

THE WORLD'S HOTTEST ARTISTS CONVERGED IN VENICE FOR THIS YEAR'S VISUAL ARTS BIENNALE. WE PROFILE ARTISTS GABRIELA FRIDRIKSDÓTTIR, MIYAKO ISHIUCHI AND RICKY SWALLOW, WHOSE SHOW-STEALING WORK IN THE PAVILIONS HAD TONGUES WAGGING.

While the jury wrangled over the success of this year's Biennale, critics agreed that the leadership of Spanish curators Maria de Corral and Rosa Martinez provided an urgently needed, dynamic, feminine spin on the dusty – and at times anachronistic – 110-year-old affair.

Outstanding work was to be found in some of the national pavilions (see the following pages), and in much of the impressive Arsenale site, a kilometre-long string of former shipyard buildings that hosted younger and emerging artists. Memorable pieces here included a chandelier made out of 14,000 tampons (from a distance it looked like a glistening Swarovski creation) by French-born Joana Vasconcelos; and a sleek and sophisticated interactive spaceship sculpture by Japanese artist Mariko Mori, which visitors could climb into for an otherworldly sensorial experience (the queue was unfortunately even more daunting than the electrodes you had to don before entering). Then there was an installation of rack upon rack of new stainless steel pots and pans by Indian Subodh Gupta (the ostensibly western cookware is, in fact, all manufactured in India).

A video installation, *Viva España!*, by Pilar Albarracín unnerved viewers, who moved from hilarity to uncomfortable silence as they

watched an all-male marching band pursue a well-dressed woman through a city. Another quietly powerful video by Palestinian Emily Jacir depicted images of a bar, a shop and an office in Ramallah and New York side by side. It gently probed cultural stereotypes by showing how it was impossible to distinguish which city was being projected on each side of the screen.

The Golden Lion Award for Best Young Artist went to Regina José Galindo. The young Guatemalan exhibited a grisly film of a hymen replacement operation (a procedure carried out in many countries where virginity is a prerequisite for marriage) and a filmed record of her own bloody footprints as a protest against the violence directed towards women in her homeland.

The title of the Arsenale section was 'Always a little further'. And indeed this year the Biennale did go further than it ever has, with an increased female contribution tackling the artistic world's overwhelming gender imbalance. But, as anonymous art co-operative the Guerrilla Girls pointed out in their amusing and brightly coloured pop art billboards, only two African countries were present, proving that the Biennale still has a lot further to go to truly become the world's best modern art show. This year it started the journey.



IN THE ICELANDIC PAVILION ARTIST GABRIÉLA FRIDRIKSDÓTTIR BLURRED THE LINE BETWEEN REALITY AND IMAGINATION WITH A VIDEO INSTALLATION FEATURING BJÖRK.

Stepping inside the small, barn-like Iceland pavilion at this year's Biennale is like entering a world of mystery and foreboding. Artist Gabriela Fridriksdóttir has adorned the facade with twigs and wood, and sounds emanate from hanging owl-like sculptures that contain state-of-the-art loudspeakers.

Inside, the intense musical soundtrack continues in a darkened atmosphere, and the air is redolent with magic and whiffs of hay. Charged, embossed drawings featuring Tarot symbols adorn the walls. Bas-reliefs and sculptures made out of hay, mud and clay surround four screens where videos titled *North*, *South*, *East* and *West* are playing. They depict tales and scenes that seem to be epic in proportion and yet strangely intimate, primeval and earthy, peopled by humans and

animals, and filled with symbols and omens which seem to be located somewhere between dreams, illusion, nightmares and reality. In the most memorable of the videos, Icelandic musician Björk, who is covered in grass and leaves and intended as a sort of Venus of Willendorf figure, gives birth to a creature covered in sticky white slime. In the final scene, Björk and her progeny become one with the hay-wraiths around her in a violent explosion and tempest. Spontaneity and improvisation are fundamental in Fridriksdóttir's world, yet the sense of ancestry and tradition, the mystical quality of the Icelandic, and other sagas, is also palpable.

