

CounterPunch



VENEZUELA, IRAN AND THE DEMOCRATS BY PAUL STREET

THE GREAT DISAPPEARANCE BY JOHN DAVIS

HOW WAR FUELS MODERN SLAVERY BY TJ COLES

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BORDERZONE NOTES

What if We Stopped Fighting Drugs and Started Caring for People?

BY LAURA CARLSEN

Mexico's president Andrés Manuel López Obrador recently made two announcements that could finally close the bloodiest chapter in the history of the United States' global war on drugs. He called for ending the Merida Initiative—the 3 billion-dollar US counternarcotics aid package that has fueled Mexico's drug war—and announced a pivot from prohibition.

“As for the Merida Initiative, we want to completely reorient it because it hasn't worked,” AMLO, as he's known, stated at his morning press conference May 7. “We don't want cooperation in the use of force, we want cooperation for development.” He added that his government rejects U.S. military support in favor of funding for “production and jobs”.

Enhorabuena. On the eve of its eleventh anniversary, few US foreign policies have produced more catastrophic results than the three billion-dollar Merida Initiative. Drawn up by

the George W. Bush administration in 2007 to increase US economic and military influence south of the border, Plan Mexico, later dubbed the “Merida Initiative” to avoid comparisons to Plan Colombia, was a blueprint for increased US security intervention in Mexico—a nation historically averse to US involvement within its borders based on nationalist principles and prior experience.

Since the US strategy began during the Calderon administration, the Merida Initiative (MI) opened doors for US military and intelligence agencies that even the long-standing Party of the Institutional Revolution—friendly to US interests but historically nationalist—kept shut for years. The Pentagon gained unprecedented influence on Mexican security and intelligence and US agencies, especially the DEA, CIA and FBI, gained access and major funding increases under Merida. The U.S. government exported armed equipment, training and intelligence systems that many Mexicans believe compromise national sovereignty. Since it began in 2008 the US Embassy in Mexico City has expanded to become one of the largest in the world. In addition to the

Embassy, the US government occupies a downtown skyscraper as construction continues a nearly one-billion-dollar new complex. US arms sales to Mexico have also skyrocketed.

The MI sent \$400 million to Mexico in the first tranche, most to armed forces and police. No actual money goes to the Mexican government—most of it goes to US defense companies, private security firms, NGOs and government security forces. This means that members of Congress in districts where powerful defense companies and other interested parties are located face a constant lobbying effort to keep the Initiative up and running despite its failure. This in large part explains why it has gone on so long amid so much bloodshed. The Trump Administration reduced funding but continued to support a law-and-order approach to drug use and drug trafficking at home and abroad and heavy border security measures.

The Merida initiative—and the drug war model it supports—has not only been a failure by any standard; it has led to an explosion of violence in Mexico as selective hits on cartels spark turf wars and corrupt security forces take sides. The “kingpin strategy” brought in by the DEA and the Pentagon posits that taking out a cartel leader causes the cartel to wither and cease operations. This has never happened. With El Chapo in a US prison, reports show the Sinaloa Cartel is stronger and deadlier than ever—the largest seizure of fentanyl in history is linked to the post-Chapo cartel. For every high-profile arrest, there is a hydra-like reorganization, usually accompanied by battles for control that turn entire Mexican cities into war zones.

AMLO is right to end this disastrous policy. More than 225,000 Mexican men, women and children have been murdered in the context of this war and 40,000 disappeared, according to the government's underreported count. Some are extrajudicial executions committed by police or armed forces as the rule of law has eroded, rather than strengthened. Thousands of families

have been forced by the violence to flee their homes to other cities or to the United States where Mexican asylum requests have surged.

Every major victims' organization in Mexico, from the aggrieved families of the murdered to the mothers of the disappeared throughout the country and the parents of the 42 disappeared students of the Ayotzinapa teaching college, has pleaded with the US government to end the Merida Initiative. They have wept in Congressional offices and presented testimony in hearings. In late 2017, victims and human rights organization including ours, supported a letter by members of the US House of representatives to conduct a complete review and reorientation of the Initiative.

Mexico is currently working on legislation to regulate cannabis nationwide. The Supreme Court set binding precedent to end prohibition last November. Legislative reform has an excellent chance of passing given the majority of AMLO's Morena party. An end to prohibition was written into the new government's National Development Plan:

On drugs, the prohibitionist strategy is no longer sustainable, not only for the violence it causes but for its bad results in public health... The alternative is for the state to quit fighting addiction through prohibition of the substances that lead to it and dedicate itself to getting substance use under control through clinical treatment and prescription doses and later, personalized care for rehabilitation under medical supervision.

