

Making Worlds Collide from Regents Canal to the Grand Canal

Text by Sophie Wilson

The seed of the idea was sown late one night within the white walls of Wilson Williams, the upcoming gallery space, incongruously (and yet somewhat perfectly) located within a converted Victorian terrace in Hackney. In her continuing quest for world domination and inspired by her connections in the Italian art industry, Director Chiara Williams decided to attend the opening week of the Venice Biennale along with fellow Director Debra Wilson in order to network and promote WW Gallery and its artists. However, as with many projects this dynamic duo is involved with, thoughts soon turned to anarchy and a plan for a guerilla art event was born.

Wilson and Williams got together with another Wilson – Sophie, the self-styled Curatrix and founder of Pharos Gallery, a local art collective whose raison d'être is to champion young artists and enable them to commercialise their work in a less clinical context than that of the usual transactional gallery space. Although Pharos has no permanent home as yet, it, along with WW Gallery is grounded in the grungey environs of the East End scene. With that in mind, the curators decided to collaborate on an exhibition which would preview at WW Gallery then travel onward to Venice. Their aim was to take a little piece of Hackney and explode it onto the world's art stage during the most important week in the industry calendar.

Despite the negative connotations often attached to their Hackney homeland, the curators envisage many similarities between London's East End and the historical capital of Veneto. Both places have canals, are home to a bustling art scene and have, for centuries, attracted bohemians and pleasure seekers to the seedy underbelly beneath the faded elegance. Williams sourced a corresponding domestic space to WW Gallery in a private palazzo and the plan to storm the Biennale opening week with a satellite show of London artists was complete.

Williams, herself half Venetian/half Londoner was conceived in Venice and born in London and this hybrid heroine assembled a group of artists and documenters to retrace those elemental steps with her in a journey from one capital to the other. This all-female team will be on site in Venice to make and record site-specific and in-situ works as well as hang and invigilate the show and physically transport or 'mule' the work along the London/Venice route. The 'Travelling Light' concept was borne out of the practicalities of undertaking this journey, which dictated that works had to be light in weight, easily transportable and quick to install, hang or perform. After researching suitcases, weights and baggage allowance, the curators decided that the only way to practically resolve the

show was to instigate a dogma, a set of rules to which all submissions had to adhere. The curatorial remit became a sort of 'wash & go' idea, limiting the size of work submitted. The rules were as follows: all artworks had to be deliverable by post, fit into a standard post office box or bag complying with 'large letter' posting class and the overall dimensions of the packaging had to be max 353 x 250mm, max 25mm depth, max 750g weight, including all packaging. The curators quickly realised that the possibilities of what could emerge from a large letter envelope/box were almost limitless and would challenge artists to interrogate and modify their existing practices.

Initially, the call was disseminated amongst the artists represented by Pharos and WW. However, as the Travelling Light phenomenon began to gain momentum, the curators decided to widen the call and open it up both in the UK and internationally. The fact that the work had to be posted meant that it would therefore start its journey, not simply in London, but in the home or studio of each artist submitting. Soon, artworks began to fly in from all over the globe, having begun their journeys in locations such as USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Russia, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, France, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Greece, Wales, Scotland and of course, England. With their varying colours, shapes, watermarks and stamps, the packaging of these envelopes alone told a story. Spoilt for choice (and with the package-filled gallery beginning to feel like an over-indulgent Christmas morning), the curators went about picking their way through the 200+ submissions. The finished result comprises 58 works selected from artists living all over the globe.

Due to the restrictive nature of the physical brief, Wilson, Williams and Wilson decided not to place conceptual limits on the submission, rather, the curatorial focus was open to interpretation. This could mean that artists respond only to the practical constraints themselves, or additionally to the idea of the work being posted/transported, the concept of lightness or light or the wider contexts of the two cities in which the exhibitions are held.

Many artists chose the history of the route from London to Venice as inspiration: Ruth Pringle's *Landlocked* overtly references the fact that this was an established trade link for the exportation of silk, grain, spices and exotic produce when Venice was a major maritime power and centre of commerce. Similarly, Lorraine Clarke's *Per Diversas Mundi Partes* draws inspiration from when 'La Serenissima' was at the apogee of its maritime and mainland power. This work references the rich exchange of ideas and cultures, the intellectual and physical pleasures, extravagance, indulgence, revelry and hedonism of the period. A 15th century list of precious trade items is symbolized by the contents of 12 transparent packages.

One of the artists who will be accompanying the curators to Venice is Lucy May. As an in-situ artist, the restrictions on May are different – her work has to fit into her suitcase as she will be personally carrying it with her when she flies to Marco Polo airport, before boarding a boat bound for Venice, along with the rest of the team. May was born in Melaka, which, in the 15th Century was described by Marco Polo as the ‘Venice of the East’ due to its strategic importance in the Straits and flourishing trade and culture. He observed that whosoever had control of Melaka “held Venice by the throat”. May’s bronze sculpture *The Throat of Venice* takes this metaphor literally, deriving its form from an anatomical wax model of a tongue and throat dissection. Her use of visceral, sinewy forms coupled with opulent gilding and a sense of baroque excess is intended to evoke associations of gluttony and vulnerability.

