Venice takes flight

War is bad, we're all going to die, and men with bird heads are a very bad sign ... in a special report from the world's biggest arts jamboree, Adrian Searle reveals what the Venice Biennale has to teach us

Standing in a huge, daylit room lined with vast new paintings by Sigmar Polke, I feel breathless. Their colour is translucent, resinous, and as dark as toffee. There are things going on in, under and behind the surface. At the top of one painting, a group of eager children peer down into the gloom, where something horrible and nacreous is half-visible. It might be a landscape, a wound or something children aren't meant to see. It is hard to know what one is looking at, and I'm tempted to follow the advice of Robert Storr, director of the 52nd Venice Biennale, who calls his keynote exhibition Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind. The title sounds better in Italian - Pensa con i Sensi, Senti con la Mente - but it doesn't help me with the Polkes.

Words, in any case, are never the biennale's strong point, although there are always a great many of them. Someone has written of one unfortunate Australian artist that she "made a quiet choice to be an artist first, a painter sometimes and a person in the world, always." This sort of vacuity is not unusual, but made me feel quite ill. Luckily for Storr, he is not responsible for what happens in the national pavilions in the Giardini and the national representations and collateral events scattered in rotting palaces and forgotten buildings across Venice. The only critical inanities he need take care of are his own, along with the contents of the Italian Pavilion in the Giardini (long since abandoned by the Italians themselves and used for the biennale's keynote shows), and of the Arsenale, extending through the city's magnificent medieval docks.

Storr, now a professor and for a long time a senior curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, seemed an ideal director: urbane, sensitive, a good writer, hard-nosed, open-minded. He has also been guided, it appears, as much by his personal affinities and sensibilities as by theory, and there's nothing wrong with that. Whatever clever arguments there always are for including one sort of art or another, they have long ceased to matter by the time the next biennale comes along. The art itself is what counts, and what is memorable.

The lessons Storr gives us are that war is bad, utopian dreams persist, and that we're all gonna die. But these perhaps have been the Venice Biennale's irreducible themes ever since it began in 1895.

The one thing that Storr seems to lack - and it really does matter - is genuine flair for exhibition-making, the telling juxtaposition, the twist and the surprise. He warns that biennales are not for people who are in a hurry, and that he would like us to slow down. But tell that to the art-consuming hordes who come for the opening days, and who in the heady rush for the next spectacle hurry through the Arsenale, and from pavilion to pavilion. Slow down too much and we might notice the tired alignments, or how dreary Robert Ryman looks, and how Storr is shaky when it comes to photography and sculpture.

The Arsenale is, usually, the liveliest area of the biennale. This time, the spaces feel dulled by war and the weight of artistic responsibility. We begin with memories, film clips and interviews with the descendents of the Italian futurists, and end, hours, if not days later, with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's intricate models of the fabled and quite fictitious city of Manas in the mountains of northern Tibet.

There is then a contentious Africa Pavilion, the contents of which all come from a single collection (and not all of which are by African artists). And then, teetering over the far end of the docks, the Italian Pavilion proper, where

Francesco Vezzoli has installed his disappointing spoof US election campaign films. Starring Sharon Stone and an unlikely Bernard-Henri Levi, Democrazy points out what we already know about the media-managed vapidity of election campaigns, and not just in America. Vezzoli's "remake" of Gore Vidal's Caligula, at the last biennale, was much superior.

In between there is a great deal of hurly-burly, much of which reminds us of the grimmer realities of modern life. A boy expertly kicks and dribbles a football around in front of the shattered and blasted concrete ruins of the former Serbian army headquarters in Belgrade, in Paolo Canevari's video. The ball, one soon realises, is a rubber cast of a human skull. This is dull and obvious. In fact, there seems to be images of war-torn ruins everywhere - sniper's eye views of a blasted Beirut, riots in Santiago, Chile, and winter views of the Serbian front line near Sarajevo. A burlesque, absurd rehearsal of the copyright dispute between Russia and Bulgaria pertaining to the AK47 assault rifle somehow manages to go beyond the obvious. There is misery everywhere, and perfect minimal circles made of razor wire. Relief is at hand - but who has time for Yang Fudong's epic film Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, which clocks in at around four hours, shown in a procession of screening rooms down the length of the Arsenale? One longed for cinema seating, air-conditioning, the quiet conditions the work deserves.

