

La Biennale di Venezia
59th International Art Exhibition

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The Milk of Dreams

TITLE AND THEMES

The Milk of Dreams takes its title from a book by **Leonora Carrington** (1917–2011) in which the Surrealist artist describes a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination. It is a world where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else; a world set free, brimming with possibilities. But it is also the allegory of a century that imposed intolerable pressure on the definition of the self, forcing Carrington into a life of exile: locked up in mental hospitals, an eternal object of fascination and desire, yet also a figure of startling power and mystery, always fleeing the strictures of a fixed, coherent identity. When asked about her birth, Carrington would say she was the product of her mother's encounter with a machine, suggesting the same bizarre union of human, animal, and mechanical that marks much of her work.

The exhibition *The Milk of Dreams* takes Leonora Carrington's otherworldly creatures, along with other figures of transformation, as companions on an imaginary journey through the metamorphoses of bodies and definitions of the human.

This exhibition is grounded in many conversations with artists over the last few years. The questions that kept emerging from these dialogues seem to capture this moment in history when the survival of the species is threatened, but also to sum up many other inquiries that pervade the sciences, arts, and myths of our time. How is the definition of the human changing? What constitutes life, and what differentiates plant and animal, human and non-human? What are our responsibilities towards the planet, other people, and other life forms? And what would life look like without us?

These are some of the guiding questions for this edition of the Biennale Arte, which focuses on three thematic areas in particular: the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; the connection between bodies and the Earth. Or, to borrow the terms used by philosopher **Rosi Braidotti**, whose writings on the posthuman have been essential for this exhibition, the end of the centrality of man, becoming-machine and becoming-earth.

Many contemporary artists and thinkers are envisioning a new "posthuman" condition, which Braidotti defines as "a convergence phenomenon between post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, that is to say, the critique of the universal ideal of the Man of reason on the one

hand and the reject of species supremacy on the other.”¹ They challenge the Enlightenment notion of the human being – especially the white European male – as motionless hub of the universe and measure of all things. In its place, they propose new alliances among species and worlds inhabited by porous, hybrid, manifold beings that are not unlike Carrington’s extraordinary creatures.

Under the increasingly pervasive pressure of technology, the boundaries between bodies and objects have been utterly transformed, bringing about profound mutations that remap subjectivities, hierarchies, and anatomies.

Today, the world seems dramatically split between technological optimism – which promises that the human body can be endlessly perfected through science – and the dread of a complete takeover by machines via automation and artificial intelligence. This rift has widened during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has forced us even further apart and caged much of human interaction behind the screens of electronic devices. In these past two years, the fragility of the human body has become tragically clear, but at the same time the body has been kept at a distance, filtered by technology, disincarnated, rendered almost intangible.

The pressure of technology, the heightening of social tensions, the outbreak of the pandemic, and the looming threat of environmental disaster remind us every day that as mortal bodies, we are neither invincible nor self-sufficient, but rather part of a symbiotic web of interdependencies that bind us to each other, to other species, and to the planet as a whole.

In this climate, many artists envision the end of anthropocentrism, celebrating a new communion with the non-human, with the animal world, and with the Earth; they cultivate a sense of kinship between species and between the organic and inorganic, the animate and inanimate. Still others, drawing from indigenous traditions, practice what feminist theorist and activist **Silvia Federici** calls the “re-enchantment of the world,” trying “to reconnect what capitalism has divided: our relation with nature, with others, and with our bodies, enabling us not only to escape the gravitational pull of capitalism but to regain a sense of wholeness in our lives.”²

EXHIBITION STRUCTURE AND TIME CAPSULES

The exhibition unfolds in the Central Pavilion of the Giardini, and in the Corderie, Artiglierie, and the outdoor spaces of the Gaggiandre and Giardino delle Vergini at the Arsenale complex.

