



Biennale Gherdeina Makes a Case for Pleasure

This year's edition, 'Persons, Personae, Personer', celebrates ecologically minded contemporary art that is joyful and sensual.

BY TOM JEFFREYS IN EU REVIEWS, EMILY BERTON REVIEWS | 04 JUL 22



Located in the Dolomite mountains – a region of historically shifting borders still divided by linguistic difference (Italian, German and the local Ladin), but often marketed simplistically as a ski or spa retreat – Biennale Gherdeina was initiated in 2008 by gallerist Doris Ghetta as a parallel event to Manifesta 7. Since then, the biennial has grown slowly: from five artists in early iterations to 25 participants this year. Curated by Filipa Ramos and Lucia Pietroiusti, the eighth iteration, titled 'Persons, Personae, Personer', celebrates ecologically minded contemporary art that is sensual, embodied and full of joy.



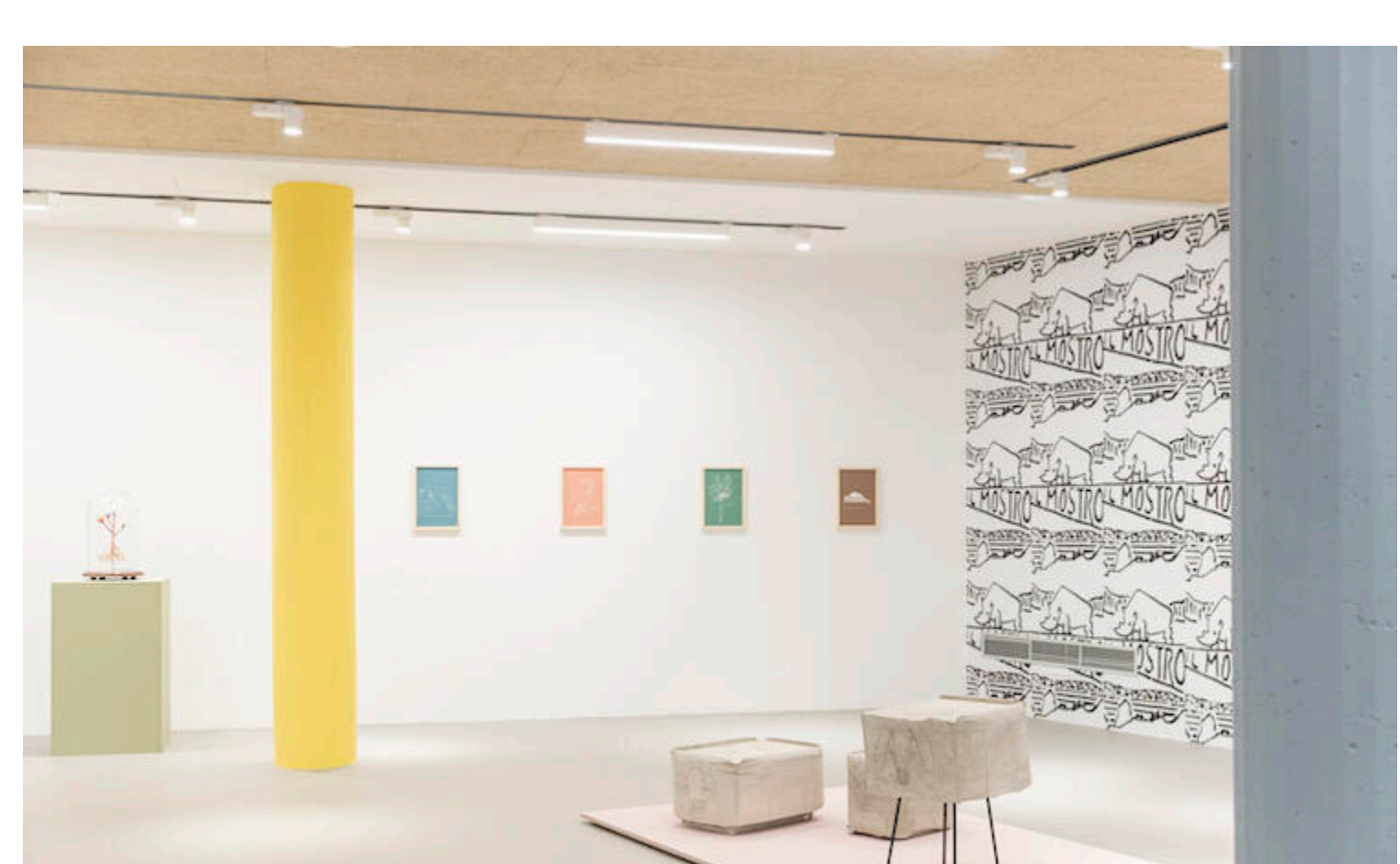
Ignota, *Memory Garden*, 2022. Installation view. Courtesy: the artist; Photo: Tiberto Sorvillo