A legal market, production and distribution aids in some of Mexico's greatest challenges by reducing the power and wealth of cartels and relieving prison conditions that reveal the same kind of discrimination based on race, class and gender we see in the United States. Like in the United States, shifting the focus from war to human well-being marks a sea change in policy.

Mexican drug reform groups and congressional members are working

together to develop a state-of-the-art bill that guarantees participation of small farmers in the new market, assures equity, avoids corporate and transnational control, is fiscally responsible and funds reparations and health programs.

Ending the War at Home and Abroad

The Mexican decision comes too late for those killed in the past decade of the US-led war on drugs, but if implemented it could save lives. Lopez Obrador dared to break with U.S. federal policy and should be encouraged to follow through. So far, the Lopez Obrador administration's actions haven't always supported the change in model, as it continues military deployment. The Trump administration has said little about the announcement, in part because its new vehicle for security intervention in Mexico is immigration and in part because the Pentagon is still trying to negotiate a role. Eventually, you can bet there will be strong resistance from the Pentagon, the DEA and the defense industry.

On the home front, although states have steadily chipped away at prohibition through popular referendums on cannabis regulation, the Trump administration continues its war. Measures to restrict and punish the financial and production parts of the new businesses limit their growth and security. Armando Gudino, of the Drug Policy Alliance in California, notes that his organization views the wave of legalization measures as a social justice initiative more than a drug policy. The U.S. government's war on drugs is also not about drugs, but about social control, so the issue has become a forum for justice that encompasses demands against police brutality, racism, militarism, immigrant persecution and violence against women and children.

Recent legislation incorporates this broader view. Illinois's Senate recently passed a bill to legalize marijuana that seeks to repair the injustices of prohibition by expunging the record of those convicted of possession. California es-

tablished a fund "for communities disproportionately affected by past federal and state drug policies" to be financed by cannabis taxes of up to \$50 million dollars a year to support jobs, mental health treatment, substance use disorder treatment, support and legal services, and linkages to medical care.

Studies revealing the mass incarceration and disenfranchisement, primarily of people of color, have shocked society and communities are becoming aware of the deep trauma of prohibition on the collective, family and individual levels. The concepts of transitional justice and historical memory, usually associated with wars and dictatorships, have become part of the drug policy reform movement.

Other states have moved against the federal model. Janet Mills, the governor of Maine, which has one of the highest death rates for opioids in the country, signed an executive order to direct \$1.6 million to harm reduction measures, including purchases of the overdose-reversing drug naloxone, medication-assisted treatment in jails and prisons, and supporting recovery from substance use disorder.

More and more, communities in the United States and abroad are bucking the US government's determination to fight a war against substances and the people associated with them and are fighting for something. They are fighting for healthy people, families and communities. They are fighting for social and economic justice. They are fighting for robust democracies that don't cancel out the rights of certain populations by putting them behind bars.

Every step, large or small, in that direction should be celebrated. **CP**

being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them some way or other, before they can be of any use, or at all beneficial to any particular man.”

People who “inclose, without the consent of ... all mankind” create waste, or what Locke called “the perishing,” and part of that “perishing” today—in the literal sense—is the wasting of people. A man or woman “tills, plants, improves, cultivates” the land but is driven away to perish somewhere else because some enterprise wants to take it and accumulate more of the “durable thing” that will bring about “the perishing of [everything] uselessly”.

Two decades into the twenty-first century we’d do well to look back to 1689 and heed Locke’s words because, if we accept terms like “underused land” from enterprises that really mean they’re going to clear people (“perceived obstacles”) off it, we’ll never be able to talk about rights, even for ourselves, for we won’t know what they are. **CP**

Inauthentic Opposition: The Democrats on Venezuela and Iran

BY PAUL STREET

Anyone who doubts that the Democratic Party is deeply invested in United States imperialism would do well to review the Democrats’ response to the Trump administration’s twin provocations of Venezuela and Iran, two oil-rich nations whose resistance to Washington’s dictates have long irked ruling class elites atop and across both the United States’ major political parties.

An Open Air Coup Campaign

The Trump White House has engaged in an open effort to abrogate Venezuelan democracy and sovereignty. Last January, the administration brazenly “appointed” the unelected Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s “interim” president and rallied 50 nations to formally recognize Guaidó as the nation’s real head of state. Senior U.S. officials subsequently held regular talks with Guaidó while the White House applauded and otherwise encouraged violent protests calling for the removal of Venezuela’s freely and fairly elected President Nicolas Maduro.

The Trump administration heaped all blame for Venezuela’s severe economic difficulties on the Maduro “dictatorship,” which the White House absurdly accused of “genocide.” In fact, the main force behind Venezuelan misery has been a brutal U.S. sanctions regime that has so far killed 40,000 Venezuelans. Last May 15th, Trump suspended all commercial and cargo flights between Venezuela and the US, denying many Venezuelans access to scarce medication and food. An effective US oil embargo imposed last January 29th is expected

to shrink Venezuela’s economy by more than a fourth this year.

