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The Venice Biennale

Arsenale and Giardini venues, Venice, Italy, 13 May–26 November 2017.

Once every 10 years there is a golden year for contemporary art lovers like myself, as the Venice Biennale, documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany, and Skulptur Projekte Münster all coincide. This will be the first time we have tried all three as a family, so I wonder, can you still have a holiday with culture at its heart with a 5-year-old?

We started during May half-term with raised eyebrows and 'good luck with that' expressions from playground compatriots as we headed off for part one in Venice. The 57th Venice Biennale is breathtaking in its scale, with two large curated shows at its heart, featuring 120 different artists, 86 National Pavilions, and numerous other shows spread around the islands of Venice. In previous years we had flitted around the shows without a care, but with a 5-year-old I worried how much, if any of it, we could do.

WOW FACTOR

La Biennale is one event that all artists want to be part of, which might explain why they raise their game to try to stand out from the crowd, this year with impressive results.

AUSTRIA. Brigitte Kowanz, Erwin Wurm. 57th International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia, Viva Arte Viva. Photo by: Francesco Galli. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia.



Vajiko Chachkiani in the Georgian pavilion has brought a large peasants' country house to Venice and it is raining inside, constantly, for 6 months. It is a truly multi-sensory experience with an amazing smell as the ancient wood becomes wet and begins to decay. Takahiro Iwasaki in the Japanese pavilion has gone miniature with beautiful tiny cranes made of cotton, lifting and manhandling a collection of books. You can also become part of the miniature artwork by sticking your head up through the floor (the visitors upstairs politely say 'hello' as your head appears). Next door, Geoffrey Farmer has removed the walls of the Canadian pavilion and placed a 30 ft fountain in the middle. My son was instantly entranced, as we all were. Art, to me, does not need to be complicated and you don't need a degree to appreciate it, just plenty of (a 5-year-old's) enthusiasm and an open mind.

MY TURN?

OK, I know we are British and dislike audience participation, but when you are a child you don't have these hang-ups and, with so much to participate in, it's very easy to get involved. Spain and the Netherlands have created huge grandstands for you to sit on and become part of the artwork, while for Turkey the stand is the art, with areas caged off (quite a poignant piece about immigration). But our favourite is Erwin Wurm for Austria. Outside is an upended 7 tonne truck (left) for visitors to ascend and enter the viewing platform. Inside the pavilion he has a number of 'performative one minute sculptures' to stand on, or climb over, or into. The main piece is a caravan that, among other feats of contortion, allows you to stick your bottom out the side. Here my 5-year-old's enthusiasm and laughter were infectious, and soon the serious audience of art lovers were all joining in.

PLAY TIME

In the heart of the monumental curated exhibition in the Arsenale, which must have been a mile long, my son and I sat down in the middle of a beautiful tent by Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto. It was painstakingly woven (with a pattern akin to neurones) and suspended from the ceiling. Previously this has been used for meetings by a tribe from the Amazon, but today it's just for us to play in. Further on we found a three-screen video artwork by the Turkish artist Nevin Aladag. It was filmed in a children's



SINGAPORE. Dapunta Hyang: *Transmission of Knowledge*. 57th International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia, Viva Arte Viva. Photo by: Italo Rondinella. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia.

playground with musical instruments. On the first screen, a violin has been attached to the roundabout playing chords against the bow once a revolution. On the next screen a drum rolls down a hill, and the final screen had a tambourine rocking back and forth on a bouncing horse. Overall it made a beautiful tune, but was also very funny.

SIZE CAN BE EVERYTHING

The Italian pavilion over the last few Biennales hasn't ever really excited me, but this year was another story. Giorgio Andreotta has filled a vast room with scaffolding, making it initially dark and uninviting, but at one end is another grandstand that lets you look at the top of this strange structure, where you discover it is covered in water, giving you a perfect reflection of the beautiful, ancient roof above you as far as the eye can see. Nearby, Lisa Reihana for New Zealand has created an epic, panoramic film maybe 20 meters long that fills a vast space, with numerous vignettes recreating Captain Cook's men arriving on the Pacific islands 200 years ago. As the film unfolds it explains how they interacted with the natives. It is a very powerful reminder of our shared history.

This year the UK is represented by septuagenarian sculptor Phyllida Barlow, an artist who has remained largely forgotten and under the radar for the last 20 years while we obsessed about the YBAs. Now she has been 'rediscovered' and has produced a monumental show in the Giardini. Outside we find large painted concrete 'lollipops' on sticks; inside, the space is congested

with huge sculptures bisecting and dividing the rooms, reaching high up into the roof. The physicality of the work makes you feel uncomfortable and exhilarated, and it appears to be made of rubbish, recycled old wooden batons, cardboard boxes, and chunks of cement and polystyrene, all brightly coloured. It makes the building feel small and almost as though you are not visiting an art exhibition, but instead are a voyeur, stumbling upon something that has been there forever and you are having a sneak around.

So can you centre a holiday to La Biennale with a 5-year-old? Yes you can and we all enjoyed ourselves. We had made the conscious decision to stay on the Lido so had the beach a 5-minute walk away for 'non-art days'. We considered the *vaporetti* (water buses) essential for getting around town and they are a must for children with a fascination for all forms of transport. Most contemporary art is very accessible to children; my son would often point out details that we had not noticed and was just as enthusiastic as we were. His highlights of what we had seen each day were often the same as ours, although he loved taking charge of the map and ticking off what we had seen and where we were going next. I think we all came back mentally and physically refreshed. Roll on the next two chapters of this glorious year ...

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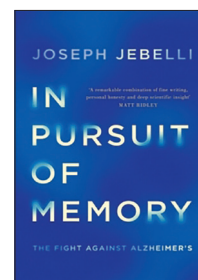
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In Pursuit of Memory: the Fight Against Alzheimer's

Joseph Jebelli

John Murray, 2017, HB, 320pp, £18.99, 978-1473635739



TANGLED UP IN HOPE

Joseph Jebelli is a researcher at the Institute of Neurology at University College London, working on rats genetically programmed to develop Alzheimer's disease — specifically, on immune stimulation of microglial cells in the hope that this will make some contribution to an eventual cure.

He begins with an account of the first formal description of the disease by Alois Alzheimer in 1906, whose presentation to a psychiatric convention was met with a distinctly uninterested response from his psychoanalytically inclined audience. His work was rewarded in 1910 when Kraepelin, in his *Handbook of Psychiatry*, used the term 'Alzheimer's disease' for the first time.

Moving on to describe the major research findings to date, we read about the discovery of plaques and tangles, the two microanatomical hallmarks of Alzheimer's, and the later discovery that acetylcholine activity was diminished in the brains of sufferers. Further work elucidated the significance of beta-amyloid, bolstered by the finding of a single nucleotide mutation on chromosome 21 in familial early-onset Alzheimer's, which causes the production of amyloid precursor protein (APP). The three overlapping but competing theories of causation include the beta-amyloid cascade theory, which contends that the deposition of amyloid is the primary precipitant; the apoprotein 4 theory, which focuses on the role of impaired glucose uptake in diseased brains; and the tau theory, tau (tubule-associated unit) being a protein found in tangles that disrupts intra-