Fridriksdóttir has called the installation 'Versations/Tetralogia' and says the 'versations' part of the title refers to a conversation without

the prefix, a tantalising and seductive monologue, which Fridriksdóttir says is "very Icelandic". It could also be interpreted as a paradoxically circular but free form of communicating, or an attempt at doing so.

The first thing one notices about Fridriksdóttir is her self-assured manner, firm handshake and potent gaze. The youngest artist – at 34 – to represent Iceland at the Biennale, she seems to be taking the artistic shenanigans well in her stride. **The most striking thing about Fridriksdóttir however, is the range of her output and the ease with which she can dip into different ways of expressing creativity.** She herself says she has no favourite media, that she "adores them all".

Fridriksdóttir is currently located in Brussels, which she describes as "the capital of Europe", despite its stuffy reputation. Yet her occupation of the city is likely to be transient. In a recent interview she spoke of a famous ancient poem in which the Norse god Odin tells the reader not to stay at home. He advises that one should rather go away and come back with stories of the world. Having lived in Prague and Quebec before Brussels, and enthusiastically experimenting with everything from photography to sculpture and music, Fridriksdóttir seems firmly intent on doing the same.



FACING PAGE Gabriela Fridriksdóttir outside the Icelandic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. ABOVE Fridriksdóttir's 'Tetralogia' videos formed a key part of her multimedia installation. One of the series (above right) featured Björk and dancer Erna Ómarsdóttir in an exploration of "the imbalance of emotions and their expulsion from the body".





MIYAKO ISHIUCHI CREATES PHOTOGRAPHS OF SKIN AND MEMORABILIA WHICH EVOKE A POIGNANT SADNESS – BUT ALSO CAPTURE THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE MODERN-DAY WOMAN.

It's impossible not to be moved by Miyako Ishiuchi's solemn portraits in the Japanese Pavilion. Wigs, girdles, shoes, kimonos and false teeth that belonged to her mother have been arranged and photographed with a formal precision, filling the frame and appearing as if suspended in time.

Some exhibits still appear to cling to the life they were once part of: a hairbrush has a few strands of its owner's hair; lipsticks are half-used or chopped up. Other photos are close-ups of part of her mother's body – stomach, feet, hands and some scars on her right arm and breast, inflicted years ago in a cooking accident. "I always wanted to take pictures of my mother's burns," explains the 58-year-old Ishiuchi, "but I wasn't able to do that until a year before she died."

Ishiuchi's fascination with skin and scars stems from personal and philosophical preoccupations. In skin, you can see the shape of time, she

explains, her phrasing as economical and lyrical as her work. She explains that she, too, has a big scar and that in winter it gets infected and swells up. "When that happens I remember the day that I originally got the scar," she says.

When you take many pictures of scars they all start to look similar, Ishiuchi says, alluding to the profoundly personal yet universal resonance of her subject matter.

Many of Ishiuchi's earlier works featured her home town, Yokosuka. I ask if the buildings she photographed have a 'skin' in the way humans do except that, instead of scars, they reveal peeling paint or cracked walls. She replies that buildings too speak eloquently of the workings of time.

Ishiuchi came to photography relatively late in life, at 28. During her 20s she felt lost and frustrated, and describes herself as a "flowerchild with no particular goals". When a friend gave her a camera and some equipment she began taking

photographs. Two months later she had already taken part in her first exhibition.

Though Ishiuchi claims never to have felt very close to her mother – they never got on particularly well – when her mother died, at the age of 84, Ishiuchi had an unexpectedly violent reaction.

"Somebody who had always been there was suddenly gone and, confronted by the reality of that loss, helplessness and regret surged over me with unimaginable grief," she writes in the afterword of the catalogue for the Venice exhibition. "Her old undergarments, which had lost the only value they had, seemed to me to be almost pieces of her skin. Thus, just like her body, when they were no longer of any use, I thought I should burn them or put them in the trash, but I found myself unable to perform this simple act ... Feeling that it would be easier to dispose of them if I photographed them first, I began to do so."

