

# Frieze

Opinion /



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## The Art of Getting It Wrong – 58th Venice Biennale: The Best of the Arsenale Pavilions

The strongest exhibitions in the 58th Venice Biennale find creative freedom in failure



Venice is a place where you find what you least expect yet lose what you most took for granted. Or so a friend told me the other night, after we had wandered through a maze of alleys and sottoporteghi for days, circling in mad loops around pavilions with unlisted addresses. If you feel self-assured, the city will doom you to failure: you simply can't fight the tide (or the mysteries of Italian scheduling). The best exhibitions in the 58th Venice Biennale contend with these coiled notions of failure and success, finding creative freedom in the art of getting it wrong. Worth getting lost in, but impossible to compare, these were my favourite pavilions in the Arsenale.



Italian Pavilion, Venice Biennale,  
2019, installation view.  
Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia;  
photograph: Italo Rondinella

**Enrico David, Chiara Fumai, Liliana Moro**

***Italian Pavilion***

There's no wrong way to enter the porous labyrinth of the Italian Pavilion, though, as with the city of Venice itself, there's no predicting where and when it will spit you back out again. Provocatively curated by Milovan Farronato, sharply angled, winding hallways and coiled courtyards feature works by Enrico David, Liliana Moro and the late Chiara Fumai. Though the works were made over the course of 20 years (David's are the only ones that are entirely new), together they feel like a close collaboration, even – in Fumai's case – from beyond the grave. This befits three practices that engage with the uncanny: from David's grotesque bodies to Fumai's occult symbolism to Moro's manipulation of mundane forms that seem culled from a beautiful yet unsettling dream. I lost track of the times I had to crouch, kneel or double back on my path: to view David's resting wax heads and snail shells perched beside a tiny doorway cut like a mouse hole in a gallery wall (*Pietra la Croce*, 2019), or stuck in a cul-de-sac with Moro's *Avvinghiatissimi* (1998–2019): a pair of foam rubber mattresses ratchet-strapped to a bed frame, with hidden speakers playing a devilish tango (another mouse hole here offered me only a tease of escape). This faces Moro's Murano-glass Excalibur (*La Spada nella Roccia*, The Sword in the Stone, 1998) that glistens like a deadly icicle beneath a spotlight and seems to rise from the same myth that produced Fumai's final work, *This last line cannot be translated* (2017), which was realized posthumously for the show: a wall drawing in brown ink rife with obscure symbols and the tracings of a stalagmite-riddled cave. There's much to mine from this delightful and daring show, but curators looking to mirror Farronato's forceful approach should enter at their own risk.

Georgian Pavilion, Anna K.E.,  
'REARMIRRORVIEW, Simulation is  
Simulation, is Simulation, is  
Simulation', 2019, installation view,  
Venice Biennale. Courtesy: Venice  
Biennale; photograph: Italo  
Rondinella

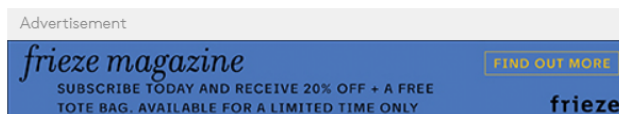
**Anna K.E.**

***Georgian Pavilion***

If the journey is more important than the destination, as the cliché goes, then process is the core of artistic practice – even if it leads, literally and figuratively, nowhere. Anna K.E. appears rudderless in the selection of bemusing videos that comprise a retrospective of sorts at the Georgian Pavilion, covering most of the last ten years; these play on small video monitors she has embedded on the glossy steps of a ziggurat that resembles a Memphis swimming pool. In *Enough Sugar* (2011), K.E. steers herself around her studio on a rolling, tiled platform using poles as makeshift oars; in *Gloss of a Forehead* (2011), she folds her body over, trousers binding her ankles as she waddles across the floor, mooning the camera. At every turn, her movement is impeded, her actions appearing slightly demented. On the pyramid display, elegant stainless-steel faucets pour water from spouts shaped like Georgian script, which together spell *chaishala*, or deranged. Bohemian artists have long been considered insane; what's truly crazy is their commitment to a field with no real limits or expected outcomes. K.E.'s Sisyphean performances poke fun at the bogus academicism of studio practice while demonstrating that failing, or getting it wrong, can be the most radical gesture of all.