Last February, the White House has worked with the right-wing Colombian and Brazilian governments to try to whip up support for regime change by staging border clashes in which the US and its allies claimed to be delivering food and medicine to the suffering Venezuelan masses. The “humanitarian assistance” offered for transparently political purposes was tiny compared to the harm caused by the US sanctions.

Last April 30th, the US tried to orchestrate a military coup in Caracas. Washington’s puppet Guaidó was embarrassed when no significant military support emerged to back his call for Maduro’s removal. As the failed putsch unfolded, Trump’s warmongering National Security Adviser John Bolton spoke to “the patriotic citizens of Venezuela” in a video posted on Twitter. “Whether you are civilians or members of the military,” Bolton said, it was time “to regain your libertad, take control of your government, and oust Maduro.”

After the coup’s collapse, Bolton invoked the Monroe Doctrine and triggered memories of the Cuban Missile Crisis by claiming without evidence that Maduro remained in power only because he was militarily and economically backed by Cuba and Russia. In fact, Maduro remains in power because he continues to have the support of the Venezuelan population, which is strongly opposed to the United States’ long and ongoing history of interfering in the internal affairs of Venezuela and other Latin American nations.

The White House threatened new sanctions on Cuba and Russia for alleged “destabilizing activities in Venezuela”—a richly ironic charge from the Superpower that had been openly disrupting Venezuelan political life for many years. The Bolivarian socialism Maduro upholds has been in Washington’s target sites ever since the Venezuelan people elected the socialist anti-imperialist Hugo Chavez president in 1998.

Trump claims that “all options are on the table” regarding Venezuela, meaning that the White House reserves the right to undertake a direct military intervention.

“The International Community Must Support Juan Guaidó”

Where have the Democrats been on Trump and Bolton’s campaign to revoke Venezuelan national independence and popular sovereignty? They’ve jumped on board, holding up the not-so port side of the imperial ship. A Democratic Party establishment that has obsessed for two-plus years about Russia’s supposedly significant and even purportedly decisive outside interference in the plutocratic United States’ mythical “democracy” has had little opposition to offer when it comes to the Trump administration’s war on Venezuelan democracy and self-determination. It’s been about assistance, not resistance when it comes to Venezuela.

Last January 13th United States House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (net worth: \$72 million) met with Guaidó’s pretend “ambassador to the United States” Carlos Vecchio and voiced support for

what she called “the Guaidó government.” In early February, Pelosi backed US recognition of Guaido as “Interim President until full, fair and free elections can be held” and denounced “Maduro’s regime of repression and impoverishment...During this perilous time,” Pelosi said, “the United States must support the people of Venezuela.” She made no call for an end to US sanctions, the main cause of Venezuelan suffering.

Around the same time, Democratic presidential candidate and US Senator Liz Warren (D-MA) said that “The Venezuelan people deserve free and fair elections, an economy that



works, and the ability to live without fear.” Warren’s statement ignored the free and fair nature of Venezuela’s elections and Washington’s fear-inducing collapse of Venezuela’s economy. By late February, Warren said “I support economic sanctions but ...we have to offer humanitarian help at the same time.” This was like calling for giving band-aids to people after breaking their limbs.

Last February, Democrats, “who pride themselves on leading on Venezuela in Congress” (Miami Herald) proposed four major anti-Maduro bills in the US House. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz’s (D-FL) “Russia-Venezuelan Threat Mitigation Act” instructed the State Department to assess “Russia’s presence in Venezuela.” The “menacing Kremlin influence creates not only a hurdle to restoring a functioning, legitimate democracy to the people of Venezuela,” Wasserman-Schultz said when her bill passed the House last March, “but it also poses an imminent military threat to the entire Western Hemisphere.”

Wasserman-Schultz, a key player in the rigging of the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries against the candidate who would have defeated Trump (Bernie Sanders), had nothing to say about how the United States’ “menacing influence” poses “imminent military threat[s]” to the entire world with a Pentagon budget that accounts for 40 percent of global military spending and maintains more than 800 military bases

across more than 100 “sovereign” nations.

“Restoring a functioning, legitimate democracy” was code language for the overthrow of Venezuelan socialism and the re-installation of a Washington-aligned business class and military oligarchy atop the government in Caracas.

As the failed Guaido putsch attempt was underway, Pelosi tweeted her support for the “peaceful protests” being staged by right-wing leaders against Maduro. Other high-ranking Democratic politicians rallying to the coup included Democratic Senate Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ), Rep. Eliot Engel (head of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs), and top presidential contender Joe Biden, who tweeted that “The international community must support Juan Guaido.”

