(that's art)



ARTS NOTEBOOK
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THE VENICE BIENNALE opens this week and the whole event feels a lot like some anachronistic joke. The city that sits dripping in Renaissance decadence like some crumbling old dowager in ancestral jewels plays host to the world's most flamboyant contemporary arts fair.

It is like giving Miss Havisham a Damien Hirst. But if you work in the arts world you have to go with it. The biennale is the arbiter of cultural taste. And, even as you read this I will probably be queueing at the gates of the Giardini or popping in and out of a hotchpotch of national pavilions.

I have already run the quarter-mile gamut of the nearby Arsenale. So far I have typed a letter using only full stops, rehearsed my own funeral to the strains of *Killing Me Softly* (the Shirley Bassey version, of course); I was surgically swabbed and electronically linked to a Texan and an Italian; and I climbed inside the belly of a Utopian whale to admire the patterns of my brain waves (they looked disconcertingly liked a plate of spaghetti and baked beans).

But, if that isn't enough already, today promises much more: anything from the launch of a spaceship made by Chinese peasants through a trip to a Portaloo that, apparently, is all about fundamentalism, to a promised opportunity to hold the wind in my hands.

It would be rather more useful if I could hold an idea in my head. The opening week of the biennale passes in a tumult of press and private views, of parties and receptions, of professional-level gatecrashing and industrial-strength hangovers. And where amid all this turmoil is the space for quiet contemplation? Where is the space to appreciate the precious, the illuminating, the profound?

This festival is a fairground. Emotions all melt into a merry-go-round blur. You feel a bit like a spoilt baby plonked down in its playpen.

Given too many bright baubles, you get tired and frustrated. If everything means something, then soon nothing means anything. You end up by chucking the whole lot of them out.

Only too aware of this, the curators this year — which marks both the first co-curatorship and the first time that women have filled the position — have cut down the number of candidates by about two thirds.

It is infinitely better, because when anything goes, then my advice is that you shouldn't. The biennale may be a must for professional art critics, but it is not the place for those who want truly to appreciate art.

◆ THE MESSAGE of the biennale is blatant. It is all about trade. It is all about buying and selling, launching new brand names and bolstering prices. And in the market place mêlée, the more spiritual aspects of art-making tend to get rather lost. So where can you find these?

Not in the dream time of Aboriginal art, I discovered last week. A striking exhibition of photographs of the Mowanjum people, taken by the photographer Dennis Morris, was opening at Spectrum and I was invited to come in and meet the Aboriginal "ambassador" who had kindly agreed to travel all the way in from Weybridge to bless the show. He arrived, bandy-legged, down Great Titchfield Street, complete with pelt of many possums and emu-feather wristlets, and proceeded to stalk round the gallery whirling a bull-roarer in an enjoyable but totally unabashed publicity stunt.

I went on round the corner to the Rebecca Hossack gallery which, specialising in Aboriginal art, was showing the myriad patterned paintings of the Spinifex people, survivors of what they call "the big wind" but what we now know was a nuclear test performed by the British in their remotest desert regions. Hossack tried to teach me how to discern between the thousands of Aboriginal fakes that flood that market and the real thing: to show me the difference between potato-print-style symmetries, the neatly applied dots, the colours carefully gauged to appeal to a culture familiar with pointillist prettiness, compared with the messier authenticities of the creator who might, for instance, lay down a kangaroo-head lunch on his canvas and take a brief a nap.

But maybe, in the long run, it is our yearning to find something beyond getting and spending that most matters. Maybe it is up to us as spectators to return the spiritual to art.