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Venice Biennale Features Mika Rottenberg's 'NoNoseKnows'

BY RAOUL BERGHOFF MAY 16, 2019



The artist Mika Rottenberg. Pearl cultivation is the focus of her exhibit at the Venice Biennale.
Cecily Kolbrough for The New York Times

VENICE — Running across a shimmering pearl market smack dab in the heart of the 56th Venice Biennale doesn't seem particularly odd, given this city's history as the West's watery mall for the exquisite and the exotic.

But then you walk through the market into a sweltering theater and see this Rube Goldbergian hallucination on the screen: Rows of Chinese women using tools like knitting needles to insert tiny pieces of severed mussel tissue into the mantles of living freshwater mussels, which will transform these cannibalized irritants into cultured pearls; a large woman sitting in a flower-filled office beneath the production floor; a girl above turning a hand crank, making a fan spin in the world below, wafting scent into the large woman's nose, which grows long and red. The denouement comes when the woman sneezes explosively, causing steaming plates of Chinese food and pasta to burst from her inflamed schnozz, which seems to provide the pearl workers' sole nourishment; the process repeats, maybe endlessly.

This comic-macabre vision of labor and luxury comes from the studio of Mika Rottenberg, a video and installation artist whose work here, "NoNoseKnows," has become one of the most talked-about — and mobbed — of the Biennale, in a year when the fair's theme leans heavily on Marx to examine global commerce, suffering and humanity's future. For more than a decade, Ms. Rottenberg's work has been mostly about work, and about women doing it. But her pieces have come at the subject from surreal angles never easily pinned to any political perspective, making her a bit of an insurgent in the Biennale's main exhibition, organized by Okwui Enwezor, a prominent Nigerian curator and critic.

"I didn't read 'Das Kapital' until I was older, and I guess I've always read it as poetry, the way he writes about the spinning of yarn and measuring value literally by the amount of human life it requires," said Ms. Rottenberg, 38, who was born in Buenos Aires and grew up in Tel Aviv, where her father, Enrique Rottenberg, was a film producer. "But as an artist you're obligated to create good work and sometimes that doesn't have anything to do with morality, or even contradicts what's moral." She added: "Sometimes as a joke I say I'm going to quit and do something real."

Her pieces often envision candy-colored, fictional factories, staffed by women of wildly varying sizes, colors and body types, where real commodities are produced by absurd means: maraschino cherries made from women's clipped blood-red fingernails; cheese from the milking of Rapunzel-like locks of hair; towelettes individually moistened with the sweat of a hulking truck driver, played by the professional bodybuilder Heather Foster.

But more than a year ago, Ms. Rottenberg became interested in cultured pearls, an industry that

China now dominates. And what she saw in the immense pearl-making facilities of Zhuji, south of Shanghai, when she traveled there last year with her boyfriend and young daughter, was so visually staggering — stranger than anything she felt she could create herself — that she incorporated significant documentary footage into a piece for the first time.

“It was sick but also beautiful and amazing, the whole thing,” she said in a recent interview. “It kind of draws you in, even though it’s really pretty perverted what has to be done to a living thing to force it to create a pearl.”

She likened her interest in China to the feeling that first propelled her to the United States 17 years ago (she lives and works in upstate New York). “America is this kind of monster that you want to smell the breath of,” she said, “and I had that same attraction and compulsion about China, so much so that I almost wanted to suspend the idea of it and not even go there.”

The 21-minute “NoNoseKnows” video includes views of the seemingly endless beige apartment towers and manufacturing buildings under construction around Zhuji, a bleak landscape that is repeated up and down China’s east coast.

In the pearl facilities — in scenes that play like a mash-up of “Blade Runner” and “Un Chien Andalou” — women skilled in the delicate work of seeding pearls sit hunched over bowls with live mussels whose shells have been forced open with a caliper-like device. Later, a woman is shown hacking open mussels the size of salad plates and scraping out the pearls inside, of which only a handful out of hundreds of thousands will be of a quality high enough for sale to jewelers.

The large woman with the fecund nose — played by one of Ms. Rottenberg’s outlandish regulars, a 6-foot-4 fetish performer who calls herself **Bunny Glamazon** — comes off as a Western overseer even more enslaved by the system than the workers she outranks, like a queen bee locked into the heart of a hive.

Because it includes real workers, who are paid relatively little for such exacting, mind-numbing labor, the video and installation hold out a darker vision than Ms. Rottenberg’s earlier work, whose fictional factories seem to be engaged mostly in the production of Ms. Rottenberg’s visual obsessions. (Her pieces are in several prominent public collections, including those of the **Guggenheim** and the **Whitney Museum of American Art**.) The Dutch curator Ann Demeester has described such work as “contemporary fables in which both the moral point and the animal characters have been left out.” She added: “Or as Pastor Jon, one of the main characters in Susan Sontag’s favorite novel ‘Under the Glacier,’ by Halldor Laxness, would have it: ‘Everything that is subject to the laws of fable is fable.’”

Sitting last Thursday in front of her Venice installation, in the vast old rope-factory building that dominates the city’s Arsenale complex, Ms. Rottenberg said: “I think in my work I try to give shape to the way things are made and consumed, which has become so vast as to become unimaginable. If we actually comprehended the insanity of it, I think people would probably behave differently.”

At that moment, some people crowding around the installation were behaving quite badly, leaning over baskets heaped with ill-shaped reject pearls and trying to filch a few as Biennale souvenirs. “Don’t touch!” Ms. Rottenberg barked, policing her wares as if she were a real pearl merchant. “Don’t steal things!” But her mood was lightened by the number of people packed into the tiny theater, where the air-conditioning was suffering some kind of Italian malaise.

“I love that they’re all sitting in there and sweating,” she said, beaming. “That they’re having to suffer for their pleasure.”