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STATE OF THE ART

One of the world's most prominent contemporary exhibitions, La Biennale di Venezia has once again brought bold and brilliant creators from around the world to Venice. **Mark Sissons** provides a guide on how to take in the show and squeeze in the city's other sites in a brief stay.

It has been called "the Olympics of modern art." Every other year since La Biennale di Venezia was founded in 1895, the world's oldest and still arguably most prestigious contemporary art show takes over the Floating City – mesmerizing, inspiring and often baffling audiences with its global showcase of significant new works.

On until Nov. 26, the 2017 edition features artists representing more than 80 invited countries, including Canada's official entrant, Vancouver artist Geoffrey Farmer. Each national entry features new work specifically commissioned for the Biennale, displayed in national pavilions

and eclectic exhibition spaces. Numerous collateral gallery shows, galas and workshops also occur, transforming this already famously artistic city into a temporary world capital of cutting-edge creativity and artistic frisson.

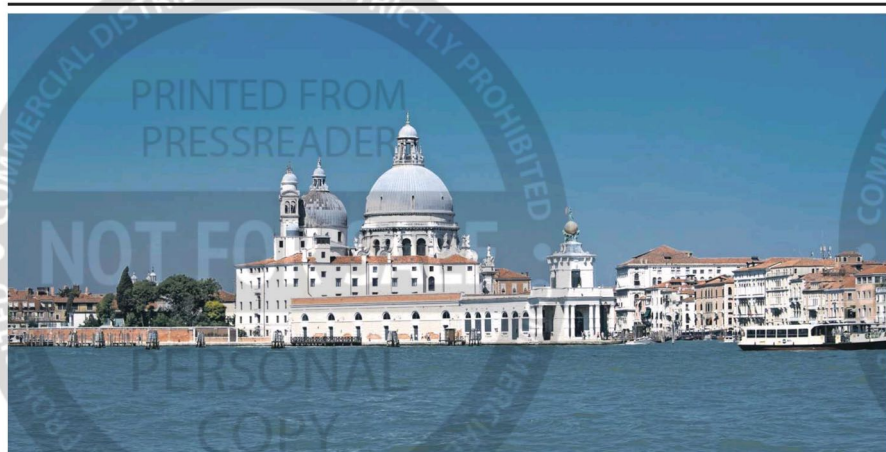
With so much bold, brilliant (and sometimes just plain wacky) modern art on display and so many new artists to discover – all housed in a labyrinthine city legendary for getting you lost – La Biennale can feel overwhelming at first, especially if you're trying to fit it in between requisite tours of the Doge's Palace and Piazza San Marco, selfie-stick photo ops on the Rialto Bridge and that sun-

set gondola ride along the Grand Canal. Here are a few suggestions on how to tackle La Biennale in a day or two.

Stick to the park and shippard

Most of La Biennale's artistic action conveniently occurs within the confines of Il Giardini, the tranquil gardens originally created on the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte after he conquered the Republic of Venice in 1797, and in the nearby Arsenal, Venice's massive former military dockyard. Both are about a 20-minute walk along Venice's waterfront from Piazza San Marco.

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With sites such as the Santa Maria della Salute, you can't beat Venice as a singularly beautiful backdrop. PHOTOS BY MARK SISSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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La Biennale: Geoffrey Farmer given virtual carte blanche to alter Canadian pavilion

» And both are blissfully far from the madding crowds of cruise-ship passengers who pour into Venice by the thousands on a daily basis.

Il Giardini hosts La Biennale's Central Pavilion, along with 29 of its more than 80 national pavilions, all built by participating countries. This year, they contain new work by well-established modern-art stars such as British sculptor Phyllida Barlow, German performance artist Anne Imhof (winner of La Biennale's top prize, the Golden Lion), Australian photographer Tracey Moffatt and African-American abstractionist Mark Bradford, as well as many other established and emerging contemporary artists.

Occupying nearly 50 waterfront hectares, the Arsenale's massive complex of former shipyards and armories was once the world's largest naval production centre. Thousands of workers toiled here to produce a warship a day during the middle part of the second millennium AD. Today, the cavernous stone interiors of its 14th-century Corderie (rope factory) serve as the austere setting for several major Biennale installations, including some that fall within 2017's main theme: Viva Art Viva.

Conceived by La Biennale's curator, Christine Macel, chief curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, Viva Art Viva links nine interconnected "trans pavilions." The show begins in Il Giardini's central pavilion (the former Padiglione Italia) and flows through the Arsenale's Corderie before ending in the gardens at the end of the complex. Promising to take spectators on "a journey from interiority to infinity," it features a multigenerational collection of artists from all over the world, their work unfolding in spaces meant to resemble chapters in a saga with names such as Arts and Books, Hopes and Fears, Traditions, Shamans, Colours and Time and Infinity.