The Milk of Dreams includes over two hundred artists from 58 countries. More than 180 of these artists have never had their work in the International Art Exhibition until now. For the first time in its 127-year history, the Biennale will include a majority of women and gender non-conforming artists, a choice that reflects an international art scene full of creative ferment and a deliberate rethinking of men’s centrality in the history of art and contemporary culture.

The exhibition features contemporary works and new projects conceived specifically for the Biennale Arte, presented in dialogue with historic works from the 19th century on.

¹ Rosi Braidotti, “Preface: The Posthuman as Exuberant Excess,” in Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), XI.

² Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018).

As visitors move through the exhibition in the Central Pavilion and the Corderie, they encounter five smaller, historical sections: miniature constellations of artworks, found objects, and documents, clustered together to explore certain key themes. Conceived like time capsules, these shows within the show provide additional tools of investigation and introspection, weaving a web of references and echoes that link artworks of the past – including major museum loans and unconventional selections – to the pieces by contemporary artists in the surrounding space.

This wide-ranging, transhistorical approach traces kinships and affinities between artistic methods and practices, even across generations, to create new layers of meaning and bridge present and past. What emerges is a historical narrative that is not built around systems of direct inheritance or conflict, but around forms of symbiosis, solidarity, and sisterhood.

With a specific choreography of architectural spaces developed in collaboration with the designers Formafantasma, these “cabinets” also prompt reflection on how the history of art is constructed around museum and exhibition practices that establish hierarchies of taste and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Many of the stories told in these capsules have not yet been absorbed into the official canon and have been for too long considered minor and obscure. These sections thus participate in the complex process of rewriting and rereading history that has marked the last few years, when it has become clearer than ever that no historical narrative can ever be considered final.

THE ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION

The fulcrum of *The Milk of Dreams* is a gallery on the lower level of the Central Pavilion where the first of the five capsules, titled *The Witch's Cradle*, features a collection of artworks by women artists of the historical avant-garde movements, including, among others, **Eileen Agar**, **Leonora Carrington**, **Claude Cahun**, **Leonor Fini**, **Ithell Colquhoun**, **Loïs Mailou Jones**, **Carol Rama**, **Augusta Savage**, **Dorothea Tanning**, and **Remedios Varo**. The works of these and other women artists of the early 20th century – shown in an ensemble inspired by Surrealist exhibitions – summon up a domain of the marvellous where anatomies and identities can shift and change, following the desire for transformation and emancipation.

Many of the same lines of thought return in the work of contemporary artists on view in the other galleries of the Central Pavilion: the posthuman, hybrid and disobedient bodies depicted by **Aneta Grzeszykowska**, **Julia Phillips**, **Ovartaci**, **Christina Quarles**, **Shuvinai Ashoona**, **Sara Enrico**, **Birgit Jürgensen**, and **Andra Ursuța** suggest new mergers of the organic and the artificial, whether as a means of self-reinvention or as a disquieting foretaste of an increasingly dehumanised future.

The ties between human being and machine are analysed in many of the works on view, as in those by **Agnes Denes**, **Lillian Schwartz**, and **Ulla Wigggen**, for instance, or in the screen-like surfaces by **Dadamaino**, **Laura Grisi**, and **Grazia Varisco**, which are collected in *Technologies of Enchantment*, a second historical presentation that explores Programmed Art and kinetic abstraction in the 1960s.

The bonds between body and language are at the heart of *Corps Orbite*, another capsule inspired by *Materializzazione del linguaggio*, a showcase of Visual and Concrete Poetry at Biennale Arte 1978 that was one of the first openly feminist exhibitions in the institution's history. Visual and concrete poems by **Mirella Bentivoglio**, **Tomaso Binga**, **Ilse Garnier**, **Giovanna Sandri**, and **Mary Ellen**

Solt are juxtaposed here with experiments in automatic writing and mediumistic communication by **Eusapia Palladino**, **Georgiana Houghton**, and **Josefa Tolrà**, and other forms of “feminine writing” that range from **Gisèle Prassinòs’** tapestries to **Unica Zürn’s** micrographies.