Against Independent Development

This Democratic support for regime-change in Caracas should not surprise careful observers. U.S. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton supported a right-wing coup that overthrew the democratically elected left-populist government of Honduras ten years ago, with disastrous consequences. Obama imposed sanctions on the Maduro government, going to the absurd extreme of declaring a “national emergency” to do so in 2015.

Thirteen years ago, then-presidential Obama aptly summarized Washington and Wall Street’s conventional bipartisan wisdom on and against Latin American independence in his campaign autobiography *The Audacity of Hope*. There Obama chided “left-leaning populists” like (Maduro’s socialist predecessor) Hugo Chavez for thinking that developing nations “should resist America’s efforts to expand its hegemony” and daring to “follow their own path to development.” The future regime-change president (in Honduras in 2009 and Libya in 2011) Obama accused Chavez of “rejecting ‘American’ ideas like ‘the rule of law’ and ‘democratic elections.’” Obama did not comment on the remarkable respect the U.S. showed for “democratic elections” and “the rule of law” when it supported an attempted military coup to overthrow the democratically elected Chavez government in April of 2002.

In Latin America as around the world, the US imperial project has always been a richly bipartisan affair.

“People Want to Make This About Capitalism, Socialism”

What about the minority of progressive Democrats in Congress? In a joint letter on Venezuela sent to Trump’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in early March this year, sixteen progressive House Democrats (Ro Kanna, Pramila Jayapal, Mark Pocan, Raul Grijalvo, Hank Johnson, Adriano Espaillat, Ilhann Omar, Rahida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (“AOC”), Ayanna Pressely, Nydia Velazquez, Jose Serrano, Tulsi Gabbard, Karen Bass, Danny Davis, and Jan Schakowsky) expressed “deep concern” about Trump’s “broad unilateral sanctions,” Trump’s threats of military intervention, and “the recognition of an interim president [Guaido] without

(*Centaurea melitensis*) and hand weeding the mustard. Late May rains mean that the weeding has taken on added urgency because, for a few weeks, it's possible to pull the mustard rather than chopping it with a Pulaski axe.

Partly because of the late rains, and partly because it's the second year of recovery after the devastating Thomas Fire of 2017-2018, the native wildflowers have been extraordinary. Bird life seems to have recovered with the notable exception of the tiny wren-tit, with its signature chaparralian song. At night, the faint hooting of a pair of greater horned owls drifts through open windows.

I have spent the last ten years informally studying this community, and it is the haunting birdsong, the wildflowers, trees, rocks, mountains and sky that help me explore what it might mean to live as an ecological being: to discover the possibilities of an enmeshment with the non-human world. But, still imprisoned within Modernity, it is the ever growing literature focused on the global warming induced sixth extinction (and its related memes) that gives urgency to my quest. **CP**

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Libya: How NATO Spent Seven Years Entrenching Militia Misrule

BY DAN GLAZEBROOK

By late 2015, the West's Libya policy was in total disarray.

To the untrained eye, of course, it looked as though it had been in disarray from the start. The 2011 intervention had, after all, turned the country into a death squad free-for-all, destroying state authority, and drawing militias from across the region—including Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and ISIS—to its vast territory to set up camps, loot state armouries, and train the fighters who went on to attack Tunisia, Nigeria, Algeria, Manchester and elsewhere. The 30,000-strong city of Tawergha—the only black African town on the Mediterranean—was completely ethnic cleansed by NATO's proxies; it is now a ghost town, its former inhabitants scattered across refugee camps where they are still hunted down and killed to this day. Thousands of African migrants remain detained in illegal facilities by the country's hundreds of militias, where they face regular torture and rape, and public slave auctions have been reintroduced. The country remains at war, without a functioning government, facing rampant inflation and regular power cuts. The criminal justice system has collapsed throughout much of the country, which remains under the control of ever more powerful and unaccountable armed groups. Per capita income has collapsed by more than a third, from \$12,250 in 2010 to

\$7,820.28 in 2014, whilst the country has dropped 40 places in the UN's human development index, from 53 in 2010 to 94 in 2015. Life expectancy has dropped by three years over the same time period.

If the goal was, as NATO proclaimed, to improve human rights, then, by any standards, the intervention was an utter disaster.

But no serious person ever believed it was really about that. NATO—with Britain leading the charge—was concerned about Gaddafi's growing influence on the African continent, his role as a bulwark against US and UK military encroachment, and the money he was pouring into financial institutions explicitly designed to reduce African dependence on the IMF and World Bank. As with the previous intervention in Iraq, however, the goal was not only to remove this particular thorn-in-the-side but in fact to prevent the country from ever again re-emerging as a strong, unified independent power. The goal was not to change the government, then—but to prevent effective government altogether. To this end the leading NATO powers have consistently acted to ensure the country's hundreds of rival militias are empowered and remain at war with one other. From this point of view, the West's Libya policy has been a roaring success. But by 2015 it had come under serious threat.

