

ART & DESIGN

Venice Is a Stage for Damien Hirst's 'Treasures' (and a Biennale, Too)

By SCOTT REYBURN MAY 12, 2017

VENICE — Damien Hirst's "Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable" is the most talked-about art show on earth. And all of it is for sale.

The numbers boggle. Two museums; 54,000 square feet of exhibition space; 189 artworks, including more than 100 sculptures (one of them almost 60 feet high); 21 cabinets filled with smaller objects.

Occupying the Punta della Dogana and the Palazzo Grassi, museums run by the French billionaire François Pinault's foundation, until Dec. 3, this privately financed exhibition purports to display artifacts that were once owned by the second-century collector Cif Amotan II and that have been salvaged, at vast expense, from the depths of the Indian Ocean. Mr. Hirst told the BBC that he had sunk "probably more" than 50 million pounds, or about \$64.5 million, of his own money into the project.

The visitor soon discovers — maybe when seeing a coral-encrusted bronze self-portrait of the artist as a collector holding Mickey Mouse by the hand — that the shipwreck is an elaborate shaggy dog story. "Treasures" is Mr. Hirst's latest body of work that aims to astound with the scale of its ambition and commercial success, like his \$200 million "Beautiful Inside My Head Forever" auction at Sotheby's in 2008.

That the latest gigantic selling exhibition has been timed to coincide with the 57th Venice Biennale underlines the city's transformation every two years

into the world's biggest art fair, as well as a must-see overview of the latest currents in contemporary art.

Tailoring the exhibition to the trophy-hunting mentality of wealthy collectors, most of the major sculptures in the show are available in three versions: Coral (as if just retrieved from the sea), Treasure (as if just restored) and Copy (like a museum reproduction), each made in an edition of three, with two extra reserved for the artist. No real coral is used in the exhibition. The bronzes were cast by the Pangolin Editions foundry in western England, and the marbles carved in the Carrara region of Italy. The largest bronzes are priced at more than \$5 million; a 4-foot-long white marble "Sphinx" in the Copy format is \$1.5 million.

Mr. Hirst's showmanship and chutzpah have turned this extravaganza of "post-truth" art into one of the great love-it-or-hate-it exhibitions of recent years.

"It's virtuosity and a big workshop," said Susanne Titz, director of the Abteiberg Museum in Mönchengladbach, Germany. "He's supersmart, but it is cynical."

Critical opinion of the show is divided, but has "Treasures" drawn enough buyers to become a commercial success? François Odermatt, a collector from Montreal, is one such customer.

"It's a fantasy; the ideas are brilliantly audacious," said Mr. Odermatt, who, like others, bought works after being shown images on an iPad by Mr. Hirst's dealers. Mr. Odermatt said he paid about \$2 million for a color-patinated Coral version of "The Diver," a 16-foot-high bronze sculpture inspired by a Francis Bacon painting, now on display at the Punta della Dogana. He said he had also tried to buy two other sculptures, but that the editions of those pieces had already been bought.

Mr. Hirst's dealers, Gagosian and White Cube, have declined to comment on sales.

Mr. Hirst's blockbuster show is just one of a number of events in Venice

looking to gain the attention — and perhaps open the wallets — of the thousands of collectors, curators and museum directors who flock to the Biennale, which runs through Nov. 26.

Near the Palazzo Grassi, in the church of San Samuele, the Calgary, Alberta, gallery Trépanier Baer and the curator Michael Short are presenting “Ask Your Body,” new and recent sculptures by the Canadian artist Evan Penny. One of the many “unofficial” collateral shows in Venice, “Ask Your Body” features hyper-realistic pigmented silicone imaginings of the human body in varying states of decline and distress. The life-size sculpture “Marsyas,” informed by a celebrated Titian painting, is priced at \$275,000.

“We’re happy our neighbor is Damien,” said Yves Trépanier, the gallery’s founder, adding that the works of Mr. Penny and Mr. Hirst “play off each other in interesting ways.”

On Tuesday, the London dealer Victoria Miro staked a more permanent claim in Venice, opening a gallery there with a show of 22 works on paper by Chris Ofili, the artist who represented Britain at the 2003 Venice Biennale. Ms. Miro has taken over the former Capricorno Gallery in the San Marco district from her friend Bruna Aickelin, now in her 90s. In its heyday, the small space mounted exhibitions by major 20th-century artists, including Lucio Fontana and Robert Rauschenberg.

Is it counterintuitive for a major international gallery to open a branch in a city as underpopulated and overtouristed as Venice?

“Artists love coming here,” Ms. Miro said, “and they’re queuing up to exhibit in this space. The art world is so global now.”

Venice’s alternating art and architecture biennales don’t just draw artists, she said. “People do come to the shows.”

Titled “Poolside Magic,” the inaugural show at Victoria Miro Venice consists of vibrantly colored mixed-media drawings that evoke the exotic atmosphere of Trinidad, where Mr. Ofili lives and works. Prices range from about \$50,000 to \$100,000.

The market is more discreet at the Biennale itself, but collectors who learn the codes are aware that there is plenty for sale.

“This says ‘call me,’ ” Alain Servais, a collector in Brussels, said on Wednesday at the “Viva Arte Viva” exhibition in the Central Pavilion in the Giardini. Mr. Servais was pointing to a label with the telltale combination of “Courtesy of the artist” and the name of a sponsoring commercial gallery.

“Pretty well everything is for sale here,” Mr. Servais added.

Unlike at a mainstream art fair, curation — this year in the hands of Christine Macel — rather than commerce is the prime consideration of the Venice Biennale. Ms. Macel invited 120 artists to contribute to her main group show at the Giardini and the Arsenale, but with a budget of 13 million euros (about \$14.2 million), the Biennale relies on dealers to fund these presentations.

The African-American artist Senga Nengudi was among 40 selected for the Giardini component of “Viva Arte Viva.” Best known for her pantyhose sculptures from the 1970s, Ms. Nengudi, 73, is showing a new installation and wall pieces combining industrial metal with her trademark pantyhose medium. These were priced “on request” at about \$120,000 to \$250,000.

“This is intellectually and curatorially driven,” said Thomas Erben, a New York gallerist who represents Ms. Nengudi in collaboration with the international dealership Lévy Gorvy. “She was invited by the curator. The Biennale is a prestigious event that will give her global exposure. Sales help recover the costs.”

Mr. Erben said he was confident that the works would sell to museums.

Martin Bethenod, director of the Venice museums hosting the Hirst show, said that there was something appropriate about “Treasures” being at the Punta della Dogana, a former customs house.

Venice has always been a city of art and trade. In 2017, the two are more closely entwined than ever.

Correction: May 12, 2017

An earlier version of this article described incorrectly a group of hyper-realistic sculptures by the artist Evan Penny. They are made of pigmented silicone, not resin. The article also misstated the price of one of the sculptures, “Marsyas.” It is \$275,000, not \$325,000.