Signs, symbols, and private languages also crop up in the work of contemporary artists such as **Bronwyn Katz**, **Sable Elyse Smith**, **Amy Sillman**, and **Charline von Heyl**, while **Jacqueline Humphries’** typographic paintings are juxtaposed with **Carla Accardi’s** graphemes and with the machine code that informs the art of **Charlotte Johannesson**, **Vera Molnár**, and **Rosemarie Trockel**.

In contrast with these hypertechnological scenarios, the paintings and assemblages by **Paula Rego** and **Cecilia Vicuña** envision new forms of symbiosis between animals and human beings, while **Merikokeb Berhanu**, **Mrinalini Mukherjee**, **Simone Fattal**, and **Alexandra Pirici** craft narratives that interweave environmental concerns with ancient chthonic deities, yielding innovative ecofeminist mythologies.

The exhibition at the Arsenale opens with the work of **Belkis Ayón**, an artist whose work re-reads Afro-Cuban traditions to dream up a matriarchal society. The rediscovery of art’s myth-making potential can also be seen in **Ficre Ghebreyesus’** large-scale paintings and **Portia Zvavahera’s** hallucinatory visions, as well as in the allegorical compositions by **Frantz Zéphirin** and **Thao Nguyen Phan** that blend histories, dreams, and religions. Drawing on indigenous morphologies, oral histories, and subverting colonialist stereotypes, Argentine artist **Gabriel Chaile** presents a new series of monumental sculptures, made from unfired clay, which tower like the idols of an imagined Mesoamerican culture.

Many artists in the exhibition imagine complex new relationships with the planet and with nature, suggesting unprecedented ways to coexist with other species and with the environment. **Egle Budvytyte’s** video tells the story of a group of young people lost in the forests of Lithuania, while the characters in a new video by **Zheng Bo** live in total – even sexual – communion with nature. A similar sense of wonder can be found in the snowy scenes embroidered by Sámi artist **Britta Marakatt-Labba**, and ancient traditions also overlap with new forms of ecological activism in works by **Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe** and in **Jaider Esbell’s** dreamlike compositions.

The Corderie starts off with another time capsule, in this case inspired by sci-fi author **Ursula K. Le Guin** and her theory of fiction, which links the birth of civilisation not to the invention of weapons, but to tools used for providing sustenance and care: bags, sacks, and vessels. As we are told by Le Guin, stories and technologies are neither Promethean nor apocalyptic, but rather containers that open spaces for the expression of life. Presenting an iconology of vessels in various forms, in this section, titled *A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container*, ovoid carapaces by Surrealist artist **Bridget Tichenor** are juxtaposed with **Maria Bartuszová’s** delicate plaster works, **Ruth Asawa’s** hanging sculptures, and **Tecla Tofano’s** hybrid creatures. These works from the past live side-by-side with **Magdalene Odundo’s** anthropomorphic vases and **Pinaree Sanpitak’s** concave forms, while video artist **Saodat Ismailova** surveys underground isolation cells that serve as places of refuge and meditation.

Colombian artist **Delcy Morelos**, whose works are inspired by Andean cosmologies and the cultures of the Amazon, presents a large-scale installation featuring a maze built out of earth. Many other artists in the show combine political and social approaches with an investigation of local traditions, as in **Prabhakar Pachpute’s** large-scale paintings of the environmental devastation

caused by the mining industry in India, or **Ali Cherri's** video about the dams of the Nile. **Igshaan Adams** grounds his abstract textile compositions in themes ranging from apartheid to gender conditions in South Africa, whereas **Ibrahim El-Salahi** conveys his experience of illness and his relationship with the pharmaceutical world through a meditative practice of meticulous daily drawings.

