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Art

Standouts From the 2024 Venice Biennale's *Foreigners Everywhere*

Let's investigate some of the hundreds of artworks on display as part of the central exhibition at this year's Biennale.


Hrag Vartanian and AX Mina May 31, 2024

Entrance to the main exhibition at the Giardini (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

VENICE — While biennials have practically metastasized across the globe, the Venice Biennale is the OG — the first ever biennial that launched the whole phenomenon back in 1895. Its success can be seen in the influential biennials that have followed, including the Bienal de São Paulo, the Whitney Biennial, the Gwangju Biennale, and more than a hundred others worldwide.

Unfortunately, in the last few years the curatorial frameworks for biennials are showing signs of fatigue, as introductory texts use generic artspeak that could describe most group exhibitions and provide a thin pretext for curators to show favorite works and artists. But it's about the art, isn't it, so curatorial statements be damned. Let's investigate some of the hundreds of artworks on display as part of the central exhibition at this year's Biennale, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, the artistic director of the São Paulo Museum of Art, under the theme ***Foreigners Everywhere***. — *Hrag Vartanian*

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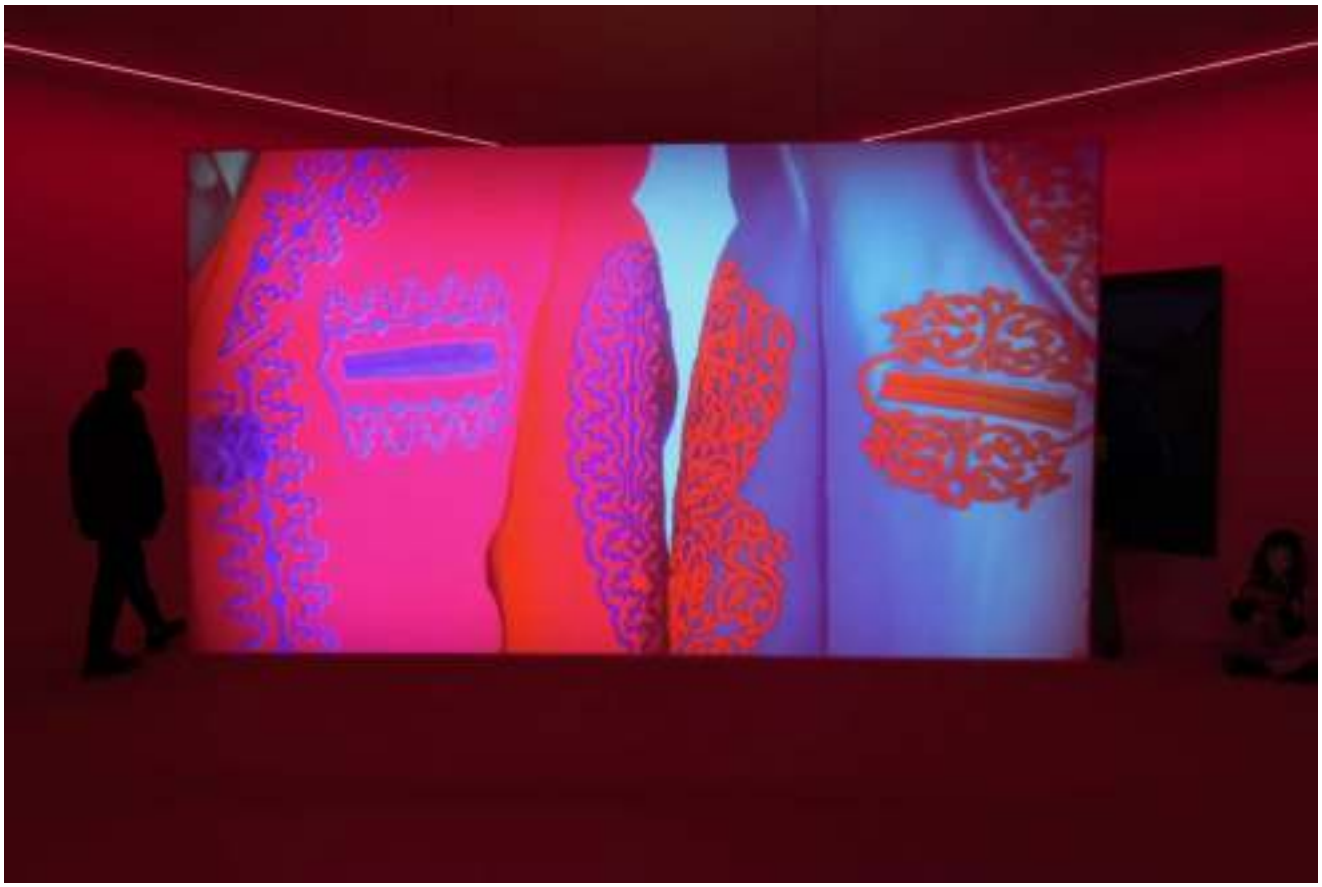
Visitor looks at the display by Bolivian artist River Claure that includes work from the *Warawar Wawa* (2019–2020) and *Mita* (2022–present) series. (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

