Matter That Really Matters: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s Istanbul Biennial

by Gregory Volk

This eagerly anticipated Istanbul Biennial (through Nov. 1), “Saltwater,” is the first exhibition by curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev since her acclaimed Documenta 13 in 2012 (although she prefers to say that she "drafted" the exhibition). “Saltwater” is an intelligent, idiosyncratic show that embraces the city in unprecendented ways, as you navigate its far-flung sites—among them the Istanbul Modern, other art museums and institutions, two schools, a hamam, hotel rooms, private houses, several boats, storefronts, garages and a lighthouse—you go on a voyage of discovery. Christov-Bakargiev’s exhibitions are all about maximum contact—contact with artworks and ideas, with sundry cultural objects as well as with animals, plants, sites and their meanings. Here such contact extends to Istanbul as a whole.

Wonders are often discovered in unorthodox, non-institutional sites. Duck into Vault Karaköy, The House Hotel—formerly an imposing bank, built in 1863—to find a mini theater with a motorized marionette show by Canadians Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller (Sad Waltz and the Dancer Who Couldn’t Dance, 2015). As the male pianist plays a very sad song, the female figure tries to dance. Her movements mix ungainliness and occasional grace, painful awkwardness and stubborn valor. The domed Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hamam (built in 1477) in the Balat neighborhood is the perfect setting for Egyptian Wael Shawky’s latest film in his "Cabaret Crusades" series, The Secret of Karbala (2015). This one features marionettes made of Murano glass and elaborate movie sets. As you lounge on cushions in a building rich with history, you see intrigue, rampant violence, alliances and betrayals in a historical epic that
looks at the Crusades from a Muslim perspective. You're also deep in Old City Istanbul absorbed with a work that involves the sack of Constantinople. A dingy garage in the Beyoğlu neighborhood houses German artist Kristina Bucht’s two-channel video *Such prophecies we write on banana skins. (triangulation of criminal grace)*, 2015, pairing New York’s Guggenheim Museum and Mount Everest. The sounds of loud explosions, borrowed from the final scene in Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1970 film *Zabriskie Point*, suggest that these famous monuments of culture and nature are being blown to smithereens.

Christov-Bakargiev's intellectual enthusiasms permeate this eclectic exhibition with its interlacing themes, including saltwater, waves, knots, political resistance, the Armenian Genocide, embodied thoughts and ideas, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. Saltwater is a chief theme. As you move through the exhibition traversing Istanbul, you are frequently close to water, and often you are right on it, in a boat.

Liam Gillick’s *Hydrodynamic Applied* (2015), a giant mathematical Bernoulli equation (illustrating a principle in fluid dynamics in which the speed of a fluid corresponds to pressure), is painted in black characters on the Bosphorus-facing back of the Istanbul Modern. The whole museum suddenly, and scientifically, responds to the nearby flowing sea. During the biennial’s preview, Theaster Gates (who elsewhere has a thriving, cross-cultural, very musical pottery shop) took guests on two lengthy early-morning boat trips, voyaging far out to a massive half-finished bridge—a controversial pet project of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—beyond which is the Black Sea. As we took in the impressive surroundings, Gates occasionally played music with his collaborators, talked softly, told stories, and ranted like an impassioned preacher. This trip was a highlight of my Istanbul experience.

On carless Büyükada, the biggest of the quaint Princes’ Islands in the Marmara Sea (incorporated into the Biennial for the first time), Susan Philipsz’s work occupies the faltering 19th-century Mizzi Mansion (*Elettra*, 2015). Eerie yet engrossing photographs, displayed on the floors and leaning against the walls, depict ruined parts of the historical ship Elettra. The vessel was variously a British minesweeper during World War I, the roving laboratory of radio pioneer Guglielmo Marconi and an Italian warship during World War II, until it was torpedoed and sank off the Dalmatian coast, in saltwater that became a corrosive burial site. Eventually it was raised, cut apart and dispersed to several museums. The soundtrack, quietly resounding through the empty rooms, is an altered version of the CQD distress call which predates SOS; a sound from the remote past continues into the present. Warnings and emergencies are evoked, while the work induces wonderment and rapt meditation. Down at
the docks I was hypnotized—literally—by Marcos Lutyens, from Los Angeles, while I was lying on a bed made of rope. Lutyens has comprehensively transformed a moored boat into different zones for contemplation and perception, and his project includes hypnosis sessions (Neurathian Bootstrap, 2015). Body and boat merge, as do consciousness and the sea. I entered the session as a skeptic and left it remarkably refreshed.

Also on this island, you wend your way through the decaying remnants of the house where the exiled Leon Trotsky lived in the early 1930s. A looming menagerie startles just off the shore: white lifesize animals sculpted from fiberglass and other materials by Argentine Adrián Villar Rojas (The Most Beautiful of All Mothers, 2015). An elephant, two giraffes and a gorilla, among others, look festive, even magical, yet also beleaguered and alarming. Each bears a heavy burden—the elephant balances what looks like a large brass plate on its head; the gorilla carries a stone lion on its back-like weary survivors emerging from some disaster. Speaking of which: In the U.S. there is governmental debate about how many Syrian refugees to accept, given the enormous refugee crisis going on—maybe 1,000, maybe 10,000, maybe none at all, as several presidential candidates have demanded, even though this crisis can be traced to the U.S.-led Iraq War in 2003. In greater Istanbul there are some two million refugees and, heartbreakingly, you see them everywhere, including very young kids begging for money at all hours.

Saltwater is the fertile environment for all sorts of marine life; it's nutritious and sustaining. It's a conduit for commerce, communication, the movement of peoples and the rise and fall of civilizations. It's the substance of tears and sweat. It's in our blood and cells. It's ominous, given global warming and rising water levels. It's very lovely—hilly Istanbul provides many splendid watery vistas—and also horrific, especially now when we are shocked by the bodies of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi migrants floating in the surf.

