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Fabienne Nicholas at the New Forest Pavilion, Venice Biennale



Charlie Murphy

The opening days of the Venice Biennale were marked by the monster crowds and queues of the global arts elite, a whirlwind of parties and pavilion openings all overseen by massive yachts jostling for prominence on the waterfront. Money and power rule in Venice, and the selection of weary one-trick ponies Gilbert and George for the British pavilion seemed to exemplify this jaded commercialism. But deep within the Venice alleyways sat the New Forest Pavilion, a group show from regional gallery ArtSway that offered a far more confident depiction of contemporary practice in the UK. The crumbling grandeur of the Palazzo Zenobio provided an unlikely but ultimately fitting stage for the work of 11 artists who had previously undertaken production residencies at ArtSway.

Simon Hollington and Kyp Kyprianou's *Invisible Force Field Experiments (IFFE)*, recently shown at MOP Projects in Sydney, extends their long-term exploration of the relationship between technology and the uncanny. During their 2003 residency, a performative attempt to create an impenetrable IFFE around the ArtSway building resulted in the inexplicable disappearance of the 2 researchers. In this darkly comical parody of empirical scientific methodology, the Venice installation recreates a recently deserted office of the Scientific Accident Investigation Group ("Making Accidents Safer") sent in to examine the unexplained phenomenon. Dusty pinboards, archaic typewriters and outdated, blinking electronic equipment set an atmospheric scene in which to explore DVD documentation of the researchers' experiments and the investigation findings. The DVD is hilarious and one becomes easily submerged in the layers of fictional proof and truth that inform the world of these mad scientists.

Vicky Isley and Paul Smith's *'Boredom Research'* collaboration provides another alternate view of reality in their *Theatre of Restless Automata*. Three 'biomes' are windows into an evolving microcosm of tiny digital creatures. The biomes themselves, sleek black plastic pods, are desirable domestic objects in which to gaze upon an anthropomorphised universe. Whilst the pods are physically located only metres apart in the installation, automata must travel a programmed 'invisible mile' to reach the next biome, creating a pleasurable rupture in spatial perception.

Another gratifying world is created in Charlie Murphy's *The Art of Tickling Trout* and other *Sensual Pleasures*. Looking down onto a tabletop screen, one witnesses slightly risqué close-up frames of trout being gently stroked into hypnotic submission, fingers combing through the curling locks of a bull and the twitching muscles of sensitive horse-hide reacting to flies. Innocent and erotic at the same time, the work slyly exposes the secret sensuality inherent in our relationship with animals and their husbandry. The piece was extended through an ongoing series of artist multiples: *Best in Show*, luscious silk rosettes functioning as subversive awards for the competitive behaviour we display and applaud in society. This edition of rosettes created specifically for the Biennale features the Lion of Venice jumping through a circus hoop alongside subtly seditious gold-embossed phrases ('Dark Horse', 'Unbridled', 'Master'). In the context of the Vernissage art market hoopla, similarities to the competitive awards of country horse shows are wittily acknowledged, with the eternally hopeful artist striving for 'Best In Show.'

Emilia Telese's striking performance, *Life of A Star*, also offered up a sizzling reflection on the overtly present glamour and glitz of the Biennale. Obsession with celebrity has become a rather morbid characteristic of media in the modern world. Dressed in flaming red Alexander McQueen, hidden behind dark sunglasses and flanked by black-suited henchmen overseeing the crowd/audience and her every move, Emilia's 'star' pranced and played to the paparazzi through the streets of Venice, not speaking and in actual fact doing very little—famous for being, well...famous. By contrast, *Sleepwalking*, Emilia's video installation for the Pavilion is a moving and intimate portrait of the artist's response to her father's death. Telese retraces a journey her father made to the New Forest shortly before he died, both geographically and physically by recreating the disordered sleep patterns caused by his illness. Her attempt to share an experience that she was not a part of translates into a beautifully paced work that celebrates the relationship between father and daughter. Together the works highlight the disparity between the high-powered international art world and the very pragmatic and sometimes painful world of the practicing artist driven by a very personal creative imperative.

John Gillett's companion works *John Bull War and Peace* and *The Making of John Bull War and Peace* are similarly inspired by the process of artistic creation, more specifically the time it takes to both make and to look at a work of art. In the first video we see looped, speeded-up images of Gillett's heroic attempt to print out Tolstoy's famously lengthy novel using only a toy printing set. In the second, the artist documents his performance in real time, and the illusion is revealed—12 minutes is the time it took to make the video. An adjacent glass cabinet displays a 2-foot high stack of A4 paper with (apparently) only the top page of the epic printed, extending the illusion and inviting the viewer to choose between belief and disbelief.

Three powerfully authored digital video pieces from Richard Billingham, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva and Alistair Gentry share a preoccupation with the British landscape and the long shadow that history casts over the island and its inhabitants. Gentry's *Sea House* in particular highlights the precarious nature of existence on a crumbling coastline under threat from rising sea levels. Filming himself from within a water-filled model glasshouse, the artist submerges the viewer in the creeping and ominous power of the sea to both provide and destroy.

Although predominately works using digital technologies (a choice dictated as much by the constraints of exhibiting in a historical building, as in the ArtSway residency parameters), the exhibition displayed a rich diversity of hybrid practice through performance, research, writing, filmmaking and sculpture. The final piece, a website documenting and archiving Anna Best's extensive body of temporal, process-based work epitomised the collaborative and purposeful cross-disciplinary nature that characterised much of the exhibition. Perhaps the unique situation of ArtSway as a rurally based contemporary gallery offers artists a certain stillness, a place to retreat and consider their practice. In any case, the elegant marble halls of the Palazzo were stunningly inhabited by this powerful body of work from the regions.

New Forest Pavilion, curator ArtSway Director Mark Segal, Venice Biennale, June 8-12

ArtSway is a contemporary visual arts gallery based in the New Forest in South East England creating professional development opportunities for artists including production residencies. www.artsway.org.uk

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