

2015 Cameron Rowland's *Loot*  
 Ramaya Tegegne's *Tetris*  
 2016 Anna-Sophie Berger's *Parabolic Reflectors*  
 Zoe Leonard's *Total Picture Control*  
 Bunny Rogers' *Cafeteria Set*  
 Cameron Rowland's *91020000* at Artists Space and *Indirect Benefit* at Fri-Art  
 Luke Willis Thompson's *Sucu Mate / Born Dead*  
 2017 Prem Sahib's *Do you care? We do*  
 2018 Ghislaine Leung's *Public Sculpture*

When looked at within the context of the past century, work exhibited by myself and my peers since about 2014 of objects presented without alteration may appear as shockingly new or reaching towards a pure sculptural clarity. In this thought process, the 'rediscovery' of these works by Lewis Stein shocks a now institutionally recognized contemporary artistic process in which power dynamics, narrative, and the political are revealed through inanimate entities. The timeline, as I've constructed it, allows me to see what the Lewis Stein exhibition has the ability to illustrate. His works are not the outliers in time they seem to be. While viewing art within a successive timeline can serve a purpose, it must not be

default and can be as dangerous as favoring great artists over great artworks. The academic research concerning the pure readymade is a totally open field. The changes in the use and understanding of the readymade varies widely. They can be seen as devoid of nearly all meaning, or looked at as all-encompassing. The possibilities of the readymade are not exhausted, and many questions remain unanswered. For example, why are so many women, queer, and non-white artists attracted to the readymade? That an exhibition had the power to bring up so many revelations and concerns should not be taken lightly.

— Mitchell Anderson

## In Defense of Disappointment

Being in Venice in 2017 you find it difficult to ignore the Damien Hirst show *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* that is double staged in the vast venues of Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana.



The shipwreck story\* sounds intriguing, the reviews are strictly divisive and whatever is on the pictures available, looks horrendous. So yes, you really want to see it.

Not least intriguing is the surprising potency of a show that held at a private

foundation, by an established (white, male, British) artist wasn't expected to be debated that much at all. Not least because some of his better known artworks are full of a baroque post pop that seems to be so clearly rooted in (and fitting for) the last decade. It surely wasn't what the world was waiting for.

So, I want to say we came because we were invited to see a spectacle and even if we haven't rushed to go we had to go, eventually. Not being the people who have to make a point by not going. But then maybe it isn't really an invitation after all if you have to pay 18 Euros for a ticket at the entrance.

Palazzo Grassi. You enter first and after you queue and pay you are handed a piece of paper. You see a gigantic foot. It is painted in bronze and paired with another, belonging to the centerpiece in the Palazzos hall; a headless giant. But, you have been warned. It's looking back at you like an 18 meter high question mark. Walking up the Palazzo's beautiful staircase you meet smaller but not more digestible pieces. The army of figures awaiting are a boundless pastiche of Greek mythology: fantasy figurines, porn star bodies, sea shells and Disney characters (is Disney the ultimate default for anyone

who is lacking an idea?) Some are confined to immaculate vitrines (of course), others not. The logic here appears to be that because a lot of the objects are made out of a different material than the plaque is claiming, the vitrines keep the onlooker further away and more assured of its content's value. The effort put into achieving this illusion (or clues left to something else) varies greatly; there is a sea shell painted in crude airbrush, there is a "made in China" stamp on the back of another, there are some that leave you unsure.

You ask a guard what the beheaded giant is made of and she says "bronze". You say, "No, what is it really made of?" and she says, "Oh, polymere."

The plaques on the vitrines are a bit funny: "This freestanding monument presents a man beating a drum, which is balanced on the elongated head of a child or spirit. Seemingly carved directly out of a cliff face, it is possibly of Chinese origin. While the sculpture's function is unknown, the phallic suggestion of the smaller figure's head implies a relationship with maturation rituals, perhaps accompanied by music and drum beating."



You could have easily just turned around, nauseated or annoyed by the first rooms, but something intoxicating is going on, like a sugar rush. There is a luring sparkle of gold not too far away. In front of the other exhibition venue (and former customs office of Venice), Punta della Dogana, there is yet another large outdoor sculpture made out of white “marble”. I see a man on a horse entangled by a giant snake. The snake’s mouth is wide open—all fangs—the man screams, the horse screams, and we see a lot of tongues.

Okay, so one more round of stuff. It seems clear to you that you are invited to laugh along. Unless you are incredibly inattentive or persuadable, there is no way you can mistake these movie set prop-like objects with ancient artifacts. But then there are many other things happening at a museum besides the display of exhibited pieces. There are tour guides recapitulating

the shipwreck story to their assigned groups with remarkably straight faces (some questions arise as to what kind of people these guides are), there are texts about the wreck being placed in your hand and on display everywhere, there is even a Netflix documentary! (That is quite impressive, to me.)

Some of the things we actually see in the many rooms of Punta della Dogana include a naked woman riding a bear, a naked woman leading a lion, a naked woman fighting the many-headed Hydra, a naked woman reclining on a divan, and a naked woman that is being raped by a minotaur. What else? Some more vitrines containing gold nuggets, some cutlery, some jewelry. A golden monkey, a golden transformer. It is said that each object exists in three versions: one coral covered, one allegedly restored in gold or bronze or marble, and one version as museum reproduction, probably polymere. A lot of things come to mind. An art connoisseur could write on this exhibition: “art for the post-truth era”, “the museum as a gift shop”, “sunken treasures in a sinking city”, though I’m really not suggesting anyone should.

Maybe you find it slightly painful, listening in on the museum guides who are giving a tour or watching others serenely studying the exhibits one by one. It feels like the sort of cringe of someone explaining his own joke, you leave.

As you walk out you think about the relationship between this and other artists’ sculptures, for instance Hirst’s friend Ashley Bickerton’s, or the publicly installed art works in Venice of recent years, like Marc Quinn’s *Breath*, or as you’re standing outside Punta Della Dogana, Charles Ray’s *Boy With A Frog*. It’s confusing.

You guess the disappointment was to be expected, the idea of the recovered treasure is just too promising and the spectacle you imagined was bound to be better than the one he delivers. And, you add to the guess,

as a concept, abundance of money and lack of restraint never made anyone more inventive or a better artist.

So it comes with little surprise that the people who found Hirst’s work highly objectionable before this show feel that this current project is nothing but a highly cynical joke, pointing at the perverse features of the art market and its more gullible collectors. Considering Hirst’s close relationship with the market (being a passionate collector himself) and the whole scale of the project, I don’t find this very probable. If there was an impulse to let people question what has and is given value, it fails because there simply isn’t anything of value to be found. The sugar rush is over too quickly, the bad boy attitude is a bit outdated, and at best, this kind of nihilism is truly sad and familiar.

You can probably think of a few more cool or interesting things that could have happened there instead, but is it the most boring art you have seen during the Biennale? Not by far. Is it the most morally twisted, deplorable thing on stage? Surely Olafur Eliasson exhibiting refugees who are being taught in a “workshop” how to make his lamps beats most of the competition on that field.

Maybe you have coffee now on a piazza and enjoy being in Venice, knowing that soon the pieces of this exhibition will sink back out of sight into private collections, duty free warehouses, and storage vaults. But hopefully you will get to go back to Venice soon.

— Gina Fischli

\* from the official press release: “[...] the exhibition tells the story of the ancient wreck of a vast ship, the ‘Unbelievable’ (Apistos in the original Koine Greek), and presents what was discovered of its precious cargo: the impressive collection of Aulus Calidius Amotan—a freed slave better known as Cif Amotan II—which was destined for a temple dedicated to the sun.”