This sensuality is also evoked in *Fall Fig Leaves, Farewell to a Flimsy Disguise*. Tumim and Prendergast use decadent Shakespearean colours to echo the fabrics worn by 16th century libertines traversing the passage from London to the ‘pleasure capital of Europe’, lured by the promise of the glamorous courtesans, fabled to be the most beautiful in the world at that time. David Rusbatch’s *Venice Viagra Bars* consider the historical opulence of Venice and function as an ode to the “city of love” - a haven for debauchery ahead of its time. Meanwhile, his sound piece *English in Venice* comments on a more recent kind of touristic phenomenon and the perception of the English experience of ‘culture’ abroad.

For other artists, the journey was interpreted in a conceptual sense: the abstract cartography of Oona Grimes’ prints escapes its own boundaries, going its own way. Evy Jokhova’s sculptural piece allows the narrative to fly from the book on butterfly wings. In an ecstatic upward burst, the words, concepts and associations become free from their physical constraints in a truly metaphysical Joy Ride. In a tragic echo of this once dynamic function of text, Amy McKenny’s *Downfall – Learning, Memory and Conceptual Processes* illustrates how wisdom and information once poured forth, however as we try to make sense of the words between the repeatedly punctured holes, we are unable to find a coherent statement: “The sad fate of textbooks that go out of date.” (Walter Kintsch, author of *Learning, Memory and Conceptual Processes*). We are left, instead with intangible thought processes, beyond our grasp.

Inspired by the Dadaists’ use of the psychoanalytic technique of Free Association, Boa Swindler’s *Lost Luggage* can be read as a record of the thoughts that are acquired and taken with us when we travel. The images, words or thoughts that pop into our heads either as a daily matter of course or those that appear as a direct result of the things we are seeing or experiencing around us in that moment, are carried with us fleetingly, before being just as easily dropped. In the emotional sense, these thoughts are without baggage.

Contrastingly, the journey undertaken in *My Grandmother's Return to Campo dell'Accademia* by Eleanor Havsteen-Franklin marks a symbolic homecoming for the artist's grandmother, who studied fine art at the Campo dell'Accademia in the 1920s. She reappears in *Travelling Light* by way of a black and white photograph contained within a compact and again through the artistic hand of her granddaughter. This work not only exposes the many generational layers of art history, it resonates with the space in which the Venice show will be hung – the palazzo once housed students of the nearby Academy of Fine Art.

The theme of the 53rd Venice Biennale is 'Making Worlds'. Expanding further on his vision for the Biennale, Director Daniel Birnbaum said "Taking 'worldmaking' as a starting point... allows the exhibition to highlight the fundamental importance of certain key artists for the creativity of successive generations, just as much as exploring new spaces for art to unfold outside the institutional context and beyond the expectations of the art market." (Daniel Birnbaum, Venice Biennale, 53rd International Art Exhibition Press release, 23rd March 2009) This echoes Havsteen-Franklin's reference to those artists that have gone before us and live on in us. And although not part of the official event, *Travelling Light* enacts its own creation in Venice, made up of the artists that both galleries represent and the work that came in to them from all over the globe. The guerilla nature of the exhibition and its location can be said to confound the expectations of the industry, ironically but appropriately bringing it in line with the official theme of the Biennale event.

In their selection of artworks, the three curators often tend towards the subversive, always with an undercurrent of humour. A distinctly politicised, female flavour is strongly detectable in works such as Ingrid Berthon-Moine's audio visual piece *Midriff - Version 1*, where acceptable standards of womanly behavior are challenged through the use of popular culture to comedic effect. Horrified, embarrassed or amused, laughter often ensues as the viewer is unsure what to make of the piece. An alternative and mischievous subversion is Nerys Mathias' *Treasure*, inspired by the escape maps of World War II where servicemen were given cloth maps which could be easily concealed and did not rustle. Mathias perverts this idea to produce a fetishistic image of a man's chest, captured by the female gaze. One also wonders if Jokhova's choice of text for the *Joy Ride* piece was conscious: the back of the book says of the author "Barbara Howell is most interested in feminine cunning, in what women will do to survive, and triumph, often at the expense of men".

