

Out of Hours Exhibition

STATE OF THE UNION — THE HOME NATIONS AT THE 56TH VENICE BIENNALE

La Biennale di Venezia,

Giardini and Arsenale venues, Venice

9 May 2015 — 22 Nov 2015

www.labiennale.org

In the middle of the vernissage for the Venice Biennale I received an email from my sister: 'I saw the BBC article about the British pavilion which sounded like it was just going for shock value, but what was it really like?'

It's not hard to see where these opinions about the Sarah Lucas show come from. As you walk along the main boulevard of the Giardini and approach the pavilion you are confronted at the top of the steps by *Gold Cup Maradona* reclining leisurely with a 20ft phallus in bright yellow. All the walls are painted in the same colour and in each room naked, plaster figures cast from the waist down (literally topless) recline on tables, or in one case, on a chest freezer, with single cigarettes poking out of whichever orifice is on show. All very 'shocking' but, as ever, there is more to the show than meets the eye.

Lucas came to prominence in the early 1990s as one of the Young British Artists (YBAs), good friends with Tracey Emin, they were renowned as much for their hard living as their art. Her art at the time was irreverent and challenged male stereotypes. In *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), she represented a naked woman lying on a table by placing two fried eggs and a kebab on an old table.

The Biennale, in its 120th year, is as big as ever with 89 countries displaying national pavilions, 44 collateral events, and two large curated shows by the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor. So, what about these headline grabbing, topless nudes? Lucas calls them her 'Muses', and they are casts of her closest female friends, including her gallerist, Sadie Coles.

Each cast is unique and full of blemishes from the process, with protruding seams where the different bits of bandage join. They seem provocative, but as you study them you notice their casual poses, not in the throes of sex, but sitting on a chair as if chatting, or reclining on the table. Slowly you realise they are very gentle, affectionate portraits of her friends. And then there are the cigarettes

sticking out of belly buttons, bottoms, or vaginas. She tells us she put them there for titillation, mostly. I think I would agree, and this is a YBA after all, even if she has turned 50, because this is what we have come to expect isn't it? They are distracting and irreverent as ever but they catch your attention and hold it, adding a light-hearted edge to what in places is an exhibition about female empowerment.

In '... *The Rest is Smoke*,' photographer Helen Sear's collateral event for Wales, she returns to a small beech wood near her home over the course of a year. Photographs and moving images are combined to form her central video piece *Company of Trees*. The trees are branded with forester's numbers and these flash up at you as a little red riding hood figure wanders around the forest while the seasons quickly change before your eyes. You feel transported from Venice into a very British fairytale setting. In another video piece *Altar*, a black and white vignette shows blue tits feeding on an altar-like block of seeds, flying in and out until nothing is left. We are voyeurs of this event, the behaviour of the birds the same as it has always been through the passage of time, and will be long after we have died.

One of the joys of the Biennale is exploring the palazzi not normally open to the public. One such space is the Palazzo Fontana, with fading frescoes on the wall and a stunning view over the Grand Canal. This is not necessarily where you would expect to hear a Robert Burns poem sung by reggae singer Ghetto Priest, accompanied by classical musicians from the Scottish Ensemble, but this is exactly what Graham Fagen has done. The haunting film forms the central piece in his show *Scotland + Venice*. For Fagen, growing up in the west of Scotland, it was hard not to be aware of Burns and he came across his poem *The Slaves Lament* written in 1792, a work emphasising the



Sarah Lucas, *Gold Cup Maradona*, British Pavilion 2015. Photo by Cristiano Corte © British Council. Sarah Lucas' British Council commission is at La Biennale di Venezia from 9 May until 22 November 2015. www.britishcouncil.org/visualarts.

appalling hurt of the displaced, trafficked, and enslaved. Fagen has created a haunting interpretation of the poem with Priest's soulful voice and the classical musicians emphasising its sadness. Each musician was filmed individually and they are shown on separate screens, side by side in the front room of the exhibition. It is a mesmerising piece, echoing around the peaceful palazzo, resonating down the centuries the pain and suffering of the slaves then and now.

So how was the state of the Union during a hot election week in Venice? Away from the political and media chaos back home you will be relieved to hear it was in a healthy condition with just the right amount of sex, nature, and slavery to make waves in the lagoon.

La Biennale continues all over Venice until 22 November, there is no better excuse for a long weekend in the Lagoon.

Will Norman,
GP Partner & Trainer, The Avenue Surgery,
Cirencester.

E-mail: willnorman@doctors.org.uk

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X686353