One of the great pleasures of Venice is encountering artists and works for the first time. Two great walls of what appear to be fabric or tapestry hang between columns. In fact, Ghanaian-born El-Anatsui's works are made from bottle labels, tags and caps, copper wire, washers and aluminium detritus, recycled (as so much is in Africa) into these tessellated, lumpy, heavy, glittering fields of imagery. As Storr hopes, they slow you down.

Yang Zhenzhong asked dozens of people around the world to pause for his video camera and say the words "I will die". Young and old alike smile, look quizzical, laugh and repeat the words. All this takes place in an area devoted, wearily in my view, to the lighter side of death. An embroidered and bejewelled skeleton of a philosopher shits under a tree, in one of Angelo Filomeno's ravishing nocturnes, drawn and stitched on silk. In another, two skeletons fly on a broomstick (this image is borrowed from Goya) above the shimmering night-time grid of Los Angeles. Nearby, Jan Christiaan Braun photographs the happy-sad ways in which New Yorkers doll up their loved ones' graves - a giant T-shirt reading Number One Mom has been stretched over a granite headstone. Another plot is decked up for Halloween; others celebrate Thanksgiving, birthdays and St Patrick's Day in more or less upbeat and sacrilegious ways. And the voices keep saying "I will die, I will die".

Jason Rhoades died suddenly last year, aged 41. One of the artist's great agglomerations of junk, thrift store tat, mattresses and a forest of dangling neon brightens up the Arsenale's ancient gloom. All the neons in Rhoades's Tijuanatanjierchandelier spell out slang names for the female genitalia. It is all jolly, festive, mariachi obscenity. As I pass by, a couple of preteens are taking a breather on one of Rhoades' slightly squalid mattresses. Above them the words glow Yoni, La Chupa, Alcachafa, and much besides. All this is not so removed from the sort of things Tracey Emin once did: rude words, mattresses, filth, startling candour, alarming confessions.

Which brings me, reluctantly, to Emin's show in the British Pavilion in the Giardini. Much hyped, this is in fact a very polite exhibition, largely of paintings and drawings. Emin has bravely if ill-advisedly ditched her strengths in favour of playing up her weaknesses. This is not bad work, but merely mediocre, which is infinitely worse. Artistically, she does not survive her international context. It is embarrassing, and I don't mean embarrassing in a taut, Emin-at-her-bad-girl-best sort of way. Compare Emin's fussy, sexually inexplicit and arty

approximations with what is shown around her - Sophie Calle's full-on narrative work, based on a letter from a lover who jilted her, in her French Pavilion show. Think how much further this goes than the little stories Tracey used to tell. Take a few steps to the German Pavilion, where Isa Genzken has occupied this daunting space with an extreme, over-the-top collection of figures, hanged soft toys, spacewalkers, masks, mirrors and much else. Look at the maypole of angry, spitting, snarling, crying, screaming faces by Nancy Spero, now over 80, in Robert Storr's Italian Pavilion show. Spero looks the younger, more vital artist.

Cross the city to the drawings of Joseph Beuys and Matthew Barney, side by side in a show at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection; both artists have made extreme representations of sexualised bodies, drawing with a light touch Emin can barely begin to approach. Emin's show is either premature or too late, and I can't work out which.

Finally (I could go on), consider how much silly gossip and how much hot air is spent on Emin in Britain.

