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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

NEBULA

Curated by Alessandro Rabottini and Leonardo Bigazzi, Complesso dell’Ospedaletto, Venice, 17 April–24 November 2024

Reviewed by Charlene K. Lau, Independent Critic

Despite having existed as a medium for art-making since the late 1960s, video art has continually had an unfair disadvantage in the world of contemporary art. Critics, curators and viewers alike still complain of long or uninviting video installations – Marco Scotini’s *Disobedience Archive*, a 39-video installation of art and activism at *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, the 60th International Art Exhibition at the Biennale Arte 2024, curated by Adriano Pedrosa is a case in point. As one critic in my WhatsApp group chat put it clearly: ‘40 videos?! Who has time to watch 40 videos?!’ Even this critic felt subsumed. While institutions often forgo interesting and complex modes of displaying the moving image as art, *Nebula*, curated by Alessandro Rabottini and Leonardo Bigazzi (both of Fondazione In Between Art Film), dares to try harder with its eight carefully considered video installations. Summoning its title from the Latin term for ‘cloud’ or ‘fog’, the exhibition spreads out across two floors of the historic Complesso dell’Ospedaletto, a former church and hospital in the Castello area of Venice that also functioned as a shelter for over four hundred years. Each installation breathes life into the decommissioned spaces, since *Penumbra* (2022), the Fondazione’s first exhibition in the same space.

Out of the heavy, cold rain on an April day in Venice – later that night temporary elevated platforms were put out for potential flooding from the high tide known as *acqua alta* – I was one of few who trekked to Castello to visit the exhibition. Yet the emptiness and damp chill benefited the installations, which felt like a sanctuary from the elements and surrounding circus of global contemporary art world politics. Immediately in the first ‘room’ sat the warm screens of Basir Mahmood’s three-channel work *Brown Bodies in*

an Open Landscape Are Often Migrating (2024), majestically unfolding like a giant room divider across the width of Santa Maria dei Derelitti (the church of Complesso dell'Ospedaletto). Following the movements of undocumented migrants from South Asia to Europe, arms and fingers point across expanses of space in Lahore, over here, over there: land, water, air, mountains, wordless gestures which in fact refer to analogic directions for both physical migration and the film being made. The film's performers in fact come from Lahore's film industry – also known as Lollywood – in a partial remaking of migrants' own footage of their journeys. A person is prostrate across sunny sections of sedimentary rock; a vivid pink sky rises out of some geological formations, reflecting off the church's chequered marble floor. I see one or two visitors disappear into the darkness behind the screens, a cue that more can be found beyond.

The pathway to the next installation is clearly marked by a lightbox that announces in a bold black sans-serif font, 'TWO'. I follow its glow down a silver foil-covered tunnel and, at the end of it, enter a cosier room containing Ari Benjamin Meyers's *Marshall Allen, 99, Astronaut* (2024), a totally galactic, superlunary performance video of Sun Ra Arkestra's current band leader. Wearing a trademark dazzling outfit – a gold-sequined cape and similarly bedecked ballcap – Allen interprets scores composed by the artist on an Electronic Valve Instrument (EVI) against the cosmic backdrop of the Fels Planetarium in Philadelphia. His music floats, the blips, bleeps and squeals



Basir Mahmood, *Brown Bodies in an Open Landscape Are Often Migrating* (2024), installation view in *Nebula* at Complesso dell'Ospedaletto, Venice, 2024. Photo: Lorenzo Palmieri, courtesy of the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film.

taking the viewer along for the ride. I feel as if I am already on a fantastic voyage, slipping and sliding through a space-time portal, future bound. I am in another world and do not want to leave.

However, not all the installations feature such magnificent displays. Others are more muted, allowing for pieces to speak for themselves. Christian Nyampeta's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2024) garners a more intimate treatment in a carpeted room that feels like a cocoon. Sourced from the Castello area, its mismatched chairs provide informal, almost domestic surroundings for a film about three artist friends in New York deciding what to do later that night. Their interactions and dialogue seem insignificant, banal even, but hiding in the depths of the characters' casual encounters are the politics of everyday life embedded in the apparent exclusion zone of privilege and the wars waged outside of it. Following in the footsteps of South African writer Bessie Head's (1968) novel from which Nyampeta's piece takes its title and Senegalese film director Ousmane Sembène's short story 'Devant l'Histoire' ('In the Face of History') (1962), the film asks big questions about how to engage meaningfully in a world torn apart, resisting from afar. It all feels very real.

