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Art in the Present Tense: Politics, Loss and Beauty

By CAROL VOGEL

VENICE, June 9 — This picture-postcard city of shimmering lagoons is plastered with red-and-green posters that read “Think With the Senses — Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense,” the theme of the 52nd Venice Biennale. Since Wednesday collectors and curators, artists and dealers have flocked here to look at and to gauge the state of new art.

But amid the glamorous parties and the people watching (Elton John and the actress Kim Cattrall were among the celebrity sightings) are chilling images of an apocalyptic world.

The works on view at the national pavilions in the Giardini, the shaded gardens that have been home to the Biennale for more than 110 years, and at the Arsenale, the former shipyards and warehouses where Venetian fleets were once built, pose many questions but provide few answers. The Tokyo-born artist Hiroharu Mori, for example, presented visitors with “A Camouflaged Question in the Air,” a giant white balloon with a big question mark in a camouflage pattern in the center.

The marriage of politics and art is nothing new of course, but this year reminders of death and war and forces beyond our control are everywhere. “There is a sense of fragility, and war is only one of the destructive forces,” said Robert Storr, the curator of the Biennale’s central exhibition. A former curator at the Museum of Modern Art who is currently the dean of the Yale Art School, Mr. Storr is the first American to organize this event.

“I wasn’t trying to deliver a message, but like Bruce Nauman, I wanted to say, ‘Please Pay Attention Please,’ ” he said, referring to Mr. Nauman’s writings of that title.

It was hard not to pay attention. The paintings, installations and videos in the exhibition organized by Mr. Storr in the Italian Pavilion variously deal with the sublime, the spiritual, the terrifying and the unknown. Some of the works seem quite innocent, like a video of a giant hand arranging a doll’s house, by a Japanese artist known only as Tabaimo. Yet as the tiny furnishings fall into place, a giant squid bubbles out of a caldron, destroying the idyllic scene.

New silk-screen paintings by the American artist Jenny Holzer, best known for her neon signs of social commentary, are based on classified military documents and the Guantánamo Bay detention center, including a medical examiner's autopsy report for an Iraqi national. He had suffered "fractures of the ribs and a contusion of the left lung" suggesting "significant blunt force injuries of the thorax," the report says.

But at the core of the show are more enigmatic works by older contemporary masters like Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Ryman and Sigmar Polke. Mr. Polke's skylit room of magical paintings — dark abstract, translucent canvases — had viewers returning at different times of day to witness how they changed as the weather did, from bright sunlight to rain.

As is true at every Biennale, art and commerce are inextricably intertwined. François Pinault, the luxury goods magnate who owns the Palazzo Grassi and recently won a bid to transform the old customs house here, the Punta della Dogana, into a contemporary art space, edged out a score of museums who competed to buy the entire room of Mr. Polke's paintings. He is planning to show the seven works — a triptych and six individual paintings — in a special room in the Dogana that the Japanese architect Tadao Ando and Mr. Polke are to design together.

"The artist wanted them to remain in the city where they were conceived," said Philippe Segalot, the Manhattan dealer who brokered the transaction.

Near Mr. Polke's paintings in the Italian Pavilion is a show-stopping installation by the French artist Sophie Calle. In one of two stark rooms viewers are presented with a wall text explaining that Ms. Calle learned her mother had a month left to live the same day she received a call inviting her to exhibit at the Biennale. In the next room is a video of her mother resting peacefully in her final hours with medical attendants hovering over her; her favorite music, Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, plays in the background as the screen eventually fades into darkness.

Ms. Calle also represents France in its national pavilion. Again she transformed the space into an autobiographical installation, here of paintings and videos, asking 107 women to interpret a breakup letter from a man she had been involved with. Actresses acted the letter, a singer sang it, a criminologist analyzed it, an editor annotated it, a photographer shot it, and a crossword puzzle specialist created a crossword puzzle of it. There was even a parrot who ate the letter.

Elsewhere the theme of loss is less personal. In the Nordic Pavilion the Baghdad-born artist Adel Abidin, who lives in Finland, presents his black-humored "Abidin Travels — Welcome to Baghdad," a spoof travel agency complete with leaflets and interactive computer screens on which visitors witness the horrors of Baghdad, win "fantastic prizes," rent "cars" (tanks and Humvees) and take out insurance (\$150,000 a day). His slogan: "Much more than a holiday."

In the Canadian Pavilion David Altmejd has created a surreal glass-and-mirror-lined forest filled with varied species of some 300 stuffed birds (some purchased on eBay), mushrooms, giant resin werewolves and male mannequins with bird's heads.

Normally the installation at the Arsenale has a hodgepodge effect, but under Mr. Storr, it is more coherent, looking like a carefully conceived museum exhibition rather than a random assemblage of works. Among the standouts are a pair of tapestrylike hangings fashioned from discarded soda cans by the artist El Anatsui, who was born in Ghana and lives in Nigeria; though steeped in African culture, their shimmering patina evoked the luster of a painting by Gustav Klimt.

For the first time the Biennale is also including comics. The North African artists Eyoun Ngangue and Faustin Titi have created original drawings for a comic book about displacement, depicting a young African boy's failed crossing from Tangiers to Europe in search of a brighter future.

Many Biennale visitors have been struck by a powerful wall of pencil portraits by the American artist Emily Prince based on photographs of American soldiers who died in Iraq and Afghanistan. She began the project in 2004, relying on photographs posted at a military Web site by family members. Nearby is a video by the Italian artist Paolo Canevari that shows a teenage boy kicking around a skull as though it were a football in a bombed-out former Serbian Army headquarters in Belgrade.

Among the countries represented for the first time, those grouped in the African Pavilion at the far end of the Arsenale have been among the most talked about. Titled "Check List-Luanda Pop," the sprawling exhibition, which seems to explore what it means to be African, is filled with everything from paintings by Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Marlene Dumas to works by little-known African artists.

The works are from the collection of Sindika Dokolo, a Congolese businessman. The exhibition was chosen by a jury from among several alternatives, and some who were not selected objected that one person's collection could not be representative of African culture. They also contend that it was selected partly because Mr. Dokolo was able to pay for the exhibition, estimated to have cost more than \$100,000.

Fernando Alvim, a curator of the exhibition, said it was "difficult to represent an entire continent" and called the accusations "cynical."

With each Biennale, more and more art can be found in unexpected places. Nestled in a 14th-century palazzo near the Fenice theater, is a Zen-like installation by the Korean-born artist Lee Ufan, 71, founder of the Mono Ha, a movement that emerged in Tokyo in the late 1960s and is translated as "School of Things." He has created a sequence of pristine rooms with natural rocks juxtaposed with rectangular or steel plates, some of them gracefully bent. There are also rooms of white canvases and screens decorated with single grace brush strokes in varying gradations.

It is the first time this artist has exhibited in Venice. Asked the inevitable question of how his work relates to American Minimalism, he said his installation was rooted in what he called the art of yohaku, or the resonance of emptiness.

“American minimalism is just ‘It is,’ ” he said, “but mine is ‘It is not.’ ”