

Venice Biennale 2024: the must-see pavilions in the Giardini

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Yael Bartana and Ersan Mondtag's *Thresholds* in the German pavilion © The Art Newspaper

The decision that the Israel pavilion will remain closed until a ceasefire and hostage release agreement are reached may have dominated the headlines on the first media preview day of the Venice Biennale, but the other pavilions in the Giardini opened as planned. Here is our pick.

German pavilion

***Thresholds*, Yael Bartana and Ersan Mondtag**

The stench of bitumen and dust that fills your nostrils, the candid nudity of the performer, a heightening of senses through a soundtrack of strings and wind, all play a pivotal role in the central installation by Ersan Mondtag, loosely based on his grandfather who worked in an asbestos factory and died as a result.

The German pavilion is all spectacle, even before you enter the earthen monolith at its centre. From the building's high windows stream rays of light dramatised by pumped-in mist and Yael Bartana's spaceship hovers cinematically in its own Space Odyseean way.

The feel of the pavilion is filmic, visceral, and the performances are incredibly moving at times.

Egypt

Drama 1882, Wael Shawky



Wael Shawky, *Drama, 1882* (2024) © Wael Shawky. Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lia Rumma, and Barakat Contemporary

One of the most inventive and unusual offerings at this year's Venice Biennale comes courtesy of Wael Shawky, the artist selected to represent Egypt. Shawky's film, *Drama 1882*, brings to life a pivotal moment in the history of the country, namely the crushing of the nationalist Urabi revolution in 1882, which resulted in British occupation until 1956. Shawky tackles the concept of revisionist history and colonial legacy in an engaging way. Who could not be moved by this musical, filmed in a historic theatre in Alexandria, that melds revolutionary moments in history with a series of sweet, surreal melodies (plus Sobhy the donkey)?

Poland

Repeat After Me, Open Group



Open Group's *Repeat after me* © Photo by Emilia Lipa, courtesy the artists.

Londoners in the Second World War learned to dread the buzzing noise made by the V1 rockets that devastated the city. The film in the Polish pavilion offers a reminder of how, over the past two years, Ukrainians have similarly had to learn a new vocabulary of sounds: the verbal warnings of the early warning systems, the high-pitched “brrrrr” of a drone and the screech of a cruise missile.

Repeat After Me II, by the Ukrainian collective Open Group, records ordinary Ukrainians mimicking the noises they now have an unwanted familiarity with. They then urge the audience to “repeat with me”.

The choice of artist for the Polish pavilion has become politicised, after the new government cancelled the original artist. But the choice of Open Group speaks beyond party politics, reflecting a fearful new future for Europeans: you too might soon need to recognise the sound of approaching death.

Australia

Kith and kin, Archie Moore



Installation view of Archie Moore, *kith and kin* (2024), Australia Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2024
Photo: Andrea Rossetti; © the artist; oimage courtesy of the artist and The Commercial

A sombre, intensely moving experience awaits visitors to the Australia pavilion, where the artist Archie Moore has created a genealogical chart—in white chalk on black walls—tracing his Kamilaroi, Bigambul and British ancestry going back 65,000 years. It is both a celebration of First Nation Australian perceptions of lineage and connectivity and a window onto deep trauma: some entries are taken up by racist slurs, while gaps represent the many who have been murdered, killed by disease or erased from public record. In the centre is a black reflective “pool”, above which are tables containing redacted coroners’ inquests into the deaths of Indigenous Australians in state custody. It is hard but essential viewing.

The Netherlands

The International Celebration of Blasphemy and the Sacred, CATPC, Renzo Martens and Hicham Khalidi



PCATC, Renzo Martens and Hicham Khalidi, *The International Celebration of Blasphemy and the Sacred* in the Dutch pavilion

Much art is made to spotlight the injustices in this world, but how much of it actually makes a difference? The Dutch pavilion is making a go of it. Stepping into the space, visitors are met with the strong smell of cocoa. Along with palm oil, the coveted dark material was grown and harvested by the multinational Unilever in the Democratic Republic of Congo, from where the artists in this show, CATPC, hail. Through their vivid, cocoa-covered sculptures, on show in the Biennale, they have been able to raise funds to buy back some of the land where they and their families have worked.

Leveraging the power of the Biennale, the Congo-based collective, in collaboration with the artist Renzo Martens and the curator Hicham Khalidi, was also able to persuade the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to send a wooden statue from the 1930s of the Belgian colonial officer Maximilien Balot back on loan to their town of Lusanga, from where it disappeared 50 years ago. This is art effecting change where so much else has failed.

Japan

Compose, Yuko Mohri



Yuko Mohri's *Compose* in the Japan pavilion © The Art Newspaper

A choir of decomposing fruit and wobbling contraptions of leaky tubes and faucets forms a beautiful and understatedly political presentation by Yuko Mohri.

She was inspired by how flooding subways in Tokyo are fixed through a number of ingenious and makeshift ways. On a formal level, the exhibition leans into the chaos of those haphazardly constructed, quotidian sculptural interventions found throughout the city. Impressively it manages to do so without sacrificing a sense of balance or harmony.

Mohri, like all good artists, knows that human creativity is based on problem solving, and the bigger the issue, the further we must expand our imaginations to fix it.

On polished wooden tables more suited to the bathrooms in a luxury hotel than as surfaces for festering matter, pieces of rotting fruit are connected via electrodes to large speakers to emit modulating, ambient sounds, determined by the shifts in moisture levels during the decomposition process. It is decay as performance, death refigured as new life. In a biennial replete with art about crisis, one must be reminded of our potential for bringing about change. If we got ourselves into this mess, we can get ourselves out.

Best of the rest

- John Akomfrah's thematically sprawling but visually resplendent show in the **British pavilion** explores links between ecological degradation, colonial histories and the sounds of water bodies.
- Serban Savu in the **Romanian pavilion** paints scenes of rest and leisure, in contrast to the socialist-era veneration of work.
- Jeffrey Gibson, the first Indigenous artist to have a solo show in the **US pavilion**, blends Native American traditions with text, textiles and themes of identity and globalism.
- Aleksandar Denić has turned the **Serbian pavilion** into a familiar yet disconcerting world, with a bedroom, bathroom and bar.

Venice Biennale 2024 Exhibitions Venice Contemporary art