The final section at the Corderie is introduced by the fifth and last time capsule revolving around the figure of the cyborg. As **Donna Haraway** puts it, the cyborg brings together “the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways.”³ This presentation includes artists working over the course of the 20th century who imagined new fusions of the human and the artificial, as harbingers of a posthuman, postgender future. *Seduction of the Cyborg* presents artworks, artefacts, and documents from early 20th-century artists such as the Dadaist **Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven**, Bauhaus artists **Marianne Brandt** and **Karla Grosch**, and Futurists **Alexandra Exter**, **Giannina Censi**, and **Regina**. Here, **Anu Pöder's** delicate sculptures portray fragmented bodies that stand in contrast with **Louise Nevelson's** monoliths, **Liliane Lijn's** totems, **Rebecca Horn's** machines, and **Kiki Kogelnik's** robots.

At the very end of the Corderie, after moving through a vast, diaphanous installation by **Kapwani Kiwanga**, the exhibition takes on colder, more artificial tones and the human figure becomes increasingly evanescent, replaced by animals and hybrid or robotic creatures. **Marguerite Humeau's** biomorphic sculptures resemble cryogenic beings, juxtaposed with **Teresa Solar's** monumental exoskeletons. **Raphaela Vogel** describes a world where animals have won out over humans, while **Jes Fan's** sculptures use organic materials to create a new kind of bacterial culture.

Apocalyptic scenarios of cells run wild and nuclear nightmares also turn up in drawings by **Tatsuo Ikeda** and in **Mire Lee's** installations, agitated by the twitching of machineries that resemble the digestive system of some animal. A new video by posthumanist pioneer **Lynn Hershman Leeson** celebrates the birth of artificial organisms, while Korean artist **Geumhyung Jeong** plays with bodies that have become completely robotic and can be reassembled at whim.

Other works hover between obsolete technology and mirage-like visions of the future. **Zhenya Machneva's** abandoned factories and decrepit industrial mechanisms seem brought back to life in the installations by **Monira Al Qadiri** and **Dora Budor**, which whirl and spin like bachelor machines. Capping off this series of devices gone haywire, a large installation by **Barbara Kruger** conceived specifically for the Corderie combines slogans, poetry, and word-objects in a crescendo of hypercommunication. In contrast, **Robert Grosvenor's** silent sculptures reveal a world that seems devoid of all human presence. And beyond this motionless universe grows **Precious Okoyomon's** vast entropic garden, swarming with new life.

Winding up the exhibition in the outdoor spaces at the Arsenale are major projects by **Giulia Cenci**, **Virginia Overton**, **Solange Pessoa**, **Aki Sasamoto**, **Wu Tsang**, and **Marianne Vitale**, which guide viewers to the Giardino delle Vergini along a path that leads through animal beings, organic sculptures, industrial ruins, and disorienting landscapes.

³ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 4.

The Milk of Dreams was conceived and organised in a period of enormous instability and uncertainty, since its development coincided with the outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. La Biennale di Venezia was forced to postpone this edition by one year, an event that had only occurred during the two World Wars since 1895. So the very fact that this exhibition can open is somewhat extraordinary: its inauguration is not exactly the symbol of a return to normal life, but rather the outcome of a collective effort that seems almost miraculous.

For the first time, except perhaps in the postwar period, the Artistic Director was not able to view many of the artworks first-hand, or meet in person with most of the participating artists. During these endless months in front of the screen, I have pondered the question of what role the International Art Exhibition should play at this historical juncture, and the simplest, most sincere answer I could find is that the Biennale sums up all the things we have so sorely missed in the last two years: the freedom to meet people from all over the world, the possibility of travel, the joy of spending time together, the practice of difference, translation, incomprehension, and communion.

The Milk of Dreams is not an exhibition about the pandemic, but it inevitably registers the upheavals of our era. In times like this, as the history of La Biennale di Venezia clearly shows, art and artists can help us imagine new modes of coexistence and infinite new possibilities of transformation.