River Claure, *Warawar Wawa* (2019–2020) and *Mita* (2022–present)

These beautiful images saturated with dusty colors are visually impressive in the large Arsenale space. The series *Warawar Wawa* riffs off Saint Exupéry's 1943 novella *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*), which the artist sets in Bolivia, while *Mita* is a portrait of life in Andean mining communities. The attraction is the balance between the documentary and staged aspects of his imagery, as each photograph appears to be full of cryptic moments or interventions that question our understanding of what we're looking at. Claure summons magical realism in the everyday and sprinkles it with a dash of artistic sorcery that his camera captures like a firefly in a mason jar for us to scrutinize. — *HV*



Ana Segovia's "Pos' se acabó este cantar" (2021) on display in a brightly colored gallery with one of her paintings visible on the right, "Charro Azul" (2023). (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Ana Segovia, "Pos' se acabó este cantar" (2021) and various paintings

These bright works purport to play with Mexican masculinity in varied ways, but I think they're just good studies of people, and Segovia's close-cropped compositions create a tension that works. I don't think this art has a lot to say about masculinity, beyond the

obvious, but she sure has insight into the way bodies relate in space and the sometimes uncomfortable interactions that denote belonging or connection. — *HV*

Pablo Delano, "The Museum of the Old Colony" (2024) (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Pablo Delano, "The Museum of the Old Colony" (2024)

A fascinating "archival-based conceptual installation" that explores the colonial systems that have subjugated Puerto Rico to more than 500 years of colonial rule since the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1493. Pablo Delano's biggest obstacle is the sprawling material that gives the display more of a history museum feel. Everything from an official Mattel-approved light-skinned Puerto Rican Barbie doll to images of dark-skinned schoolchildren looking at a painting of Abraham Lincoln in San Juan are included in this dense display. I suspect this project would be better served in a smaller show, as visitors can then take their time to parse the material, but here it feels like a rabbit hole that begs visitors to step in. I look forward to future encounters with the material in different venues. — *HV*

A visitor looks at South Korean artist Chang Woosoung's "Atelier" (1943) along with works by other 20th century artists from Africa, Asia, Latin American, and the Middle East. (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Nucleo Storico/Portraits display

Over 100 portraits by "artists who worked in Africa, Asia, Latin American, and the Middle East," according to the label (which seems redundant since the Middle East is part of Asia and Africa), made throughout the 20th century are on display. The Biennale didn't offer much insight into their interconnectedness, but I still think it's a fruitful exercise as most visitors will not be that familiar with this history, and it does help to situate much of the figurative painting on display (and there was a lot of it). I do wish more contemporary paintings were placed nearby to allow visitors to make more connections between the material, but I'll take what we got. — *HV*

Superflex, “Foreigners Please Don’t Leave Us Alone With The Danes!” (2002) (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Superflex, “Foreigners Please Don’t Leave Us Alone With The Danes!” (2002)

Sometimes this Danish collective’s sense of humor really hits, and this is one such instance. Sadly, the political realities of Denmark may make this an artifact of a certain time and place, as the country joins the rest of Europe in its **increasingly rightward turn**, **even if it’s in center-left clothing**. — *HV*

Entrance to *Disobedience Archive* (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Disobedience Archive

What a waste of space: this archive asked visitors to stare at small screens to watch videos that would've been a hell of a lot easier to view online. I see this as a gesture that falls empty and I'm tired of bad design and user interfaces being presented in this context, when they're mostly uninteresting, like these. Skip this, which is a shame considering some good video work is in the mix. — *HV*

Louis Fratino, “Metropolitan” (2019) (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Louis Fratino, “Metropolitan” (2019)

