

REVIEWS VAL GARDENA, ITALY

Biennale Gherdëina 8

Various Venues

By Agnieszka Gratzka



Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen, *Paleness*, 2022, water, diatomaceous earth, Acid Blue 9, dimensions variable. From the Biennale Gherdëina 8.

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In their curatorial statement for “Persones Persons,” the eighth edition of the Biennale Gherdëina, organizers Lucia Pietroiusti and Filipa Ramos list among their reference points the recent successful efforts by indigenous leaders and ecological campaigners around the world to protect forests, rivers, and other landscape features by endowing these entities with legal personhood. This suggests a departure from Western thinking, which tends to draw sharp distinctions between persons and things, although there have been important exceptions. Take, for example, nineteenth-century American polyglot and diplomat George Perkins Marsh, who, reminiscing about his childhood in Woodstock, Vermont, recalled that “the bubbling brook, the trees, the flowers, the wild animals were to [him] persons, not things.”

For an art biennial rooted in postanthropocentric and more-than-human thinking, the title, with its human, all-too-human connotations appears paradoxical. The distinction between persons and things goes back to Roman law, which considered animals, plants, and nonsentient natural entities but also children and slaves as belonging to the latter category. Over the centuries, the set of criteria for personhood have more often than not been anthropocentric. According to Immanuel Kant, for instance, one commands respect simply by virtue of being a person: a rational, self-aware, free, and therefore morally accountable being.

For this edition of the Biennale, the invited artists—just twenty-five, including collectives, in a bid to make the exhibition more sustainable—seem to have been inspired by its overall themes and conceptual framework, but even more so by the curatorial duo’s contagious enthusiasm, the exceptional natural setting of the Dolomites, the region’s folklore, and encounters with the Gardena valley’s human and nonhuman inhabitants, as well as by visits to local museums and crafts workshops. The idea for Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen’s *Paleness* (all works cited, 2022)—milky-blue water filling a fountain in the inner courtyard of Castel Gardena, a late-Renaissance castle graciously made available for the biennale’s duration by the Rome-based Franchetti family—was born during a tour of the South Tyrol Museum of Natural History in neighboring Bolzano. The artists were captivated by live specimens of the horseshoe crab, whose copper-rich blood, prized in cancer research, has an eerie hue. For the delightful stop-motion animation *they stole my soul*, also presented at Castel Gardena, Lina Lapelyte turned to the valley’s wood-carvers, who produced the five hundred traditional animal figurines featured in the work, and to peo-ple she had met on a residency in London, whom she induced to imitate animal cries for the accompanying soundtrack.

Playfulness and a sense of childlike wonder characterize many of the pieces. Eduardo Navarro’s giant peace-lily sculpture *Spathiphyllum Auris*, sitting amid the lush meadows of Vallunga, has a hollow interior to let visitors experience what being inside a plant feels like. Objects take on anthropomorphic features: for instance, the rounded belly of Gabriel Chaile’s bread oven *Brenda*, installed in Ortisei’s main square, or Chiara Camoni’s *Sister*, an uncannily lifelike female effigy fashioned out of dried-vegetable and ground-mineral matter. Some works appeal to multiple senses, none more so than Alex Cecchetti’s *SENTIERO* (Path), a walk in the company of a trained guide, who leads visitors up to a yurt perched by a small lake in a mountain valley strewn with gentians, offers a cup of restorative soup seasoned with wild herbs, and lights some fragrant incense to see one off. My guide was called Sophie, and given the secret knowledge she communicated to me in the course of our exchanges, the name felt fitting.



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021, 8K video, color and black-and-white, sound, 75 minutes.

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