Among Viva Art Viva's highlights are a controversial project by Danish-Icelandic artists Olafur Eliasson and Francesca von Habsburg that invites the audience to work alongside African refugees as they build lamps, a video documenting U.S. choreographer Anna Halprin's 1961 Planetary Dance lullaby gathering in Marin County and a giant tent created by Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto enclosing a recreation of a Cupisawa, the ceremonial gathering place for Brazil's Indigenous Iuini Kuin people living deep within the Amazon forests.

Cool off with Canada

Summer in Venice can be an absolute scorcher. To beat the heat, head to Il Giardini's Canadian pavilion, which has been perennial Biennale faves Germany and Great Britain. Currently under a \$3-million renovation to be completed after the 2017 Biennale is over, our diminutive home base has been compared to, among other things, a wigwam and a Parks Canada information centre.

Geoffrey Farmer was given virtual carte blanche to rip its walls and windows up and fill the space with his intensely personal installation, intersecting diverse stories of collision and reconciliation, titled *A way out of*



Above: British sculptor Phyllida Barlow's installation is among the many works by established and emerging contemporary artists at this year's Biennale di Venezia art show.



Left: Currently under a \$3-million renovation to be completed after the 2017 Biennale is over, Canada's diminutive home base has been compared to a wigwam and a Parks Canada information centre.

IF YOU GO

Biennale hours and tickets
Il Giardini is open, except most Mondays, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Arsenale, also closed on most Mondays, is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, and to 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Biennale tickets, including special 48-hour multiple-entry passes, can be purchased online at labiennale.org/vivaticket.it.

Where to stay
Accommodation in Venice can be scarily expensive, especially during the summer high season. An affordable, more relaxed alternative to high-priced hotel rooms that can land you in off-the-beaten-path neighbourhoods is reserving an apartment through booking.com.

More info
For a complete listing of Biennale exhibitions and artists, visit labiennale.org.

Mark Sisson

the mirror.

Commissioned by the National Gallery of Canada and produced in partnership with the Canada Council for the Arts, Farmer's concept was initially inspired by old photographs he discovered of a 1955 collision between a train and a lumber truck driven by his paternal grandfather — 71 brass planks scattered on the floor represent the scene of the accident.

Other items include 3-D-printed sculptures cast in aluminum and bronze and a replica of the steam clock in Vancouver's Gastown.

In his poignant exhibit, Farmer intersperses stories of Italian-Canadian relations after the Second World War with intimate memories of his own familial trauma, overlaid with the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, and of Inuit teenagers residing in Cape Dorset, Nunavut. Water, in the form of a geyser intermittently spouting in the centre of the space, is a central theme meant to represent the "fountain of knowledge" that connects all of these elements.

For some midday visitors, it's also a refreshing dose of cool mist.

Purchase a pass

Why waste precious time standing in line to buy single tickets on the day when you can order a Biennale pass online in advance? Valid for 48 hours from first use, passes let you enter and exit the main Giardini and Arsenale exhibition venues as many times as you like. So when your senses get overloaded, you can flee and chill lagoon side without feeling as though you need to take everything in at once. Or choose to explore more national exhibits in opulent palazzi, churches, museums, monasteries and all manner of fabulous and far-out venues throughout the city.

Also consider the day, as most La Biennale pavilions and exhibits are closed on Mondays, but those in the Arsenale stay open an extra two hours, till 8 p.m., on Friday and Saturday until the end of September. Weekends, especially long ones, can be very crowded. Every Friday and Saturday during the Biennale, Il Giardini and the Arsenale both host lunchtime events called Tavola Aperta, where the public has the opportunity to break bread and talk art, life, love and the deeper

meaning of it all with a variety of Biennale artists.

Soak up the setting

Some art cognoscenti prefer 2017's other two important international contemporary art shows — Documenta in Kassel, Germany, and Art Basel in Switzerland — over La Biennale. But you can't beat Venice as a singularly beautiful backdrop. This lagoon archipelago of 118 islands intersected by about 150 canals connected by more than 400 bridges was the capital of the Serenissima Venetian Republic for more than 1,000 years.

It's tempting to lose yourself in the city's romantic maze of canals and twisting backstreets, where around nearly every corner awaits another medieval or renaissance masterpiece, or a tiny family-run trattoria, bacari or espresso bar. And why not — after a day or two spent digesting La Biennale's present-tense artistic provocations — surrender your senses to a break with a good old-fashioned dose of *la dolce vita* in this city of timeless beauty.

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