Singaporean Pavilion, Song-Ming Ang, 'Music For Everyone: Variations on a Theme', 2019, installation view, Venice Biennale. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Italo Rondinella

**Song-Ming Ang**  
**Singaporean Pavilion**



Getting it wrong is essential to *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme* (2019), Song-Ming Ang's project for the Singaporean Pavilion. In the 1970s, the famously strict government of Singapore launched a cultural initiative called Music for Everyone that trained schoolchildren to play the recorder and held performance and song-writing competitions. The repertoire was mostly Western and classical, suggesting the misguided aim of fostering a generation of composers who would challenge European hegemony on Europe's terms. A series of colourful posters for the programme line one gallery wall, while another displays large-scale reproductions of competition advertisements rendered precisely in watercolour, a vernacular form almost as popular (and critically maligned) as the recorder. Then the remix drops: Ang worked with musicians to devise more than a dozen ways to play the instrument 'wrong' – blowing on its fingerholes rather than its mouthpiece or using it as a drum – and invited schoolchildren from diverse backgrounds to compose their own symphony with these rebellious methods. They play in discordant unison, marching in circles like a colourfully clad military band, in front of the Singapore Conference Hall, a modernist landmark that housed many of the Music for Everyone events. Children are rarely encouraged to colour outside the lines – or play off-stave – especially in a country like Singapore that places a high social value on conformity. The childrens' recorders appear here on a table, taken apart and re-assembled as geometric sculptures. The work is a subtle critique of state propaganda and a dismantling of the Western terms it employs.

El Anatsui, *Earth Shedding Its Skin* (detail), 2019, installation view, Ghanaian Pavilion, Venice Biennale. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Italo Rondinella

**Felicia Abban, John Akomfrah, El Anatsui, Ibrahim Mahama, Selasi Awusi Sosu and Lynette Yaidom-Boakye**  
**Ghanaian Pavilion**

In the 17th century, the Asante Empire was the envy of Africa, a gilded military power and trading hub in the Gulf of Guinea. Depending on how you enter the inaugural Ghanaian Pavilion, you will be welcomed in or ushered out by a monumental El Anatsui tapestry, *Earth Shedding Its Skin* (2019), whose shimmering yellow-gold scales recall the wealth of a nation plundered by European colonialism and the slave trade. Hammered from bottlecaps, they also recall a later economic imperialism that flooded West Africa with cheap imports while extracting its natural resources (gold and other precious metals among them) for foreign markets. Anatsui's work, though, isn't intended to be political; rather, it taps something far deeper – beneath the earth's scarred skin – rooted in the sublime.

The sculptor, based in Nigeria, is one of three (from a total of six) participating artists who lives and works outside Ghana. Accra-based curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim has selected a group of uncontested masters to represent her native country, evidence of the vast Ghanaian diaspora – one of the world's largest such populations – and its immeasurable influence on world culture. This includes London-based architect David Adjaye, who has designed a honeycomb of curved, earthen walls that cradle each artist's work in dimly lit, womb-like gallery spaces. It's rare for national pavilions to hire notable architects to design their installations, but the scenography lends the exhibition an affective weight unmatched by almost any other show in Venice. At the opposite end from Anatsui's sparkling tapestry, Ibrahim Mahama has stuffed the exposed skeleton of a wood-frame wall with an insulation of burnt blueprints (a cheeky reference,

perhaps, to Adjaye's involvement) as well as bits of dried fish that evoke the tastes and smells of Ghanaian ports. *A Straight Line Through the Carcass of History* (2019), according to Oforiatta Ayim, is a 'visual archive' of the country, like a body splayed open to expose its organs and their scars.

Masters upon masters: here, too, are a series of paintings by Lynette Yaidom-Boakye, whose hastily brushed figures exude a quiet confidence and grace that mark all of the artist's prolific output. They sit, smoke, ponder and – in one canvas – strike balletic poses. Two paintings of athletic women rhyme with the pavilion's most intriguing inclusion: a salon hang of portraits from the 1950s by Felicia Abban – Ghana's first known female studio photographer – of women in traditional garb and Western dresses.

*Four Nocturnes* (2019), a new, loosely narrative three-channel film by [John Akomfrah](#), meanwhile, misses the plot. Although its transfixing footage of savannah sunrises and grazing herds showcases the artist's unparalleled cinematographic talent, it traffics in African clichés (the snows of Kilimanjaro, the mud walls of Timbuktu) while failing to provide the 'allegory' its subtitles promise us. Selasi Awusi Sosu's modest, three-channel film, *The Glass Factory* (2019), is more effective; profiling the construction of a Ghanaian glass factory, alongside shots from inside a bottle and a real, dusty pile of them, the film suggests that when progress bottlenecks, there is always promise down the line. For Ghana, it's hard to imagine a better start.