



A Black Girl In Europe: Experiencing the African Diaspora While Overseas

By Vee L. Harrison

Pigment Journalist Vee L. Harrison recounts her time covering the 59th Annual Art Biennale in Venice, Italy

During the first press conference for the 59th Annual Art Biennale, I walked in with inner-city Chicago girl energy, ready to show off my thirteen years of journalism to a room best described as a melting pot. Reporters from various parts of the world were in the room. I entered the press conference, and the main subject, Cecilia Alemani, this year's curator of the Biennale, was speaking Italian – the language that I had only just begun to learn on my Babble app two weeks prior to my journey to Venice.

The press conference staff distributed translation equipment, allowing me to tune in and transcribe the press conference in English. And folks in the room could probably see my relief.

This one instance probably set the tone for the rest of my time in Venice. A time of uncertainty, and walking into blind moments, often learning what was next. Like water buses, which became my primary transportation for 10 days in Venice. I often felt myself looking for an Uber, a faster way to get from point A to point B, but I realized after just a few days, I was on Venice's time, not Vee's time. And in Venice, you aren't getting anywhere fast.

Spending days at the Biennale, witnessing how Black artists, like Simone Leigh from Chicago, showed up in such a special time, was incredibly impressive to see. Only three years post the murder of George Floyd and the rampage in which COVID ran through our inner-city Black communities, what a time it was to see Black faces empowered by history and by the future. What a time to just be alive!

This idea of Black oppression and Black excellence made Pigment International even louder while overseas. Our mission was take Venice, and the meaning meant so much more than just galivanting the narrow streets of Italy and browsing through small, shops and stores.

The mission was to take back the Black voice of freedom and document the beauty of the African diaspora in ways that were stolen from Black people. Crossing over the Mediterranean Sea, where I know many of my ancestors' souls lay at rest at the bottom of that sea, made this trip so sacred. Cruising the waters of Venice in water buses and water taxis showed me just how exceptional Pigment's presence was in Venice, it was nothing that I was used to. We were in a different territory, but the territory was ours. The time was ours. Black art in different spaces signified the pivot our nations are experiencing.

The memories are certainly forever. Yet, one thing that stood out was my brief time in Florence, where my team and I travelled by train for two hours to visit Michelangelo's statue of David. On the way, I walked past at least four homeless people on the streets of Florence, who had made their homes on



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streets only blocks away from Fendi, and United Colors of Benetton, and other high-end designer stores.

I remember thinking to myself how far I was from home, and how some elements of home were so parallel to life in Italy. I thought about the homeless people I would see on Michigan Avenue, sometimes adjacent to the Apple Store, or Salvatore Ferragamo. I thought of the haves and have-nots, and just how close we all were, even on different continents.

Pigment's team on the ground was definitive in our mission to document and celebrate the work of Black artists and this documentation will last for generations, like the statue of David, over 500 years old.

Pigment took Venice. With all we had to give, walking in cold, windy rains to art exhibitions, and climbing bridges, navigating canals, pushing through waters, and finally arriving with huge relief.

In many ways, I felt like my ancestors who were snatched from Africa and forced on to America's land, climbing bridges, navigating canals, pushing through waters but... never arriving.