

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Gartenfeld, Alex, "The Giardini: Beyond the Small Packages," *Art in America*, June 2, 2011

The Giardini: Beyond the Small Packages

by alex gartenfeld 06/02/11

Architecturally, the Arsenale is a tough venue to show work in. By contrast, the national pavilions at the Giardini are precious architectural nuggets with tidy nationalist premises. The best installations this year toy with the Biennale's pomp and fuss while also transcending it.

Just inside the Giardini entrance is the Swiss Pavilion, featuring work by Paris-based Thomas Hirschhorn. It was my first stop, and set a bar that was unmatched. It is one of the artist's signature environments involving massive, categorized accumulations of material to critique wastefulness (in all its manifestations).



VIEW SLIDESHOW View of Thomas Hirschhorn's installation *Crystal of Resistance* in the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Photo Paola Ferraro.; View of Thomas Hirschhorn's installation *Crystal of Resistance* in the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Photo Paola Ferraro.;

Crystal of Resistance opens with absurdity: cell phones and oversize reproductions of them with crystals masking-taped on. The installation is seemingly an ode to the inevitable antiquation of our most ubiquitous, recent technological innovation. The installation proceeds-labyrinthlike-with hip-height walls of crystalline growths of taped-together plastic bottles, a balance of impossible magnitude, cheap technique and precise execution. The forms take an organic turn with the arrangement of Q-tips in the bottles, like protruding nerve endings. This bodily reference is elucidated in some of the goriest photos of war victims I have ever seen, taped floor to ceiling. Interspersed are other mass media, not quite labeled junk but treated as such. The work culminates in banners with text that repudiates the pretenses of opacity, but by this time the critique of clean institutional packaging is clear. The (astounding) success of Hirschhorn's show results from the shifts of tone, form, ingenuity and surprise.

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This year marks the first installation of a new partnership for the three nations of the Scandinavian Pavilion, which will rotate shows every two years. It's Sweden's turn, and Sverre Fehn's precious modernist architecture is matched by the elegant installation of variously sized brownish near-monochromes by Andreas Eriksson. The acrid but palatable works are based on the rural terrain outside his studio in Västmanland. Shiny white panels on the floor double the vaguely troubling approach to this cleanest of buildings.

In both a gesture of landlessness and a subtle takeover, Fia Backström, Sweden's other representative, offers an audio guide that visitors can take around the grounds. For *BORDERLESS BASTARDS (multi-culti abc)*, the mixed-media artist and expert wordsmith asked some 57 artists and curators to discuss cultural stereotypes of their nations of origin (all are countries represented in the Giardini). By pointing a neat little remote-control device at sculptures scattered around the grounds, users activate the audio track. The discussions often chart similar narrative courses of debunking clichés, but also offer great variety, fun facts and interesting cultural critique. Did you know that Swedes aren't as blond as they seem? Many apparently sustain their mythologized flaxen locks with a disproportionate use of hair color, not genetics.

Meanwhile, at the U.S. Pavilion, Allora & Calzadilla play with expectations to perform in contest. The exhibition, "Gloria," uses gymnastics as its point of departure, for its formal elegance, ties to patriotic boosterism, and issues of beauty and gender.

For these two, sculpture is consistently a prop to be physically activated by a performer or by the viewer. Here a giant pipe organ with a (fee-free) ATM in it creates an algorithm and a musical score based on your debit card, upon insertion. Two opposite rooms contain customized Delta and American first-class seats—one used as a women's balance beam, the other as a men's pommel horse. On these nominal tokens of privilege, at hourly intervals, members of America's Olympic team and other prime physical specimens execute near 20-minute performances. The typical Olympic routine is under three minutes, so these consist of mostly slow, sustained movements like splits and handstands, requiring incredible strength and balance. The moves were choreographed to create symmetry between the gymnasts, but the effect is ungainly. The viewer's close proximity reveals the effort behind the deceptive ease with which the gymnasts perform. There are no real superhumans for Allora & Calzadilla—just experts with lots of rigorous training to prepare for short and labored bits of recognition.