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The Unmissable Highlights of Christine Macel's 2017 Venice Biennale

"Viva Arte Viva" eschews epic overtures for intimate detail, but its most powerful moments linger in the memory.

by Andrew Goldstein

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The curator Christine Macel titled her 2017 Venice Biennale "Viva Arte Viva" as a way of illustrating her intention to place art in the middle of life—see what she did there?—and walking through the show you can start to see what, exactly, she means by that. This is not so much the capital-L Life of childbirth, sex, death, and what comes next; Macel's show is geared more to the lowercase-l life of going to work in the morning, noting ephemeral glimpses of beauty in the world around us, collaborating on worthwhile things, getting a little crazy after work perhaps, and then doing some light housework before going to bed.

While not a sustained *cri de coeur* in the same overt way as Okwui Enwezor's previous biennale, its power lies in its closely observed details and passages of splendor—it's like a collection of short stories, in other words, not an epic novel. There are, of course, some riveting, impactful moments in this show that visitors will take home in their memory. Here are six of those highlights from the show.

DAWN KASPER

The Sun, The Moon, and The Stars, 2017



Immediately upon entering the Giardini portion of "Arte Viva Arte," you find several artworks dedicated to artists sleeping or in other stages of active rest, ready to receive inspiration—the state of *otium* Macel describes as "a space of productive idleness and mind work." Smack in the middle of these is the American artist Dawn Kasper, who Macel invited to reprise her performance *This Could Be Something If I Let It* from the 2012 Whitney Biennial, in which she set up her studio in that museum's galleries for three months, making art and talking to the inquisitive visitors who

stopped to chat. Since this is Venice, however, the piece (retitled *The Sun, The Moon, and The Stars*, and part of her ongoing project “The Nomadic Studio Practice”) has grown grander in the intervening five years: now, Kasper, whose once short hair has grown long and rangy, will be working inside the exhibition for six months. It’s also more complicated, considering that the artist needed to obtain a visa to work in Italy, which she describes as a “frustrating experience” that included so much paperwork she decided to incorporate it into her performance as a kind of research piece on the tribulations immigrants go through when researching visas.

On the Biennale’s opening day, Kasper was playing Bessie Smith’s “Empty Bed Blues” on her record player—“that starts out the day for me,” she says—and was full of nervous excitement about the project ahead. She had learned a few tricks from her Whitney stay, so this time she brought a whole box of extra chairs, a comfy couch, and a recliner that turns into a bed. Recording equipment is arrayed on tables around the large gallery she was given, and she hopes to record an album of new music with her bandmates Kelly Coates and Kathleen Kim, two Whitney collaborators who followed her to Venice (along with one of their boyfriends, who helpfully is a music producer), and also a solo album of her own compositions. A live performance in the space took place for VIPs the day before the opening, and “it’s sounding pretty well,” she says.

She’s also brought a slew of art supplies and photo-developing equipment, and is planning to hang the art she makes on the walls. “Some days I’m am going to stare at the wall and freak out about what I’m making,” she says, adding that the music helps her relax and “let go enough to let the work be what it wants to be.” In the meantime, Kasper—who is sleeping in an apartment a short walk away from the Biennale—is getting settled into her new environs. “It’s like a new lover—we’re trying to get to know each [other], me and this room,” she says. “I’m just trying to appreciate the experience.”