I prefer the truly bad, such as the decadent horror that is the work of David Altmejd at the Canadian Pavilion: the bird-headed men, the orangutans tortured by spiked glass mirrored-crystal shards, the mangled taxidermy and general gothic, Max Ernst-ish spooky surrealness of it all. I nearly laughed out loud, but I think I was supposed to worry about how artificial life is now. However alarming, even Altmejd - who left me with a bad taste in my mouth, along with a few feathers and the odd bone fragment - couldn't live up to Last Riot, a three screen, computer-animated film in the Russian Pavilion, by the group AES+F (Arzamasova, Evzovich, Svyatsky and Fridkes).

It is hard to think of a world quite so out of whack as this. Trains hurtle into ravines, tankers spill toxic chemicals into rivers, airplanes circle exploding volcanoes before crashing, flamingos flare pink in their lagoons, missiles soar upward, just missing the eagles riding the thermals above a mountain fastness where attractive young men and women perform ritual sexual argy-bargy and murder on one another, in all sorts of combinations, and with swords and baseball bats. There's the odd pieta and a spot of hara-kiri in there too, if I'm not mistaken. The music, almost inevitably, is by Wagner, and very loud. Mythic, mad, brilliantly animated and paced, full of shocks and comic disasters, it also scared the hell out of this viewer.

I'm not sure if Last Riot is a biennale highlight, or a horrible premonition of things to come. Sophie Calle scared me in a different way. Ditched by email, Calle presented the letter from her erstwhile lover to over 100 women, who pored over it, analysed and deconstructed it, lampooned and otherwise went through the text phrase by phrase, word by word. I feel a bit sorry for the guy, who, Calle told me, has now heard quite how public she has made the letter. Unless, that is, she was lying. You never know with Calle quite where truth begins and ends. Calle asked psychoanalysts, sex therapists, crossword compilers, private detectives, professors, clowns, actors and singers to give the poor jerk's words a thorough going over, and, has filled the French Pavilion with hours of film, texts and other responses to the offending missive.

The letter is danced in Bombay by a woman wearing anklets, and by a ballerina in a lighthouse. Comedians and clowns have a go at it. Miranda Richardson reads it, and then tears it up. A chanteuse sings it, and so does Laurie Anderson. Onions are peeled and tears flow. Thank God the poor sap didn't dump Calle by text message.

The artist also advertised for a curator, and the artist Daniel Buren applied for the job. Calle acknowledges that her talents lie in producing the material for her work, and that she needed someone like Buren to install and orchestrate it. I

could have stayed for hours.

A second work by Calle in Storr's Italian Pavilion show concerns the artist's mother, who learned she had little time to live, just as her daughter was invited to take part in Venice. Somehow the work, which concerns the last months of their relationship, appears cloying and sentimental. Robert Storr seems to have had a few sentimental moments of his own here, installing an entire room with the works of dead artists, including Fred Sandback, Chen Zhen, Phillipe Thomas, Leonilson and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose work also fills the US Pavilion. I don't really see what these artists are doing together, unless they are in a bar in heaven. To enter this gallery, you have to slip through a golden beaded curtain by Gonzalez-Torres. It clinks gently as you pass, like rain. Or like a golden shower, a rain of urine, one inevitably thinks, knowing how these curtains were meant to invoke bodily fluids, sex and Aids and death.

Gonzalez-Torres had the lightest of touches as an artist. Jenny Holzer, best known for her electronic LED signboard texts and poems, doesn't have the luxury of lightness in her new works, all based on declassified material from the American National Security Archive, including autopsy reports and witness statements given to the FBI by detainees at Guantanamo and elsewhere. Parts of the texts are censored. One is totally blacked out. But there are stories of torture and death, of heads wrapped in duct tape, whacked with phone books, low voltage electrocution, hooding, the use of drugs, suspensions, shackling and gagging, ligature injuries and pierced lungs. It goes on. It is hard not to think of all this later, looking at the concave casts of heads, by Bruce Nauman, which spout water into portable free-standing sinks. The water drums loudly. You think of the wretched things that can and are done, routinely, endlessly, primitively.

