

DIARY

DISCO INFERNO

April 14, 2010 • Venice • Cathryn Drake

Venice

Left: Artist Tristano Di Robilant and dealer Marilena Bonomo. Right: At the party for Damien Hirst. (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

LAST WEEKEND Venice opened its sleepy eyes to witness a flurry of openings framed, more or less, by the absence of Damien Hirst. Disembarking from the vaporetto on Friday evening in front of the San Stae church, I went straight to the Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo for the inauguration of Tristano Di Robilant's "*Otto Sculture*" (Eight Sculptures). Now a museum of period domesticity and costume, the dusty seventeenth-century palazzo feels as if its residents have just gone out, leaving their shoes next to chairs and bath towels draped over the claw-foot tub.

The translucent glass sculptures, displayed on pedestals in a long central salon with windows at either end, conduct the changing sunlight and undulate like timid phantoms. "Like poetry, these works communicate much with few words," commented the museum's director, Paola Chiapperino. At one end of the room, an amber sculpture inspired by Italian philosopher

Giordano Bruno was composed of three graduated mountain-shaped layers, one inside the other. “It refers to Bruno’s belief in the infinite possibility of other worlds,” Di Robilant said. “The owner of this palazzo, Giovanni Mocenigo, is the one who denounced him as a heretic.” It also just so happens that Mocenigo is the artist’s ancestor.

Just one of a series of coincidences that echoed throughout the weekend. On the way out I met dealer Caterina Tognon. “It’s very interesting to have a gallery in Venice, but also complicated: For long periods there is nothing, and then the whole world is here.” Indeed the Venetian archipelago seems suspended in time, making the anachronistic seem perfectly normal, and the decadent maze of streets, *campi*, and bridges eventually leads everyone to the same place. The next evening all roads led across town to the Palazzo Palumbo Fossati, where the Galleria Michela Rizzo opened Damien Hirst’s exhibition “Death in Venice.”



Left: Art historian Raphael Cuir and Orlan. Right: Jane and Philip Rylands, director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

In the courtyard I was surprised by a group of Pulcinellas, who presumably had arrived from their native Naples. More in context, if not in period, were gentlemen with plumed hats and ladies embellished with flounces and curly wigs. In the middle of it all was Philip Rylands, director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, and his wife Jane. “What a nice party,” she said. “We need more of these. Everybody passes through here but nothing ever seems to happen.” What dominated Hirst’s show upstairs was no surprise: skulls depicted in shimmering acid colors or diamond-dusted silk screens, ten new collages of skulls with human features cut from magazines, dazzling butterfly prints, and a wooden crucifix embellished with pills. “I don’t find these very disturbing,” critic Silvia Moretti Dehò noted. “Maybe it’s because they are too close to contemporary reality, but then perhaps that is the point.”

The afterparty, organized by Antonia Sautter of the annual Doges Ball, was paradise disguised as Dante's Inferno. It just happened to take place at another Palazzo Mocenigo, now the residence of Baronessa Joanita Van Amerongen and American entrepreneur Steve Green. We were greeted in the entrance by red carpets lined with candles. Funereal music set the tone for a scenario featuring a winged devil, like some extra from a Matthew Barney film, caressing a skull and attended by a diabolical-looking dwarf with a skull scepter and two giant masked crows. I imagine this is what a Marc Jacobs party looks like. I ran into the host and we ascended the stairs together. "Andrea Di Robilant thinks he owns this," he said as we passed a Napoleonic statue. He was referring to artist Tristano's brother, who wrote a book about their ancestor, Lucia Memmo Mocenigo, a former resident there and Lord Byron's landlady. Never underestimate the convolutions of lineage and history in this crazy place. Green paused on the landing to sit on a gold throne.



Left: Dealer Paul Stolper and daughters. Right: At the party for Damien Hirst.

The buffet tables were adorned with giant golden serpents and laden with such Venetian delights as pigeon lasagna (hopefully not the same ones that inhabit Piazza San Marco—but then where *else* would they get them?). A female string quartet, all dressed in virginal white period costume with head plumes, played while the devil in ram horns and his dwarf assistant mingled with the guests—an ecumenical mix of minor celebrities, Italian artists, journalists, Orlan and husband Raphael Cuir, and locals, including two female gondoliers and flamboyant pianist Enrique Pérez de Guzmà, who sported a diamond-crusted brooch (he also lives on the palatial floor below). Although the next-door neighbors, Brangelina and Johnny

Depp, in town to film Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Tourist*, were confirmed guests, nobody saw them—and nobody seemed to care much.

Toward the end of the evening, dealer Paul Stolper's daughter Georgia, stripped of her stifling seventeenth-century dress, arrived at my side with her friend Ruth, both of them flushed and panting. "We have to hide—the devil is chasing us!" she said. The surreal *Eyes Wide Shut* vibe grew ever more convincing. On our way out, we watched a Milanese model agency owner, flanked by two towering ingenues, wait for a boat taxi while the blonde and brunette shivered in their minis. Hirst himself seems to be everywhere but Venice these days—reportedly Mexico City that night. Green recounted, "Some guy kept asking me, 'Where is Damien?' So I told him, 'Oh, he's in the other room.' Brad and Johnny were the ones with the black masks—they didn't want to be recognized."

— Cathryn Drake



Left: A group of Pulcinellas. Right: Jeremy Garson and party host Steve Green, the day after.

ALL IMAGES