However obliquely, these connotations abound in the most unusual work in the show, Pierre Huyghe's Abyssal Plain (2015-ongoing) located in the Marmara Sea near the remote, rugged and uninhabited island of Sivriada. It is difficult to reach, and if you do, it's impossible to see in any conventional sense, unless you are a scuba diver. With the assistance of divers, ships and a crane, Huyghe has begun construction on the underwater concrete stage he's building around existing rock formations; his project will take 10 years to complete, maybe longer. Cultural artifacts, including parts of Huyghe's own sculptures, along with found objects, will be deposited below. They will complement the many items, from current to ancient, that seed the Marmara, which separates Turkey's Asian and European parts.
form an ever-changing ecosystem-as-installation. This outsize aquarium in the wild promises to thoroughly mesh the human and natural worlds.

While you can’t see what Huyghe is making, so much else is part of his project: the boat trip, the sea and its depths and the nearby island with its history. Sivriada was often a place for exile—an island prison. In 1911 the Ottoman government, wanting to modernize Istanbul and make it more like European capitals, shipped some 80,000 of the city’s stray, and often beloved, dogs to the island, to die of starvation and thirst. Istanbulites could hear the terrible cries of the dogs from afar, across the water. Just a few years later, in 1915, the Ottoman government initiated the Armenian Genocide, during which some 1.5 million Armenians were killed, many dying from hunger and thirst while on forced marches. The barbaric, well-organized extermination of dogs was essentially practice for the barbaric, well-organized, state-sponsored extermination of the Armenians, a Christian minority, in the 20th century’s first genocide, although the Turkish government refuses to acknowledge it as such. On Sivriada the bones of the dogs eventually entered the sea, leading to an explosion of jellyfish. Death and life, animals and humans, solid objects and the moving ocean, history and modernity, things visible and unseen—all converge in Huyghe’s project.

On the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, Armenian issues suffuse the exhibition, sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly. In two rooms of a former Greek apartment residence built ca. 1915, the young Turkish artist Deniz Gül has installed ceilings of carved and burnt wood displaying “treasure symbols,” signs left by displaced people (including Armenians) which would let them find their buried belongings if they were able to return. In Turkey there are many people out there still scouring the landscape for treasures left by deported or murdered Armenians. Gül’s ceilings suggest interior versions of a constellation-filled night sky, while they also signal loss, displacement, calamity and ethnic cleansing.

Back at Istanbul Modern, sculptures by Sonia Balassanian (born in Iran, she lives between New York and Armenia) carved from Armenian Tula stone are partly abstract but also suggest severed heads; they are powerful reminders of Armenian (and other) victims of violence (*Silence of Stones*, 2015). At DEPO, a nonprofit cultural center housed in a former tobacco warehouse, Francis Alÿs debuts his new black-and-white film *The Silence of Ani* (2015), in which young people play hide-and-seek and call out to one another with bird whistles in the ghostly ruins of the once-thriving, now abandoned city of Ani, at the border between Turkey and Armenia. As you watch the playful yet solemn young people moving through the ruins, you sense the forces that overwhelmed the city: invasions, pillaging, and all the hostility and oppression that the Armenians
often faced, culminating in the genocide.

At the Greek Primary School is American Michael Rakowitz's mixed-media installation, part of which involves wall rubbings of architectural motifs made by Armenian masters on Istanbul buildings (The Flesh Is Yours, the Bones Are Ours, 2015). Rakowitz and his team of four Armenian students scoured the city for these motifs, and in his installation they are vivid and physical indications of the longstanding Armenian presence in and contribution to Turkey.

Christov-Bakargiev's Documenta 13 had "The Brain"—a diverse exhibition within the exhibition featuring objects encapsulating her driving concerns. Housed at the Istanbul Modern, the Biennial has "The Channel," which does something similar. Items such as Karl Blossfeldt's magnified photographs of plants, made in the late 1920s in Weimar Germany, shifted focus from Expressionism to close engagement with and observation of nature and the world. These works, like Turkish oceanographer Emin Özsöy's prints of underwater rivers, and theosophists Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater's early 20th century abstract prints called "thought-forms," articulate themes that are explored throughout the exhibition. Christov-Bakargiev finds surprising correspondences between sometimes widely separated works. Blossfeldt's plant images connect with a fragrant carpet of local dried fig leaves on the bedroom floor of a hotel room-part of an installation by Stockholm-based Turkish artist Meriç Algün Ringborg (Have you ever seen a fig tree blossom?, 2015). Robert Smithson's film Spiral Jetty (1970), shown at Istanbul Modern, anticipates Pierre Huyghe's underwater project. Besant and Leadbeater's "thought-forms" connect with deeply compelling abstract paintings by Jerusalem-born Paul Guiramanssian (1925-1993) and the Turkish artist Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991), and a grouping of spiritually charged canvases by Aboriginal Australian artists.

Right at the entrance to the exhibition at Istanbul Modern stands an elongated wooden table featuring many small sculptures/paintings by Canadians Richard Igeby and Marilou Lemmens (The Prophets, 2013-ongoing). Made from such materials as string, wire, bamboo sticks and colored acetate, these fragile forms are based on economic data and forecasts, bearing phrases like "Value of Forward Contracts with Upward Sloping Interest Rates" and "Payoff from Butterfly Spread" on handwritten signs. Melding art and economics, abstraction and political upheaval, historical analysis and future prognostication, this work is a great introduction to an exhibition that is full of driving ideas and also deeply respectful of artworks as cathartic forces. "Matter matters," is one of Christov-Bakargiev's mantras. This innovative exhibition matters a great deal.