It seems right, in 2007, that Cuban-born Gonzalez-Torres, who died in 1996, should represent the US. His work is displayed with an exquisite sparseness - a few piles of posters, some blank, black-edged, others depicting an undifferentiated patch of dark sea - some photographs, arrangements of light bulbs, a floor of cellophane-wrapped liquorice sweets. The artist was first proposed as a possible official representative the year before his death, when he said he wanted to do something "tough". This is tough enough. Light bulbs nest on the floor at the entrance and climb brightly towards a skylight. Nancy Spector, the commissioner, describes this as a "haven for diverse populations". She gets a bit gooey in her readings of the artist's work, but has made an impeccable installation. The bulbs are obviously both metaphor and, well, light bulbs. They ascend. They glow, they illuminate.

The posters are there for the taking, and the candies are both a shared sweetness in the mouth and like little bullets, or something viral going out into the world. The artist's lover died of Aids, then Felix too. There's no celebration or tub-thumping here. The best America could do this time at Venice is behave with a bit of dignity and reticence, which is exactly what Gonzalez-Torres provides, along with an elegiac sense of life's passing. I love his work, but wonder if all this isn't just a little bit too convenient. Had he lived, he might well have made quite a different sort of statement altogether.

Spain lousy, my notes say, Belgium funny, the Nordic Countries kind of chilly apart from the three "interactive toilets" outside the pavilion, whose signs read liberte, egalite, fraternite and which I don't think are meant to be used. Except people have, copiously.

Across town, in the baroque Jesuit church of St Stae, Swiss artists Ugo Rondinone and Urs Fischer have installed a free-standing, false interior, in whose white cube stand Rondinone's bare-branched, life-sized, white-painted cast aluminium trees, and on the walls a number of photographic images on aluminium by Fischer, whose sole imagery is body hair and the sort of muck one is sometimes forced to

dredge up from the plug-hole. It is all very wintry and severe - the white forest, the greyed bodily traces on the bare aluminium panels, the unseen darkened church beyond the false walls, floor and ceiling. The work seems to be evidence, but of what? I read this enclosed space as a kind of confessional. The emotional chill is deliberate.

Oddly, Storr's exhibition, particularly in the Arsenale, feels somehow lifeless. Often, you have to look elsewhere for a genuine pulse, or something tantalising and uncanny, such as Northern Irish artist Willie Doherty's compelling Ghost Story, in a pavilion shared with Ireland. Here, an unseen voice talks about wraiths and the dead, and how and when they appear to us, as a camera slowly tracks a country lane to its vanishing point at dusk, and turns about a close of grubby and miserable buildings.

This is haunting, as are the small collages and films of Haris Epaminonda, in the Cyprus Pavilion. As you plunge into a completely dark room, Epaminonda's short, enigmatic films appear first in one place, then another. A woman's back, a couple looking at rings in a jeweler’s window, fireworks or scratches on the film bursting from a man's head. A couple walk backwards in a garden. The light is wrong and the space is weirdly disrupted in a way I cannot fathom. Nor can I get this out of my head.

In a tiny space over on the island of Giudecca, the film The Most Beautiful Woman in Gucha, by London-based, Serbian-born Breda Beban, left me almost unable to walk. Beban focuses on a young Gypsy woman belly-dancing for money at a village festival in central Serbia. We watch the dancer's seduction of a young drunk, and the breaking of village protocols as he woozily dances with her, passing her money from mouth to mouth. Hustlers crowd around, and a terrifying, expressionless crone eats the entire scene with her eyes. There is a riotous Gypsy band. Beban speeds things up and slows them down, changes the soundtrack to suck us into the scene, zooms and holds. Every detail counts. The film is filled with sweat and glances, gazes and touches, bad skin and intimations that things might take a very nasty turn. Tracey never went so far.

Adrain Searle’s review of the 52nd Venice Biennal, The Guardian, 12.06.07