The one-room show by Louis Fratino in the main exhibition makes the case for the artist’s work as a dialogue with a larger history of representation and the “other.” In this painting he showcases the intimate world of a Brooklyn gay bar, which comes across as sweet, lively, and lovingly rendered. The connections you can see between Fratino’s paintings and works by others in the same gallery, including Bhupen Khakhar’s “Fisherman in Goa” (1985) and Filippo de Pisis’s “Nudo maschile (Male nude)” (1927), is a nice touch, but without clear curatorial direction the connections feel more superficial than they were probably intended to be — are they in dialogue? Do they feel a kinship? It’s all very unresolved. Fratino’s “An Argument” (2021) is also a standout, and points to a direction I hope he continues to pursue. Now, if only Fratino would stop painting the same “types” and demonstrate more of the diversity of a community he clearly is a part of. — *HV*

Lauren Halsey, “keepers of the krown” (2024) (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Lauren Halsey, “keepers of the krown” (2024)

I’ve been conflicted about LA-based artist Lauren Halsey’s work since **her rooftop installation at the Metropolitan Museum** last year. Repurposing Egyptian or what can be termed “Oriental” imagery and combining it with Hollywood-inspired takes on ancient Egypt, Halsey uses SWANA imagery in much the same way so many other Western artists repurpose it for their own objectives. That history of appropriation may be complicated, but as SWANA people we’re used to having our visuals appropriated by other communities and to seeing its context and intellectual content deracinated — and it can be very frustrating.

I think Halsey is doing something different, so I continued to ponder what that could be. Last year, I was speaking to artist Shellyne Rodriguez and I brought up the Halsey works, trying to understand how non-SWANA people may understand the images differently. She explained to me, in her deeply pensive way, about how Egyptian imagery is “part of the Black imagination,” and how those visuals, which historically may have been channeled through patriarchal structures, are often a fruitful place for Black Americans

to dream. It occurred to me during our conversation that much of the Black diaspora that emerged as the result of the transatlantic Slave trade are often allotted a present without a past, meaning history and a connection to a place they're "from," while SWANA people are given the reverse — we are allotted whole curatorial departments without presents, hence the extensive "Near East" and ancient Egyptian departments at museums, which disallow those histories to continue into the present. That strange reversal, which neither group had much to do with creating, sets up a dynamic of conflict, as we saw last year with the **bizarre Cleopatra docudrama** produced by Jada Pinkett Smith and the anger that resulted on all sides. When one group of people are allotted a history without a present, and another is allotted a present without a past, conflict is sure to arise. — *HV*

Omar Mismar, "Two unidentified lovers in a mirror" (2023) (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Omar Mismar, "Two unidentified lovers in a mirror" (2023)

This Lebanese artist's mosaic works are very much of the moment and deal with the complex nexus of time periods, identities, and material realities that Beirut currently represents. When I was in Lebanon in 2019, the market was awash with looted artifacts,

including ancient mosaics that resemble the format and style of what Mismar has produced, so that nod to geopolitical realities really works in this series. Using a traditional format to monumentalize moments of heroism, like the men who guarded an archeological museum in Syria during the civil war ("Ahmad and Akram Protecting Hercules," 2019–20), "Two unidentified lovers in a mirror" (2023) is a beautiful rendering of the layered oppression queer people contend with throughout history. The obfuscation of the tesserae in the faces of the embracing men gives the work a sexual charge that lingers and makes you wonder about what else may be hidden underneath. *— HV*

Installation view of *Italians Everywhere* (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Italian Everywhere, by Sofia Gotti and Adriano Pedrosa

What a fascinating idea this is. The curators use Lina Bo Bardi's celebrated **modernist exhibition display structures that were designed for the São Paulo Museum of Art**, where Biennale curator Pedrosa is the artistic director, to display works by Italian artists who migrated elsewhere, becoming an integral part of local communities and nations.