Under the tutelage of the NATO-imposed government, the years following the 2011 bombardment saw the power of the militias entrenched. Rather than disbanding them, or attempting to bring them under a unified chain of command, the new regime began arming them and paying their salaries. Faced with few other prospects, young people flocked to join, and the number of militiamen grew from a maximum of 25,000 who fought in 2011 to 140,000 two years later. Naturally, those in charge of these armed gangs—accountable to no one but themselves—grew in power as their numbers and resources swelled, and turf warfare was common. The rule of the gun had become institutionalized.

By 2014, Libyans were sick of it. Seeing as the government was effectively toothless, hostage to the militias it had empowered, elections were largely seen as a waste of time at best, a process with no other function than to legitimize a dysfunctional status quo. Turnout in the 2014 elections was estimated at less than 20%, down from 60% two years earlier. Yet the result was nevertheless a blow to the militias, with their political sponsors—Libya's equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood—the biggest losers. The militias' parliamentary patrons had suffered a decisive defeat; and one they did not accept. In July 2014, they launched an attack on Tripoli to drive the new government out of the capital. By August they had succeeded, and the newly elected House of Representatives was forced to relocate to Tobruk in the east. But the House of Representatives had two major assets on their side. Firstly, the Libyan National Army (LNA), the country's largest and most effective single fighting force—had pledged its allegiance to them. Over the year that followed, the LNA made steady gains, and by the end

Panetti's case back to district court to take another look at whether his mental illness makes him ineligible for execution. Today, Scott Panetti sits on death waiting for his mental illness to subside so they can execute him.

While these two rulings bolstered the 8th Amendment and guaranteed that mentally ill inmates facing execution might get a fair review, it did not attempt to define standards for defining mental illness, prohibit individual courts from "loading the deck" with experts unsympathetic to claims of mental illness, or from states adopting their own much more stringent and restrictive definitions of insanity.

Florida has never found anyone too insane not to execute them.

Take the case of John Ferguson. When the State of Florida executed Ferguson by lethal injection on August 5, 2013 they knew he was insane but they executed him anyway. They had to know he was insane, his documented battle with severe paranoid schizophrenia spanned forty years and was buttressed by more than 30 doctors who came up with the same diagnosis. Strapped to the gurney, his last words were, "I am the Prince of God, and I will rise again."

Ferguson's mental illness surfaced in 1965 when he was seventeen-years-old with visual hallucinations, voices and then paranoia. For the next ten years, he was in and out of psychiatric hospitals and mental institutions. In 1975, one court-appointed psychiatrist found his mental illness so extreme it "rendered him dangerous," and stated he, "should not be released under any circumstance" from the maximum security hospital he was held.

But three years later, he was back on the streets and went on a killing spree. Along with two accomplices, he committed a home invasion robbery. Unhappy with the take, he and accomplices shot the eight occupants in the head, killing six of them. Months later, Ferguson spotted two seventeen-year-old lovers making out in a car on the side of a remote road. After shooting and killing the boy, he took the girl into the woods where he raped and murdered her.

He was convicted of 8 counts of first degree murder and sentenced to die. Once in prison, his diagnosis was repeated over the years. Suffering from chronic schizophrenia, his competency to assist in his appeals and legal proceedings was, according to his attorney, "questionable at best." "Once on death row, his mental health further diminished. He believed he was God or Jesus. "Just like Jesus," he once told a lawyer, "you'll come and look in my grave and you won't find me there."

During his lengthy appeals process, he was said to believe that his pending execution was a plot by the State of Florida to prevent him from ascending to sit on a heavenly throne at the right hand of God. He believed the state did not have special powers enough to execute him.

Because of the controversy surrounding Ferguson's legal battle against the State of Florida, Governor Rick Scott, appointed a panel of three psychiatrist to evaluate him. Despite a

four decades long history of schizophrenia, hallucinations and delusions, after one 90 minute interview, the panel found him sane and allowed the execution to move forward.

A group of mental-health organizations filed a friend of the court's brief. The National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Florida Psychological Association, and the Florida Psychiatric Society said the Florida courts had applied an unconstitutional standard in the Ferguson case. The brief said, "A prisoner with such a disorder can be highly intelligent and rational in certain respects yet entirely fail to grasp the true reason for his execution. Without this 'rational understanding,' his execution is senseless and unconstitutional".

In last minute appeals before the Florida State Supreme Court, Ferguson's attorney's argued that he was indeed insane because he did not believe the execution would kill him. The court, however, concluded he was eligible for execution because, according to its thinking, Ferguson's belief in his own immortality was shared by millions of other American Christians. The Federal Appeals Court for the 11th Circuit agreed and allowed the execution to proceed. The United States Supreme Court declined to take up the case and issue a stay of execution.

