

Zoe Pilger: Art review - 55th Venice Biennale

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Artist Alfredo Jaar makes the point that while 28 countries own national pavilions inside the Giardini, the remaining 60 are kept outside. Chile, his own country, has to rent its pavilion. Jaar has created an installation that responds to this state of political exclusion. Inside a large tank, an exact, small-scale model of the Biennale has been drowned in the jade-green water of the Venetian canals. It re-emerges every three minutes, shimmering and beautiful. This is a metaphor of destruction and rebirth, explains Jaar, who lived under the Pinochet regime. “It says resist, resist, resist.”

The tension between national representation and artistic subversion runs throughout the Biennale. It is expressed most powerfully in many of the pavilions and projects outside the Giardini. Artist Jasmina Cibic has covered the entire interior of the Slovenian Pavilion with wallpaper printed with images of a beetle named after Hitler. Discovered in a Slovenian cave in the 1930s, the beetle points to the acceptance of fascism in the nation’s past. From afar, the wallpaper appears elegant; up close, the walls appear to swarm psychedelically with vermin. Commissioned by The Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana, Cibic’s work is intelligent, humorous, and angry – a highlight this year.

Elsewhere from the former Yugoslavia, artist Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has created a stunningly repugnant installation for the Macedonian Pavilion. You enter a labyrinth made of 700 dead albino rats, flayed and stitched together by the artist herself. As the corridor narrows, you brush up against the rats’ dainty claws and empty eye-sockets. Live rats are housed at the centre, who must be contemplating their slaughtered companions with horror. A comment on the migration of disease, the installation is majestic – and repellent.

On a less gothic note, Welsh artist Bedwyr Williams has made a series of metaphysical installations and a crazily brilliant film about bits: “flecks, chunks, slivers.” Shots of craftsman cutting Venetian mosaic tiles are followed by shots of peas in aspic and teeth being scraped clean. More than zany, the film is a thoughtful meditation on loneliness and the power of art to make sense of the chaos of the cosmos. It was inspired by the terrazzo floor of the former nunnery in which Wales in Venice is displayed.

This year's prestigious Golden Lion has been awarded to Angola for a photographic exhibition about urban symbolism – hopefully a sign that countries without super-power funding will be afforded greater recognition in future.