The suggestion is that by reflecting that migration, Italians will recognize the generosity of other countries that embraced Italians, and reciprocate it, or acknowledge it at the very least. The works themselves are impressive, but in a windowless warehouse — Bo Bardi's structures were designed for an elevated space with glass walls — they're sometimes hard to concentrate on. Also, the transparency of the stands and the display grids makes the whole selection feel more like art storage than exhibition. I don't think the execution works as smoothly as it could have, but I still think this concept is brilliant. Bravo for holding up a mirror to Italian society, while teaching us about Italian heritage worldwide. — *HV*

Mariana Telleria, "Dios es inmigrante (God Is an Immigrant)" (2017/23) (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Mariana Telleria, "Dios es inmigrante (God Is an Immigrant)" (2017/23) at Giardini

A clear reference to the masts of European ships that helped colonize the Americas, these slender forms also suggest the Christian cross, antennas of some sort, and/or an armature for a larger structure. The sculpture by artist Mariana Telleria was first installed by the port of Buenos Aires, where immigrants would historically enter the

country, but this iteration broadens the scope of the piece — and situated here you can't help but consider Venice's own naval heritage and its role in looting Constantinople and other realms during its centuries-long reign as a center of global finance and culture. — *HV*

Works by Yinka Shonibare and Claire Fontaine at the Arsenale entrance (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic*)

Yinka Shonibare and Claire Fontaine

Yinka Shonibare's "Refugee Astronaut VIII" and Claire Fontaine's "Stranieri Ovunque (Autoritratto), Foreigners Everywhere (Self-portrait)" are paired up as the very the first works visitors see at the Arsenale, the former shipping and naval yard that serves as one of two primary venues for the international exhibition. Both are from 2024 but built from an existing body of work around the theme of foreignness. Fontaine, the name of the collective made up of Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill, has been producing the "Foreigners Everywhere" phrase in neon lights since 2004, which ultimately became the namesake for this year's Biennale theme.

Meanwhile, Shonibare's *Refugee Astronaut* series comes to life with a 2024 version where the astronauts tote their backpacks of goods directly into the Arsenale. As the **artist said in 2019**, "What you have here is a nomadic astronaut just trying to find somewhere that's still habitable" in the face of climate change. The astronaut installed at the Biennale marches inward from the entrance, as if guiding visitors into the cavernous world of the Arsenale. Most visitors will have paid as much as 30 EUR (about 32 USD) to get in, and it was hard not to see the entrance works in the context of **Italy's efforts to hinder immigration to the country**. The use of long-existing art in newly commissioned forms for the Biennale feels like a statement in itself, a reminder that this theme is nothing new — it's just given new light for the uniquely privileged crowd that is able to visit. — *AX Mina*

Claire Fontaine, "Stranieri Ovunque (Autoritratto), Foreigners Everywhere (Self-portrait)" (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Claire Fontaine, "Stranieri Ovunque (Autoritratto), Foreigners Everywhere (Self-portrait)"

This was one of the most hollow works at the Biennale this year. A banal phrase crafted in neon to make its meaning extra meaningless, like so many neon phrases nowadays (thanks to all the artists who have overused this medium). The fact that this trite work gets any play demonstrates how bankrupt the contemporary art world can be, and that the curator is playing with clichés rather than seeking out something new. And the attempts to intellectualize this slogan to make it seem relevant is truly sad — like you-peaked-in-grad-school-and-think-people-still-care-about-your-intellectualizing-of-other-peoples-pain sad. — *HV*

Pacita Abad, "Filipinas in Hong Kong" (1995) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Pacita Abad, "Filipinas in Hong Kong" (1995)

Having just seen the late Pacita Abad's work at **Eric Firestone Gallery's survey of the Godzilla Asian American Arts Network**, it was a treat to see "Filipinas in Hong Kong" in person at the Venice Biennale. Hailing from Batanes, Philippines, Abad passed away in 2004. Since then her name and recognition in the art world have only grown, resulting in a celebrated **traveling retrospective and catalog**. This 1995 work is made of

acrylic on stitched and padded canvas. It caught my eye in the way it highlights the vast inequalities of Hong Kong, with brand names like Chanel and Versace up top amid the city's famous skyscrapers. Down below are the work's eponymous figures, gathered together to sing, shop, and pass the time.

These are scenes I've seen countless times in the city, and it's a well documented **Sunday activity for Filipina domestic workers**. "Filipinas" is rich and detailed, and a close look at the stitching makes me want to wrap myself in the world that Abad created. Her recognition in the international art world is long overdue, and I only wish she was alive to celebrate with us. — *AXM*

Miniature ceramic creatures by Juana Marta Rodas (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Juana Marta Rodas, ceramic miniatures

