



Art

# The 2022 Venice Biennale Finds Hope at the End of the World

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*Installation view of Simone Leigh, Brick House, 2019, with works by Belkis Ayón in the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, "The Milk of Dreams," 2022. Photo by Roberto Marossi. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.*

How does one imagine a future beyond the end of the world? This is curator Cecilia Alemani's guiding question in "The Milk of Dreams," the main exhibition of the 59th Venice Biennale. The exhibition emerges in perilous times following the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, and is only the second instance the Biennale has been postponed; the first was in 1944 due to World War II. For the war-torn and weary crowd, "The Milk of Dreams" emerges as an extremely physical and imaginative exhibition that emphasizes the work of women and nonbinary artists as a way to decenter the influence and effect of Western masculine thought.

"The Milk of Dreams" engages with what remains possible after the world has ended and includes a remarkable display of paintings and sculptures. The title shares its name with Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington's fantasy book for children in which, as Alemani described in the press preview, "life is reinvented through the prism of imagination and one is allowed to transform and become other to oneself." Fantasy and metamorphosis are prescribed as ailments to our dying reality and bodies. Alemani, who is the Donald R. Mullen Jr. Director and Chief Curator of High Line Art in New York, brings a deft philosophical hand to her curatorial approach by using theory to contextualize the exhibiting artists' works—giving their practices a rich conceptual foundation, but more importantly, a future. Alemani's use of theory informs the curatorial staging, which includes five gallery "capsules," as she described, that frame the numerous ideas and themes presented in "The Milk of Dreams."

The environment takes center stage across the exhibition spaces. Delcy Morelos's *Earthly Paradise* (2022) is a large-scale, minimalist installation of dirt mixed with cassava flour, cacao powder, and spices. Morelos's use of earth is informed by Andean and Amazonian Amerindian cosmologies that view land as a subject with agency rather than a resource to be terraformed by mankind.

Elsewhere—in one of the many impressive video installations on view—Zheng Bo develops a sexual relationship with nature in *Le Sacre du printemps* (2021), creating a more relational

exchange with the Earth that deprioritizes the human as the singular being. The video features Nordic male dancers gliding up and down against trees in a Swedish forest. Filmed upside down, the work visually alters our perspective of hierarchies between man and nature.

Within the exhibition, technology reminds viewers of the intensities of our bodies and the vulnerabilities of our flesh. Mire Lee's deeply unnerving kinetic sculpture *Endless House: Holes and Drips* (2022) uses a large mechanical device with liquid clay that resembles organs or other fleshy objects revolving across low-tech motors. Over the course of the Biennale, the clay will dry and crack, evoking the body's capacity to bleed, be torn apart, or become seriously maimed.

During the press preview, Alemani explained that her interest in technology was informed by the pandemic. "The world seems to be driven by technological optimism or total automation, but this fracture has been further exacerbated by the pandemic when we realized that our bodies are very fragile and vulnerable," she said. "For when you needed contact with another [person], the only contact that was possible was through a screen; technology [both] connected and separated us."

The gallery capsule "A leaf, a gourd, a shell, a net, a bag, a sling, a sack, a bottle, a pot, a box, a container" includes a stunning array of ethereal metal sculptures by Ruth Asawa that grapples with hard materials and their relationship to the body. Asawa's sculptures, which are made of metal wire rather than wicker, were forged via a basket-weaving technique she learned in Mexico. These deceptively soft sculptures emphasize transformation and Asawa's haunted relationship with Japanese internment camps.

Whenever the weight of reality pulls the audience down, "The Milk of Dreams" lifts us back up through history. The capsule "The Witch's Cradle" does this marvelously through the use of magical realism. Here, Alemani emphasizes that our imaginations are still valuable in how we negotiate our experiences. Several of Carrington's works are included to not only cement

the exhibition title, but also to emphasize the importance of surrealistic visions of fantasy within our actual reality.

“The Witch’s Cradle” also has a surprising inclusion—a video of actress and 20th-century icon Josephine Baker dancing and performing for the camera. By naming Baker as the artist, Alemani understands and restores Baker’s creative agency as an enchanting choreographer and performer. “The Milk of Dreams” is equally interested in repairing the canon as it is invested in the potential future through the work of women artists.

These themes of metamorphosis and women’s agency, though, are signposted in the opening room of the exhibition’s Arsenale portion. Alemani features the powerful pairing of Simone Leigh’s *Brick House* (2019) with prints by the late Afro-Cuban artist Belkis Ayón, who died in 1999. Ayón’s largely monochromatic prints imagine a new world through a matriarchal lens. Her use of the color black both conceals and reveals the artist’s mythologies around Black womanhood in the Caribbean.

A detail of Ayón’s *La Sentencia* (1993) and Chilean artist Celila Vicuña’s painting *Bendígame Mamita* (1977) are displayed on catalogue covers to represent the exhibition’s visual identity. Vicuña’s early paintings, on view at the end of the exhibition’s Giardini locale, place a similar focus on myth-making and fantasy to empower our futures. Their works, alongside so many, remind us that the world is capable of regeneration.

“The Milk of Dreams” runs counter to the doomsday theory that dominates Western consciousness. Scholar Fredric Jameson famously stated that he could imagine the end of the world but not the end of capitalism. Alemani and the exhibition moves beyond apathy to provide a visually rich and layered blueprint for the future to those who still care about the world after it has ended.

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