Ishiuchi agrees that taking these photographs was also a way of forging a relationship with her mother. But she is not so sure she has been able to create that bond.

"I'm not sure we communicated any better; I'd like to think that we did." She smiles politely, displaying that combination of detachment and subjectivity that make her exhibition, 'mother's 2001–2005 – traces of the future', one of the most disarming at this year's Biennale.

FACING PAGE Miyako Ishiuchi stands before her artworks in the Japanese Pavilion at Venice. Ishiuchi's 'mother's 2001–2005' series documented her mother's life by photographing her skin and possessions. Even the photographs of inanimate objects are haunted by the presence of the dead woman, such as a comb with hair still stuck in it and partially used tubes of lipstick (pictured).

DUBBED AUSTRALIA'S
'SUPERSTAR SCULPTOR'
SINCE THE MID-1990S,
RICKY SWALLOW'S
EXQUISITE, SURREAL
WORKS DREW
ADMIRING CROWDS
AT VENICE.

"I'm feeling brain-dead today," apologises an exhausted-looking Ricky Swallow. He needn't explain: even hungover, the young sculptor is thoughtful and articulate. At the Australian Pavilion's inaugural party the previous night, Swallow, as its only featured artist, was the man of the evening.

In fact, Swallow seems to be the man of the day too, creating a genuine buzz at the national pavilions site. The pavilion is packed and journalists are queuing to speak to him. Only six of his meticulous wood carvings are on view, but their detailed intricacy inspire awed responses.

In one, a skeleton sits on a chair with a jacket slung over the back, clasp a whittling knife and

a staff. In another, a skull lies sunken in a beanbag. Nearby, snakes slither through the vents of an upturned cyclist's helmet lying on the ground.

"The pieces are about witnessing something happening or something that's just happened, making you think you've just missed the most important part of the narrative," Swallow explains. They dwell on the passage of time and that most human of predicaments: the transience of existence. For him, the "rules of reduction" applied in the carving process mimic the inevitable onset of human decomposition.

Swallow's show, 'This Time Another Year', exuded a more subtle energy than many of the other pavilions, where aesthetic enjoyment often took second place to the artistic concepts. With Swallow, the work is all about the finished product and the journey he takes to get there.

One painstakingly produced relief, depicting lizards, mice, birds and rabbits, was inspired by the great French 18th-century still life painter Chardin and was realised with the help of a taxidermist. Swallow also undertakes the physically demanding task of chain-sawing blocks of wood and whittling away at pieces with chisels for months on end.

"In terms of hours it's just ridiculous," he confesses. He points to a relatively small sculpture

that took six months to make, adding that he often worked 12-hour days and that his assistant worked on it too.

He is meticulous to the point of being obsessive. "It could be a disorder – I've never had it looked at," he jokes. "I keep choosing to work in slow ways. It kind of feels like self-sabotage." While there may be steps he could take to speed things up, Swallow believes they would compromise something in the process. "There's something about the intensity of the work; the importance of the work," he muses.

Conversely, once the work is finished he says he almost feels "a certain disregard for it", since the biggest part of his relationship with it is over.

Though Swallow has lived in Los Angeles for two years and now lives in London, one of his new pieces, *Killing Time*, evokes his childhood in Australia with a fisherman father. The sculpture, which depicts a kitchen table laden with upturned langoustines, crustaceans, buckets and a knife, has a classical composition. Perhaps, I ask, he is now far enough away to view Australia in full perspective?

"If I was there, everything would be closer and maybe a little too obvious. When you stand back you can see the value in it, in your own history," he agrees.

FACING PAGE Ricky Swallow with one of his sculptures from 'This Time Another Year', his exhibition in the Australian Pavilion. The work focussed on monuments and memories; life, death and immortality; the passage of time; evolution and survival. These themes – which have long held his attention – were given a more personal treatment, with deeper explorations of the objects and imagery that have shaped his life.