As of July 1, 2018, six states have a moratorium on the death penalty, 20 states have abolished capital punishment, and 30 states still allow it. In March 2019, California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a moratorium on executions in the state. Through executive order, Newsom granted reprieves to the 737 prisoners on death row.

Proponents of the death penalty say it preserves law and order, deters crime and costs less than life in prison. The idea of "an eye for an eye" honors victims, helps console grieving families and ensures the perpetrators never have the opportunity to murder again. In a recent Rasmussen poll 57% of Americans support the death penalty, down from 63% in 2009.

After James Holmes conviction for the mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, fifty-five percent of those asked believed he should be executed. According to a recent report by the Christian Science Monitor, Duval County, Florida, has the highest per-capita rate for inmates on death row of any county in the country.

However, a recent study and poll by Public Policy Polling found an overwhelming number of Americans, by two-to-one margin, oppose the execution of the mentally ill.

Until the US Supreme Court revisits this issue, further refining and strengthening the review process, and clarifying how much mental illness is too much mental illness for an individual to be executed, one wonders how many pecan pies will go uneaten and how many times real justice will be circumvented and human rights, enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, will be denied. **CP**

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CULTURE & REVIEWS

A Pinhole View of the Venice Biennale

BY ELIZABETH LENNARD

Ralph Rugoff, the American curator of this year's Venice Biennale, limited the number of invited artists by asking them to place works in both the Giardini- the original site of the Biennale and in the Arsenale- the 1000-year-old former shipyard. Rugoff runs London's Hayward Gallery and his previous gig was San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute. Some artists were requested not to place similar works in both places. For the visitor confronted with a multitude of artists—down to 79 from the usual 120— in theory this seemed like an excellent idea. The visitor to the International Pavilion in the Giardini will get a compressed version of the much more daunting Arsenale, (more than 11,000 square meters of exhibition space in the Corderie alone) and perhaps seek out an artist viewed in the Giardini during a subsequent visit to the Arsenale—or vice versa. The casual visitor who begins with national pavilions in the Giardini and who doesn't make it to the Arsenal, can still get an impression of the ancient Chinese curse “may you live in interesting times”, Rugoff's exhibition title. Warning : this is a biased report. I won't attempt to describe or even list the 79 artists chosen to participate in this year's twin but non-identical venues.

A Carpaccio in Venice, Berma in Phèdre, masterpieces of pictorial or dramatic art which the glamour, the dignity attaching to them made so living to me, that is to say so indivisible, that if I had been taken to see Carpaccios in one of the

galleries of the Louvre, or Berma in some piece of which I had never heard, I should not have experienced the same delicious amazement at finding myself at length, with wide-open eyes, before the unique and inconceivable object of so many thousand dreams.

—*Within a Budding Grove, Marcel Proust, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff*

As the plane landed at Venice Marco Polo airport, we were immediately summoned to the Giardini to deliver a film on soldiers, part of French Algerian artist Neil Beloufa's installation in the Arsenale. Sitting in a café on the Via Garibaldi, as we transferred the 40 minute file from one computer to another—long gone are the days of schlepping heavy film cans—Beloufa's assistant, Hugo admitted his legs were aching—he had never walked so much. Running back and forth between the Arsenale and the Giardini locations proved to be a challenge for most artists in this year's Biennale, dispersing their energies between two spaces, essentially two shows. I wanted to remind Hugo that walking too much is the beloved fate of all visitors to this carless capital, part of the undying charm of Venice. The film transfer completed, we went along our way and succeeded in getting lost in the great Venetian Google Map defying maze. But luck was on our side and we happened upon my favorite art spot in Venice, the tiny Scuola di Schiavoni, filled wall to wall with Carpaccio's 16th Century cycle of St George Killing the Dragon, the viewing of which Marcel Proust likened to his first viewing of “La Berma”, a.k.a. superstar Sarah Bernhardt. A few hours later we were back on the Via Garibaldi, at El Refolo, the one bar open late, overcrowded with artists, curators and their assistants. Nowadays, like Carpaccio,

artists are often surrounded by assistants. Long gone are the days when solitary sculptor Alberto Giacometti or lone abstract painter Serge Poliakoff presented their works at the Venice Biennale. The assistants are bearing down hard on Spritzes and Negronis; the pressure is building for the coming week's opening ritual. I strike up a conversation with Charles, born in the Bahamas, who runs fellow Nassau born, Tavares Strachan's studio in New York. Charles describes Strachan's installation on invisible histories as in the first Afro American astronaut—we've never heard of: Robert Henry Laurence Jr. “who died while instructing a flight test trainee...” I speak to Kelly Jayne Jones: a cheerful redhead from Manchester, England who designed and composed the sound for Cypriot artist Haris Epaminonda's “super 8 movie shot in Las Vegas and forgotten desert museums”. Dylan and Mehdi have almost finished their work on Neil Beloufa's two installations. Beloufa's Skype interviews with soldiers from several countries are installed in finely shaped contraptions: a cross between a workout bench and a phone booth. The viewer is engaged in a one-to-one interaction with a soldier whose candid conversations go into confessional mode as they switch between life in the army and their personal lives.

