



Padiglione Nazionale
della Repubblica di San Marino



61. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali

Pavilion of the Republic of San Marino
at the 61st International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia

MARK FRANCIS

Sea of Sound

Curated by Luca Tommasi

Interview with Mark Francis

by Vincenzo Rotondo

(FR Istituto d'Arte Contemporanea S.p.A.)

1. What does it mean for an artist, despite having exhibited widely and possessing an international CV, to show at the Art Biennale?

The Art Biennale feels like a pinnacle moment for any artist's career, in that it offers you an international platform for several months, and potentially thousands of visitors could see your work in that unique context. To be chosen to represent a country, even more so when it is not your own, feels quite extraordinary. I am a Northern Irish painter representing San Marino, an independent Republic within the boundaries of Italy. This is, of course, unusual, but because of that, it is a great honour. I am incredibly grateful to the various institutions of San Marino, FR Istituto d'Arte Contemporanea and curator Luca Tommasi for making this all happen.

2. The invitation from the Republic of San Marino came not only in recognition of the quality of your work but also because of your strong resonance with the theme of the 2026 Art Biennale curated by Koyo Kouoh. *In Minor Keys*, the author introduces a reflection on perception and listening to the world. How does this theme relate to your artistic practice?

My work has often been described as rendering the invisible visible. More recently, I have returned to the concept of inaudible sound. For me, *In Minor Keys* reflects the "lower frequencies, the hums" that I am interested in. I take the theme to refer to the constant and persistent presence of sound all around us. When I am making a painting, the act of the brush blending colours creates an illusion of sound. The pressure stretches the paint, creating various intensities of tone. As each bar of paint begins to merge with another, I am faced with new and sometimes unexpected colours and sounds. By the end of the



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painting process, I am confronted by a 'Sea of Sound'. It is as if the colours start singing as they join forces and unify.

3. What is the process of making your paintings, from conception to actual realisation?

Conceptually, I always begin a painting or series with an intention. However, during the process of making the painting, the intention is eroded, and the physicality of the paint takes over. The painting process feels intuitive, but in reality, that intuition rests on years of learned technique and confidence in the materials I use. For me, a painting begins before I have even put a mark on it, in that I build and prepare the stretcher and canvas myself. Applying layers of primer and sanding between those layers allows me to understand the surface intimately before even thinking about the oil paint. Despite knowing what combinations of colours work well together, I never know what a painting is ultimately going to look or feel like when I am in the midst of it. Much of the painting rests on the last 10% of the process, when the final brushing takes place. By the end, it has become its own entity, which frees me from needing to return to its origins.

4. During the presentation of the San Marino Pavilion to the press last autumn, you had the opportunity to visit the Republic of San Marino, including the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, and the entire Historic Centre of San Marino, recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Was the San Marino experience a source of inspiration for your work? In what way?

In time, like any experience in life, it could be a source of inspiration for my work. For this exhibition, however, my visit hasn't had enough time to filter through. For me, it can take many years before an idea makes its way onto the canvas.

5. How do you imagine the visitors' journey within the Tana Art Space?

The two spaces are quite different. One is more raw and industrial, with exposed brick walls showcasing the historical background of the building and Venice itself. The other resembles something closer to a contemporary gallery; minimal, clean and bright. In many ways, they both speak to my practice. In my studio, I exist in a constant state of order and chaos. The controlled, colourful paintings sit defiantly amongst a mass of mess; entire tables covered in paint, trestles and boards everywhere, tools and brushes scattered on the floor. But it works; the contrast plays a role, and the San Marino Pavilion somewhat mirrors this.

6. In your work, there is a constant tension between order and chaos, between science and intuition. Do you think painting can still create a space for existential knowledge in our time, and not merely be part of an aesthetic language?



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In a world that demands so much certainty, abstract art allows us to exist in ambiguity. For me, painting feels even more like an act of respite. There is a sense of safety in the uncertainty; it is exciting yet benign. My studio is where I can experiment and be playful. Working with materials that are sometimes unpredictable and with processes that are physically demanding is a rewarding process. As an artist and also as a viewer of art, I can see existential value in that. I believe haptic learning is important (handling materials, making decisions through touch, and figuring things out physically) in a time dominated by automation and screens. I am not averse to screens, as I have recently delved into the world of film and animation myself, but I am averse to complete certainty. The absence is what allows my mind to wander, into colour or imagined sound, and that openness and ambiguity hold value. I believe our understanding of something should shift and evolve with every encounter, particularly with art.

7. Your painted surfaces oscillate between immersion and distance - almost as if the viewer is both invited into the work and to observe from the outside. How conscious is the construction of the visual space within your works, and what role do you assign to the viewer?

My practice has always been grounded in the structure of the grid. When this is set against the flat surface of a canvas, the two reinforce a sense of containment. The blending and blurring of the paint then introduces a contrasting tension within that order and creates a subtle kind of agitation. It is as if the forms are in motion, pushing against the boundaries that attempt to hold them in, and I think it has something to do with the visual spacing. From a distance, the regularity of the forms paired with the variability of the colour produces a blurring effect. The restless eye is unable to land anywhere for an extended period, and so the viewer is invited to step forward. Up close, the texture and the complexity of the surface is revealed, and the impact of the blur disappears, asking the viewer to step back again. The paintings are static but have sensory impulses, and what is seen, heard and felt depends on who is looking. I think good art invites the viewer to advance and retreat, and even better, compels the viewer to return again, even if only in their mind. The paintings reward repeated viewing, and that is important to me.

8. Painting, and abstract painting in particular, has always been your language of choice, despite experimentations with other media, such as sculpture. What can you tell us about your latest moving image work?

Listening Field is my first and only moving image work so far. It is a seven-minute sequence of visuals and sound that could potentially be endless and ever-changing. The initial inspiration came from a small set of works I created in 2008, using photographic paper and bleach. The chemicals in the bleach reacted with the ink in the photographic paper, producing a hazy glow to the forms, like a bright light or a small spark. Each one appeared in a varying state of birth and decay, alluding to only a fragment of their lifespan.



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This cyclical nature intrigued me. I have always been interested in cycles, whether that's the changing of the seasons, metamorphosis in nature, or the genesis and dissolution of fungi. I see cycles in my paintings, too. In my mind, a painting rarely stays within the edges of the canvas. I see a painting as a single moment in a much larger sequence of events. However, as I am not a very digitally gifted person, I was unable to make this realisation until I worked with the filmmaker and animator, Ian Cross. Together, we were able to realise the full potential of what might be happening in one small section of a painting; in a single bar of colour, or perhaps in a moment before paint has even reached the canvas. We then accompanied the visuals with sound, not music. I was keen for the sound to edge on familiarity, but largely for it to feel industrial and unknown like a byproduct of another process. I worked with Marco Genovesi, an Italian composer, whose natural instinct was to create a musical score. However, I wanted the accompanying sound to atmospherically relate to the abstract forms. Marco understood this and produced something that sat just on the edge of the musical realm. It follows the rises and falls, and the births and the deaths, just as music would, but without the melody. He created an orchestra of sound rather than a score.

9. What kind of impact would you like the Pavilion to leave on the visitor?

I want my work to have resonance. I want it to transcend beyond the Pavilion and stay with people. Colour has a rich history of associations, which have become part of our visual language. Each colour is full of messages. Red represents danger, blue embodies calm, and yellow evokes optimism. What happens when these colours are placed together? What happens when they start to fuse together? It is almost as if I am creating grey spaces with colour. The messaging becomes merged, allowing the questions to become more interesting than the answers, and the listening to be more enlightening than the telling.

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