch exhibition. It unfolds as a disconnected cascade of objects and images, in galleries sometimes sloppily hung. If Venice's last two editions made strident claims on the path forward for art (for better in 2015, for worse in 2017), the 2019 Biennale comes across as the artistic equivalent of "Top of the Pops": a passive rundown of received tastes, dominated by the United States and Britain.

The conceit of Mr. Rugoff's show — and it's a good one on paper — is to have shrunk the number of participants and asked each to contribute at least two works, which appear in two rhyming shows in two different locations. At the larger of them, the Arsenale (Venice's former naval yard), he has devised a system of plywood walls that avoids the rat-maze feel of some previous editions. Large installations, including an engrossing effort from the Los Angeles-based artist [Kaari Upson](#) that probes the psychological pressures of housing through urethane casts of furniture and cuckoo video performances, have ample breathing room.



Visitors pass "Veins Aligned" (2018), by Otobong Nkanga. Gianni Cipriani for The New York Times

But in the Giardini's befogged central pavilion, the same 79 artists occupy less than a third the space. Too much art fills too few galleries, and the density forces Mr. Rugoff into juxtapositions that come across as cluttered and frivolous.

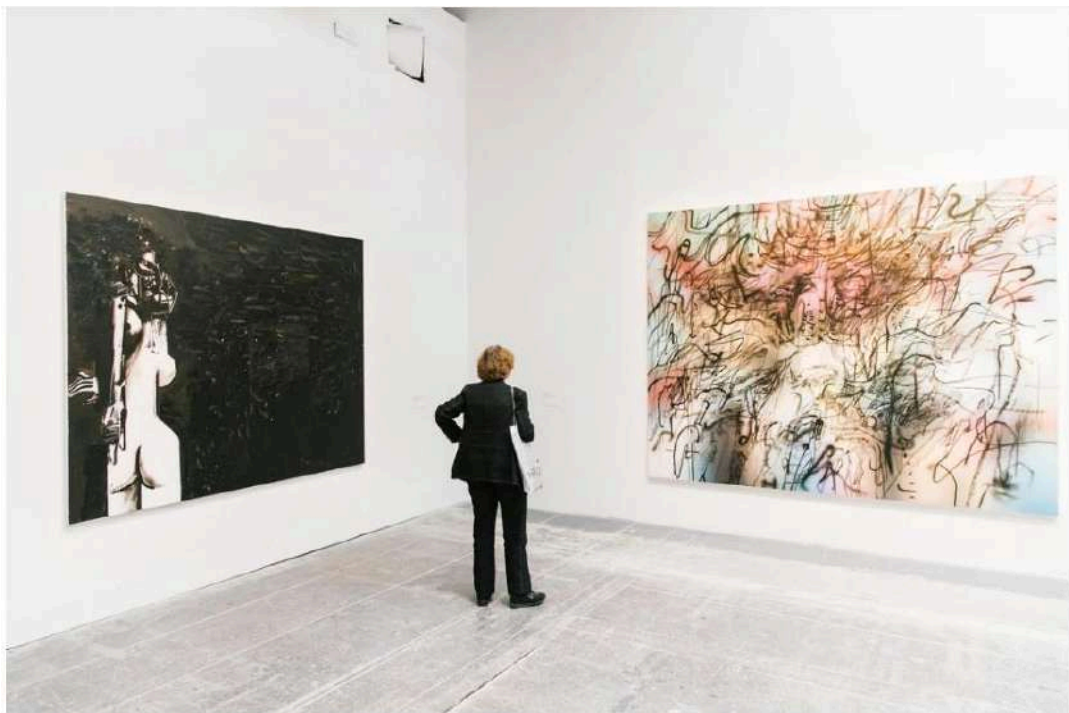
An excellent large sculpture by the Berlin-based [Nairy Baghramian](#) — uniting precariously balanced, biomorphic slabs of aluminum and wax — has been shunted into an attic with a half-ton block of marble brought by the inventive activist [Jimmie Durham](#), and far too many unrelated paintings. It comes across as a room of leftovers. [Julie Mehretu](#), [Henry Taylor](#) and [George Condo](#), three American artists working in very different idioms, have brought challenging works that deserved proper space for contemplation and shouldn't have to compete against one another this way. (They get a bit more room in the Arsenale.)

In some cases, the invitation to show in two venues has let artists take a risk on something new. Mr. Atkins, in the Arsenale, presents another gripping installation centered on his digitally rendered videos, in which waxy computer-generated bodies fret, wail, panic and disassemble. Scattered through the Giardini are surprising gouaches of human hands and feet, each of which cradles a tarantula with Mr. Atkins's head grafted onto its body. I found them idly drawn, but I appreciate the risk he took in showing them.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



"Maintainers" (2019), by Nairy Baghramian, at the Central Pavilion of the Giardini.  
Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times



A visitor with, from left, "Standing Female Figure in Black Space" (2018), by George Condo, and "Flo Me La (N.S.)" (2017-18), by Julie Mehretu. Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

[Avery Singer](#), an intriguing New York-based painter, has taken a welcome risk here, too. In the Giardini she shows her better-known abstractions prepared with three-dimensional modeling software. But she really delivers in the Arsenale with a new, frank, full-length self-portrait in which she appears to trace patterns on a fogged-up shower door. It made me gasp, then scratch my head, then thrill to its marriage of high-modernist gestures and private doodles.