Tuesday, back in Venice for the pre, pre-opening, we begin our stroll through the Arsenal. The visitor is greeted by US artist George Condo's large-scale double Elvis painting and to the left, are Indian photographer Soham Gupta's striking images of “angst ridden” citizens of Kolkata. The Condo painting hangs on the outer wall of the first of several black boxes that house films/videos in this year's Biennale. Christian Marclay layers war films literally one on top of another, sound and all, produc-

ing a work at once graphically pleasing and aggressively noisy. Ed Atkins' installation of fairytale like CGI videos are full of tongue and cheek British charm and humor. L.A. based painter Jill Mulleady's compositions are reminiscent of Pierre Klossowski's perverse and cruel dreamlike *mise-en-scenes*. Her paintings stand on their own in the noisy painting unfriendly Arsenal space whereas Julie Mehretu's abstractions look better in the Giardini. Republic of China artist Xiuwen Yin's contribution called "Trojan" is a giant woman in flight crash position seatbelt fastened in an airplane seat. She's made out of recycled sweatshirts and she's big enough for you to "go inside her". Gigantism continues with Los Angeles based artist, Arthur Jafa's "snow chained" tires. On the other side of the room a few visitors are now discovering that Beloufa's installation requires three actions: straddling the pink imitation leather workout bench, looking through a mask concealing amplifiers and pressing a button that activates interviews with military personnel.

Next door is Ryoji Ikeda's sensory journey of sound and images in a huge black box, one of the least claustrophobic of the Biennale. Just beyond you can hear the pleasant tinkling of Lebanese born, Tarek Atoui's interactive sound installation of ceramics.

As we make our way through the Arsenal our fading attention span is revived by the Ghana Pavilion. It contains 6 artists, chosen in homage to the late Ghanaian curator Okwui Enwezor. Here we are struck by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's brushstrokes, reminiscent of Manet or Eric Fischl with some Edgar Degas in her subject matter. Sadly her paintings are nearly hidden from view by the darkened cavern of David Adjaye's architecture. Felicia Abban's 60s and 70s self-portraits in various getups, are a discovery for me: a sort of Ghanaian Cindy Sherman before the letter.

At the end of a row of national pavilions in the Arsenal, the bright Irish pavilion with sculptress Eva Rothschild's Shrinking Universe comes as a welcome

surprise. Is it because we are invited to sit or climb on an uneven blockade of polystyrene rectangular blocks? Either way her work is a friendly confrontation with today's cityscape of "anti-terrorist barricades".



Neil Beloufa: Global Agreement by Elizabeth Lennard

Day two of the Biennale: the mob scene of press and anyone who managed to get an accreditation makes visiting the Giardini pavilions challenging. We skip the hour and a half wait to get into Laure Prouvost's video installation in the French pavilion and take shelter in the Korean pavilion entitled: "History Has Failed Us, but No Matter" the first sentence of Min Jin Lee's novel *Pachinko*, about the Zainichi, the 20th century Diaspora of Koreans living in Japan. Of the three women artists chosen by curator Hyunjin Kim, we were most intrigued by Hwayeon Nam choreographic video on the controversial Korean dancer Choi Seung-hee,

(1911–1969) who was pro-Japanese during the Japanese colonial era and later defected to North Korea.

No crowd—and oddly no bag search—at the US pavilion for Martin Puryear's wonderfully executed large

and small sculptural forms that stand on their own and yet have enormous political content. Some are inspired by head pieces: a giant Phrygian cap, a symbol of the French Revolution; a covered wagon made from wood on a metaphysical seesaw, called "New Voortreker", in reference to the 19th century trek of Dutch speaking settlers from British ruled South Africa that became a symbol for Afrikaner nationalists in the 1930s; a "Column for Sally Hemmings", the slave turned mistress to Thomas Jefferson. The column recalls the architecture of the pavilion where it's being shown, itself inspired by Jefferson's neo-Palladian Monticello. Perhaps in this one instance,

Puryear becomes too literal.