Further along, the venue's grandiose architecture moves forward and upward before receding. A staircase curls towards the first floor, landing on the right to a curious glassed in room with part of a bathroom that perhaps served as an office, spotlit and allowing the viewer to walk inside. On the left of the staircase, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's *Until We Became Fire and Fire Us* (2023–present) takes on several of the rooms with its non-linear, multimedia, multi-channel video and sound installation. The hallway and many of the rooms' windows have been glazed in a magenta gel, simultaneously casting a warming glow into the space and melancholic mood in a reference to the building's historical function as a shelter for the poor and sick. Inside the spaces hang drawings by Tawfik Abou-Rahme – the artist's late father – made in Jerusalem in the 1970s and 1980s, while others have been tacked to freestanding metal panels alongside poetic, typewritten fragments in Arabic and English. The texts convey the ongoing displacement, pain and resistance of Palestine, reading as diaristic entries of the recent past and connecting across time and land with the drawings. In some of the rooms, large video projections loom solo. One features a man pacing about a barren but beautiful landscape, overlaid with the Arabic and English text: 'My friend hides in Jerusalem / A fugitive to get free / he can't walk in the streets in case he's asked for his ID'. The simplicity of this video is devastating, for no more words nor images can convey such senseless destruction in this world. The heart fragments: loss can only be piecemeal, incomplete and ongoing for generations, beyond borders near and far. As expansive as the installation is, meandering through the rooms and hallways, so is the grief.

Farther down the hall, light shines in Saodat Ismailova's video *Melted into the Sun* (2024), centring on so-called proto-Socialist spiritual and political leader Al-Muqanna' ('The Veiled One') from eighth-century southern Central Asia. Ismailova cast the Uzbek poet Jontemir Jondor in a reimagining of the figure, setting the film along the Amu Darya River, Chillpiq, the Zoroastrian funerary site, and Bukhara. The ethereal video anachronistically traces the history of Al-Muqanna' and his syncretic sense of religion, touching on his preachings: 'Emerging from nature, why did we become separated from it?' 'Can a tamed wolf survive in the wild?' 'Can a bird with clipped wings fly to

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Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Until We Became Fire and Fire Us* (2023–present), installation view in *Nebula* at *Complesso dell'Ospedaletto, Venice*, 2024. Photo: Lorenzo Palmieri, courtesy of the artist and *Fondazione In Between Art Film*.

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Saodat Ismailova, Melted into the Sun (2024), installation view in Nebula at Complesso dell'Ospedaletto, Venice, 2024. Photo: Lorenzo Palmieri, courtesy of the artist and Fondazione In Between Art Film.

the sky?' he asks his followers. Reflection and light play leading roles where the science and technology of illusion take the stage: at one point two moons appear simultaneously on the screen. To match this magic, the room features stacks of shiny gold and silver quilted cushions for sitting, light bouncing off the screen and dancing on their intricately patterned surfaces.

Nebula lives up to its namesake like its multiple definitions, broad and indistinct. The exhibition does not attempt to present easy concepts that might oversimplify or essentialize themes of moving image work being made today. Instead, it takes the idea of light as an interstellar medium and casts cosmic dust across the screens in the darkened Complesso dell'Ospedaletto. *Nebula's* set design leads the viewer along a labyrinthine path through the space. Cohesive in its difference, the works are united by this trail, refusing to be categorized, if only under the umbrella of contemporary film and video being produced, telling the stories informing life through the prism of history lived, remembered and imagined. Yet the installations became an exercise in how to not only isolate moving image and sound in a room, but how to thoughtfully create a mood, to consider its experiential quality beyond the screen. Dramatic and theatrical in-between spaces, carpeted and curtained, historical hallways left to their own devices, all of these treatments coexist in the Complesso dell'Ospedaletto, adapting and adjusting as they need to change – just as humans do. At the same time, it is difficult to go wrong with displaying art in magnificent spaces where the architecture plays a character of its own, shaping and enlivening the works. Careful scene-setting and staging devices

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generate the desired effects, reminding the viewer of the original use of the spaces, showcasing rather than hiding its history. Perhaps the same could be said of the works on display; they reveal more than they obscure, unearthing stories that need more telling, more light in the constellation of a world amongst many others.

References

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Contributor details

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