With more A-side/B-side surprises like that this show might have been a success. Yet the Arsenale and the Giardini have more in common than they should. [Mr. Wa Lehulere](#) appears with two evocative, but quite similar, installations that probe the inequities of South African education. Why not show his beautiful drawings in one venue instead? And I didn't need to see even one crazed kinetic sculpture by the grindingly obvious Chinese artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu; I certainly didn't need to see two. (If shock was the aim, at least contrast one robot with the couple's "Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other," their distressing video censored two years ago at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.)



"Can't Help Myself" (2016), a sculpture by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, in the Central Pavilion at the Giardini.  
Gaarni Cipriano for The New York Times

You could also cynically read the double format as an insurance policy, for at this biennale, an artist only needs a 50-percent hit rate to be called a success. Consider [Arthur Jafa](#), the American filmmaker who won the Golden Lion this year on the strength of his 50-minute "The White Album," shown in the Giardini. This commanding achievement (previously shown at the [Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive](#)) splices reams of found footage of white Americans showing off guns and screaming like crazy people with tenderer images of Mr. Jafa's white friends. It makes use of the same meticulous music cues and on-the-beat editing of his breakthrough video "[Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death](#)," and exceeds that video in its marriage of political anger and personal vulnerability that ought to horrify a majority-white art audience.

While "The White Album" alone merited Mr. Jafa the Golden Lion, his contribution at the Arsenale was large chain-choked tires (previously shown at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York) that solidified American racism into literally leaden symbols.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



A visitor walks by "Big Wheel" (2018), by Arthur Jafa, in the Arsenal.  
Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

Saving the day is the terrifically smart Canadian artist [Stan Douglas](#), whose video installation "Doppelgänger" uses two projectors, on either side of a translucent central screen, to narrate a tale of quantum mechanics and split personalities. An astronaut is teleported to a spacecraft, but something goes wrong along the way; she gets copied, and her colleagues back on Earth panic that each astronaut may be an alien twin of the other. (The plot wittily hinges on a phrase that reads differently depending on where you're sitting: the Marxian LIVE REIFIED TIME or, in reverse, the satanic EMIT DEIFIER EVIL.)



Evil alien doubles are the theme of the video installation "Doppelgänger" (2010), by Stan Douglas.  
Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Christoph Büchel, the Swiss maximalist, [has brought to the Arsenale the wreckage of a small boat](#) that capsized in the Mediterranean in 2015, drowning at least 800 African migrants. The boat sits dry-docked by the water, guarded by a police officer. Staring up at this death trap made me feel powerless, and ready to abandon art for a new career in migration law. Even contemplating its force as an art work feels indecent.

Matters of belonging and borders animate many artists in this year's national pavilions — organized separately from Mr. Rugoff's show — starting with [Martin Puryear](#), who has done credit to the United States with a conscientious, quietly moving display of eight mostly new sculptures. His meticulously crafted works of pine, hemlock and steel are subtly inflected with themes of liberty and its lack, above all in his "A Column for Sally Hemings," a fluted bollard of painted wood topped by an iron shackle.



"Barca Nostra," by Christoph Büchel, is drydocked near the Biennale site.  
Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times



A video projection from Laure Prouvost's installation "Deep See Blue Surrounding You" (2019).  
Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

The French and German pavilions take diametrically opposed approaches to the question of representing a nation. For Germany, [Natascha Sadr Haghghighian](#) (working under a pseudonym, and pathetically appearing in public with a papier-mâché rock over her head) has blasted the Nazi-era pavilion and, with borders on her mind, sprayed a new massive internal dam of concrete.

It comes across as the safest and blandest sort of performed “antagonism,” and it looks especially feeble in the shadow of [Laure Prouvost](#), whose pavilion centers on a thrilling video of Frenchmen, migrants and animals all on the move together, forming a new community as they charge southeast from Paris to Venice. Its dreamlike nature never dips into hippiedom or mysticism, and offers a prime lesson for young artists: less astrology, more democracy!



The opera “Sun & Sea (Marina)” (2019), by [Rugile Barzdiukaite](#), [Vaiva Grainyte](#) and [Lina Lapelyte](#).  
Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

Archiving over the Biennale is the immense achievement of [the Lithuanian pavilion](#), where [Rugile Barzdiukaite](#), [Vaiva Grainyte](#) and [Lina Lapelyte](#) are presenting the opera “Sun & Sea (Marina),” which a cast of 20 sings live in English on an artificial beach. (If you visit this year, ensure you are in Venice over a Saturday; it’s being performed only once a week.) This balmiest of environmental elegies, deservedly netting the Golden Lion for best national presentation, translates the bizarreries of climate change as a dulcet chorale, and for days after seeing it, I found myself humming a passage in which a bather blithely trills that last Christmas “there was no frost, no snow / It felt like it could be Easter!”

The end of the world, these Lithuanians propose, may hit us as gently as a pop song. That may also be what Mr. Rugoff was going for when he titled this exhibition “May You Live In Interesting Times.” The apocryphal Chinese curse points to the hazards of what appears benign, although, as he will know from his long years in London, the word “interesting,” delivered with a raised eyebrow, is also a British euphemism for “strange,” “unexpected” or “bad.”

This is an interesting biennial.