Eleanor Mouldsdale is another in-situ artist whose work *Untitled* subverts expectations of women and brings the creative process back under the control of the artist. This work will be brought to the WW venue initially as component parts: it will begin as a piece of fabric and a box of pins. Mouldsdale will sit in the gallery space for the duration of the London

show, inserting the pins into the fabric in sequential order and once it is over, the half made work will be packed into her case and taken to Venice. The process becomes a kind of performance with the prologue taking place in London, the epilogue in Venice. The presence of the artist in the domestic space of the gallery harks back to the days when the home represented a woman's place and recalls a rich history of paintings in which the female subject is captured performing household tasks, delimited by her environment. However, Mouldsdales method forces her into a kind of hypnotic and obsessive trance, driving and empowering her. She is creating this work of her own free will and the finished result will be a large piece, ambitious in scale: what begins as two very functional and everyday items will be transformed into something beautiful.

Picking up on this act of transformation, Chiara Williams' delicate Birth of Venus refers directly to Botticelli's painting of the same name which depicts the goddess emerging, fully formed, from the surf, between the lips of a shell. The frozen egg yolk that sits on a bed of ultramarine pigment alludes to the egg tempera used to create the original painting. The yolk as female body is heavily loaded with sexual and primordial creation connotations, as well as bodily fluids. The inherent narcissism of the piece, which shows two representations of the idealized female body: both actual and in reflection, can be read as a dual commentary both on vanity and holding up the body of the woman for scrutiny. The personal, with specific reference to the feminine, is a motif that runs throughout the show, pointed to by the recurrence of compacts, mirrors and trinkets - items that we tend to keep about our person and take with us when we go on a journey. It seems that we all have the desire to travel light, indeed Nellie Bly, the 19th Century traveller who inspired Julie Cassels' ...To the smallest possible compass, saw the ability to fit all your earthly needs into one suitcase as something to aspire to. This desire is reflected in Cassels' rendering of the work: she has literally liberated the bag from its traditional, bulky form by printing it onto fabric which can be assembled or taken apart quickly and be disassembled to fit the smallest possible space.

However, there are often certain objects that are deemed indispensable and wherever we go, we try to recreate a little piece of our own lives or indeed, make our own world. This might be a book, a newspaper, or a religious icon. Sometimes we do this for nostalgia or remembrance and this idea is hinted at in Phil Ilingworth's Dust, a series of drawings depicting Hollywood stars that have fallen into obscurity as quickly as they were rocketed to fame. Set out as a series of framed 'pictures', they remind us of the photographs of a loved one we might put up on our bedside table whilst away from home.

The objects strewn through the domestic spaces in both London and Venice make the viewer feel as if we have stepped into a room that has just been left: here a crumpled j-cloth, there an abandoned pair of gloves. In other cases, it appears as if the gallery space has been hastily vacated: Sustasa's playful Jihad Hostage Survival Kit takes the form of a

fold away disguise for would be escapees in a hostage situation, comprising matching Jilbab and Hijab, jewel-encrusted glass cutter, wire cutter and screwdrivers. Kate Davis' discarded lemon halves, her burning cigarette and a spilt pool of nail varnish are her remains, the marks of the artist, her traces patiently repeating themselves in London and in Venice, *Still Waiting After All These Years*.

This dichotomy of presence/absence pervades *Travelling Light*. The burning, empty motel rooms of Jarik Jongman's *Phenomena* are imbued with an incandescent energy and enigmatic presences that simultaneously take centre stage and evade being 'seen'. Jessica Shepherd's *Travelling Light: Hong Kong Guesthouses* documents a series of lights found in the city's Chungking Mansions and Mirador Mansions. The lights captured on film emanate with a loaded and ghostly quality, which alludes to the leftover energies of these visitors who have passed through. These are transient spaces, passed through fleetingly by backpackers, asylum seekers and travellers. These subjects of displacement are remembered in the poetic execution of Elisavet Kalpaxi's *Mutilation*. This found object echoes the bags which in popular consciousness carry the belongings of immigrants and the homeless and serves as simple elegy to those who suffer exhaustive and unending journeys because they have no other choice.

However, despite the rumbling of these more serious concerns, the tone never remains serious for long and the 'light' element of the show rules supreme. The comic sunbathing sheep scene in William Wright's *After Titian's Diana and Actaeon* both references the Renaissance and 'kiss me quick' style postcards of English seaside holidays, just as Leigh Niland's *The Letter* smacks of caravan chintz. Annabel Tilley's ink drawings take a darker turn when we realize that these seemingly innocuous renderings of holiday destinations in fact depict the sites of infamous murder scenes. Tilley scribbles notes and dates on the back of these crime scenes, which, in a kind of postmodern *déjà vu*, are now enveloped in makeshift evidence bags; repackaged as grisly tourist destinations for voyeuristic travellers.

Although *Travelling Light* could have been a great train disaster (at one point the curators joked that if they received very small numbers of works of quality, it would have to be renamed 'Travelling Shite'), it has reached its destination at the end of the line, on time. Luckily for us, the artists surpassed themselves with their creativity and ingenuity. Who would have thought that this show, exhibited in two major European cities of culture, with 58 international artists could have emerged from one suitcase? It only begs the question: where will it go next - destination elsewhere? Watch this space...