The late Guaraní ceramicist Juana Marta Rodas studied under her mother and grandmother in traditional methods before developing her own world of whimsical and imaginative creatures. In one pair of untitled miniatures, a little frog-like creature smiles

at visitors, while another — resembling a little armadillo with an aardvark head — curls into itself in a protective posture. In her series *The Musicians*, the figures look like little elves or **duende**. For most of them, the instruments they play aren't visible, but I like to imagine they're holding wind instruments and shakers in their tiny hands. As Paraguayan author Ticio Escobar wrote for the exhibition text, Rodas's works "reject the large-scale formats of conventional pots." In a Biennale filled with large, bold statement works, I'd add that the artist has posthumously rejected the large-scale formats of biennial art. These are treasures to crouch down and appreciate. — *AXM*

Brett Graham, "Wastelands" (2024) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Brett Graham, "Wastelands" (2024)

The undulating surface of Brett Graham's "Wastelands" (2024) initially looked to me like a brain perched atop a wagon, its arms reaching out to viewers. This striking sculpture by the New Zealand artist shows a *pātaka*, or architectural structure on poles traditionally used by Māori for storage, on wheels to represent movement and migration. The undulations are eels, a traditional food source.

The title references the **1858 Waste Lands Act**, which declared that "it shall be lawful for the Governor in Council from time to time to make and revoke regulations … for the settling of all disputes and differences relating or incident to the sale, letting, disposal, or occupation of the waste lands of the Crown," among other powers. The act effectively allowed the government to drain wetlands to be used for agriculture, thus destroying traditional swamplands, now legally designated as wastelands, used by Māori.

With this context in mind, I took a second look at "Wastelands." The arms began to appear more like an embrace, toward the lands that could be, the eels that feed and nourish the ecosystem, and whatever world we've been moving into since 1858. — *AXM*

Installation view of Kiluanji Kia Henda, "A Espiral do Medo" ("The Spiral of Fear") (2022) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Meditations on Fear* (2022)

Among the most beautiful architectural elements in the city of Venice are the window burglar bars, which both protect and, in characteristic Venetian manner, add some style

to the homes up and down the canals. Many cities around the world have these bars, including Luanda, the capital of Angola.

Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda's nine-photo series, titled *The Geometric Ballad of Fear*, depicts various patterns of fences from around his country atop landscape images. While the photos make an aesthetic statement of their own, they're best seen in conversation with "A Espiral do Medo" ("The Spiral of Fear"), an iron sculpture composed of actual metal railings from the Angolan capital. They are arranged by height in a spiral, from about knee high to more than six feet tall, with their rust and rot visible. Presented in these forms, it's easy to notice how the arrangement of shapes in these fences — ovals, diamonds, and circles — serves to aestheticize the literal structural divisions present in Angolan society, and much of the world. — *AXM*

Installation view of Bouchra Khalili, *Constellations of Migration* (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic)*

Bouchra Khalili, *Constellations of Migration*

At heart, constellations are the way we ascribe meaning to random assortments of stars in the sky. We imagine bears, dragons, and scorpions across a skyscape that existed long before human imagination.

French-Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili's *The Constellations* series creates constellations from migration journeys by refugees and stateless individuals from places like Northern Africa, Southwest Asia, and South Asia. Dotted lines connect cities like Torino, Alicante, and Beni-Mellal, or Milan, Marseille, and Annaba, each of them reflecting movements back and forth and around these continents. The resulting images, rendered as white lines on blue silkscreen, look like star charts.

By themselves, these illustrations would largely serve to prettify arduous journeys, without allowing visitors to understand the complex series of decisions and chance occurrences that enable such a large geographic spread in the first place. Khalili avoids this trap by presenting eight video interviews she conducted in order to construct these charts, each showing a hand drawing journeys on a map and the stories behind them. Together with the videos, the illustrations remind us that the human world of borders is just as imagined as the constellations in the sky, albeit enforced through laws and militaries. — *AXM*

Iván Argote, “Paseo” (2022) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Iván Argote, “Paseo” (2022)

The mesmerizing simplicity of Colombian artist Iván Argote’s “Paseo,” which means “a long walk” or “stroll,” references, I believe, an actual decolonial story. In the video work, a statue of Christopher Columbus from Madrid’s Plaza de Colón is placed on the back of a truck and carted around the city. The camera follows from the truck’s cab, giving us a view of the city with the statue at center. It’s an absurd fiction that reminded me of the **Columbus statue in Mexico City’s Paseo de la Reforma**, taken down and replaced with a monument to Indigenous women.