This year's national pavilions are more nationalistic than ever, a kind of perverse World's Fair. If you enter a pavilion blindfolded, no problem guessing the pavilion's nationality. When at one time there had been some subtlety in a country's choice of artists, the equation of art + politics + political correctness oblige, nations have taken this as a freebee to unabashedly represent themselves. The Canadians show a documentary about their oppression of the Eskimos. At the Dutch pavilion you can see Remi Jungerman's finely constructed de Stijl influenced sculptures in a combine with Iris Kensmil's portraits of overlooked black women artists, writers, activists.

Although I'm an unconditional fan of Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov, his choice of totally blacking out the upper floor of the Russian pavilion made it nearly impossible to see the replicas of the 1848 Atlante figures that hold up the portico of the New Hermitage in St Petersburg and watch Sokurov's war videos. I do recommend the lower floor with Alexander Shishkin-Hokusai's enlarged version of the mechanical Peacock Clock in the Winter Palace and giant Flemish paintings created in old-fashioned theatrical 3D. The black boxes continue in the Giardini with an overwhelming number of films/videos placing the viewer in claustrophobic darkness. I find myself grabbing for my phone flashlight, desperately seeking non-existent exit signs.

The opening of "Mondo Cane" an installation by Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys at the Belgian Pavilion was crowded, perhaps it was the free beer. Mechanized puppets reminiscent of early Disneyland, represent stereotypes of local craftsmen in the apocalyptic wreck of European unemployment. The following day we run into noted Belgian art critic Bernard Marcadier boarding the Vaporetto. I ask him if the artists presented in the Belgian pavilion are well known in their home country. He says "not so much in French

speaking Belgium, but in Flanders, yes". He thought their sensibility was more Anglo Saxon than Walloon. I wasn't sure what he meant.

Apropos to Anglo-Saxon, I enjoyed my brief visit to the Great Britain Pavilion where Irish artist Cathy Wilkes shows ethereal looking pregnant ETs, unequivocally Anglo Irish wall hanging porcelain and a tea set, sculptures of arms literally doing the washing up.

As I leave the international pavilion, (one of the last or first rooms, depending on which way you enter) I am struck by large patchwork paintings by young LA-based Nigerian Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Her autobiographical works incorporate photo transfers and African fabrics creating a flattened Vuillard like perspective.

Everyone in Venice has his or her own agenda and I follow mine. We head to the Cini Foundation on Isola San Giorgio, to the opening of the Alberto Burri show. Burri's matter obsessed "paintings"—from Abstract to Arte Povera—defy categories and this show of rarely lent works deserves far more than this short mention. Also on view on the island, in a former boarding school, are 20th Century French glass maker, Maurice Marinot's remarkable creations in an exhibition organized by Le Stanza del Vetro.

I managed to locate the Indian Pavilion at the very end of the Arsenale, honoring Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birthday. The atmosphere is Lo-tech and calming, beginning with Atul Dodiya's "Broken Branches": old wooden cabinets like the ones in the Gandhi Museum, filled with hand painted photographs, prosthetics and miscellaneous items. On another wall Karnataka born, GR Iranna has hung hundreds of lovely wooden sandals, the Padukas worn by Gandhi, who refused to wear leather. The main problem of the Biennale is TMI and too much to see. Shakuntala Kulkarni's fascinating bamboo body armor and her site specific multi-media performances required more time than this exhausted viewer could give them. There is also

a Hi-tech part of the pavilion: a walk-through misty smoke screen where Jitish Kallat projects Gandhi's controversial July 1939 letter to Adolf Hitler, trying to convince him not to "reduce humanity to a savage state".

On my last day I rush to a converted boatyard on the Giudecca Island for the inauguration of the Estonian Pavilion. Baroque singer Michiko Takahashi is featured in a pagan-like performance orchestrated by artist Kris Lemsalu whose fountains of eagle winged ceramic vaginas spout water from the Venice canals. Surrounded by a crowd of enthralled young onlookers, like a statue of a saint in a Holy procession, Michiko is pulled into a warehouse on a wooden float as she vocalizes in what could be Latin. I'm in a time warp reminiscent of a Stephen Arnold warehouse performance in seventies San Francisco.

We had missed the Lithuanian Pavilion's *Sun and Sea*, where trained opera singers and locals lounge on an artificial beach in a kind of Brechtian opera conceived by Lina Lapelyte, Vaiva Grainyte and Rugile Barzdziukaite. They took home the Golden Lion for the best National participation » while Arthur Jafa, whose enchained truck tires we noticed in the Cordelerie, won the Golden Lion for his film *The White Album*, commissioned by the Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley. Haris Epaminonda received the "promising young participant" Silver Lion for her super 8movie with sound design by my new acquaintance Kelly Jayne Jones. We came home feeling that the mood of this year's biennale under the adage of living in interesting times could be post-scripted more precisely by Alexander Cockburn's *Colossal Wreck*. But, the propensity of ideas and talents provided sufficient nourishment for at least two years to come. **CP**

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