I wish the Biennale had included a little more of Argote’s work to better contextualize it, as so much of his oeuvre plays with ideas of monumentality and public space. His ***Turistas*** series involved placing Indigenous ponchos on colonial figures in Spanish-colonized cities like Bogotá and Los Angeles, and in his “**Levitate**” project, he replicated the Flaminio Obelisk in Rome’s Piazza del Popolo, installing it sideways on the ground, rather than vertically, and hanging it from two cranes at different angles. — *AXM*

Bárbara Sánchez-Kane, “Prêt-À-Patria” (2021) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Bárbara Sánchez-Kane, “Prêt-À-Patria” (2021)

It was surprisingly difficult to photograph “Prêt-À-Patria,” Mexican artist Bárbara Sánchez-Kane’s fiberglass and steel sculpture that leaps forth into the vaunted ceiling of the Arsenale. Three figures lined up in military dress march upward, with a golden flagpole that joins them passing from anus to mouth to create a towering sculpture. The title plays with the French *prêt-à-porter*, or ready-to-wear, and the Spanish-language word *patria*, which means homeland. In so doing, it makes a clear statement about military, land, and power.

As I circled the work, I realized why it was so hard to photograph: it can’t be viewed from a single angle. When approached directly, the figures look flayed or impaled, gazing upward to the heavens. From the side, they look more like a human caterpillar, ready to learn and consume in hierarchical fashion. A circular red carpet adds a touch of elegance to the work, but also creates a natural boundary that prevents visitors from getting too close to it — without this boundary, I can only imagine how many people would be adding themselves at the bottom of the sequence of figures, joining in the feast. — *AXM*

Aravani Art Project, “Diaspore” (2024) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Aravani Art Project, “Diaspore” (2024)

“Diaspore,” the luminous mural peeking through columns at the Arsenale, immediately caught my eye from far away. In bold, bright colors, trans feminine figures intermix with flowers, plants, and abstract shapes that capture tremendous positive energy and the spirit of transitioning and working across gender. The mural is produced by Aravani Art Project, an art collective with transgender and cisgender women at the helm that focuses on **creating public art for trans communities in India**. Because of the specific architecture of the building, it’s not actually possible to see the mural in full. It wraps in a gentle curve at a section of the Arsenale supported by multiple columns, which means viewers need to move and navigate through the piece to fully experience it.

Having seen photos of the Aravani Art Project’s murals in India, where community is such a key focus, I was left wondering who this mural is for, tucked away as it is in the confines of the Biennale venue — but I was also so glad to see it, as one of the few explicitly trans works in the international exhibition. As the collective writes in an

online statement, “The visibility of the transgender figure has begun to disrupt long-held beliefs about gender and the ways we organize our lives around categories of gender.” — *AXM*

Karimah Ashadu, “Machine Boys” (2024) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Karimah Ashadu, “Machine Boys” (2024)

In 2022, the city of Lagos banned *okada*, or motorcycle taxis, out of safety concerns. At the same time, **it left thousands of drivers out of work**. Karimah Ashadu, trained as a painter, developed “Machine Boys” to bring us into the world of okada drivers. The film is shot like scenes from *The Fast and the Furious*, with close-ups of the bikes and men riding in circles and figure eights while revving their engines. While ostensibly a study of masculinity and patriarchal expectations, it also centers precarity. “I’ve financed my education to higher institution,” says one rider, pointing to the revenue made possible by this line of work. “I am my own boss,” says another, using the oft-cited reason for going into freelance and independent work. In just under nine minutes, the film offers

only a small glimpse into these men's lives and motivations, but in so doing, it shares a perspective on okada that merges identity, gender, and livelihood. — *AXM*

Charmaine Poh, "What's softest in the world rushes and runs over what's hardest in the world" (2024) (photo AX Mina/*Hyperallergic)*

Charmaine Poh, "What's softest in the world rushes and runs over what's hardest in the world" (2024)

The delicate cinematography of Singapore artist Charmaine Poh's 14-minute film is a tender examination of queer family in a country with **changing laws and norms around LGBTQ+ identity**. Poh's film largely focuses on hands — hands holding little toes, hands kneading dough. These lyrical images are mixed with the realities of trying to raise a family without legal recognition — what happens if one parent dies, and the other is not legally a parent to their child?

It wasn't until 2022 that **Singapore's parliament decriminalized sex between men**, but it issued a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to heterosexual norms. "I definitely consider starting a family as a queer person to be an act of resistance," the

narrator says. “We just didn’t know the method to do it.” Poh shows the possibilities of queer and intergenerational family even under these limiting conditions, while leaving unresolved the future for families without the legal protections that marriage affords. — *AXM*

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