The pair's curatorial ethos is exemplified by the programme of workshops, walks, rituals and performances. Ignota planted a circular memory garden and produced a publication, *Seeds* (2022), which subverts nativist folklore traditions. Barbara Gamber's outdoor workshop in a Dover-filled valley (*Becoming Horizontal, somatic encounters in nature*, 2022) plunges participants deep beneath the Tethys Ocean that once covered the surrounding mountains. Alex Cecchetti's *Seniero* (Path, 2022) is a one-to-one guided walk through a forest, full of stories and slow attunement to sensory experience: fingers sticky with larch sap, we pause to feel the exhalation of trees or nibble on spruce tips, before coming to a hand-dyed yurt, lying back on a bed of hay, and silently watching the clouds pass overhead.



Alex Cecchetti, *SENIERO*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist; Photo: Tiberto Sorvillo

In the main exhibition in Ortisei, Britta Marakant-Labba's moon-lit embroideries of snow, birches and red-capped Simi women (including *Magically*, 2022) appear alongside Martina Steckholzer's huge canvases that swirl with animals and mythological figures (e.g. *H.S.B.A.A.C. 2522, Hemisphere*, 2022). Judith Hopf's three concrete sheep sculptures (*Flock of Sheep*, 2016) are jaunty and fun, while sculptures by Jimmie Durham (notably *Une blessure par balles*, 2007) and paintings by Etel Adnan (*Sunken Sun*, 2016, and *079 D13*, 2010) impart a sense of loss following the deaths of both artists last year.



'Persons, Personae, Personer', exhibition view, 2022, Biennale Gherdeina. Photo: Tiberto Sorvillo

Outside, Biennale Gherdeina extends through pedestrianized streets, an old cafe, a crumbling castle courtyard (usually closed to the public) and the extraordinary mountain landscapes of Vallunga. But the biennial remains small – 'a jewel of a project', as Pietroiusti describes it to me. This limited scale opens up time – both for the curators to work closely with the artists (most contributions are new commissions) and for visitors to linger over each encounter.



Kyriaki Goni, *The Mountain Islands Shall Mourn Us Eternally (Sea Garden, Zolotriana)*, 2022. Installation view. Courtesy: the artist; Photo: Tiberto Sorvillo

In an accompanying text, the curators describe two thematic lines: the first is an expanded idea of personhood drawn from discourses around rights for non-humans; the second follows pathways of migration and movement, influenced by the region's traditions of seasonal herding. Kyriaki Goni's *The Mountain Islands Shall Mourn us Eternally* (2022) eloquently brings these threads together in a simulation of the surrounding region that shows a hybrid plant species retreating to the mountain summits for survival. Narrated by the plants through an anonymous AI voice, the piece reminds viewers that we are 'forever part of ongoing geological processes' and advocates for 'interspecies solidarity'. Seemingly a speculative future, Goni's vision is, in fact, a present reality: Alpine plants are already seeking higher altitudes due to climate change. Goni collaborated with local craftspeople to produce an accompanying wooden sculpture of the hybrid plant. Painted and carved like the craftspersons of the Dolomites but also its expertise. As does Lina Lapelyte's stop-motion animation *they stole my soul* (2022), in which a gathering of locally carved wooden animals retreat to the mountains. Both Goni and Lapelyte sketch bleak scenarios: the former finds poetry in anxiety; the latter imbues it with absurdity.



Sergio Rojas Chavez, *Promise of a Living Forest*, 2022. Installation view. Courtesy: the artist; Photo: Tiberto Sorvillo

In an introductory talk, Pietroiusti emphasises that 'the Anthropos at the centre of the Anthropocene was never every human in the first place'. This critical stance cuts through one problem with Anthropocene discourse (namely species-level thinking that sees 'the human' as a single entity – implicitly wealthy, Western, white and male), and underpins the biennial's explicit engagement with modes of resistance against settler colonialism, white supremacy, extractive capitalism and racialized border regimes. Embedding this in a local context is Elizabeth A. Povinelli's *Geography Lessons* (2022). A complex map of the nearby town of Carisolo drawn on peeling interior walls, it points to the provisionality and violence of borders and their impact upon both the people and the geopolitical. Elsewhere, Karraing Film Collective, of whom Povinelli is a member, presents *The Family and the Zombie* (2021), a video in which Indigenous 'future ancestors' and their children work and play amid lush plant life. In this imagined future, a last white male settler skulks among the detritus of Western culture – a toxic mess of broken cars and poisoned earth.



Karraing Film Collective, *The Family and the Zombie*, 2021. Installation view. Courtesy: the artist; Photo: Tiberto Sorvillo

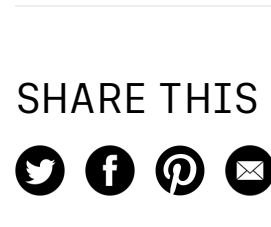
In the field of art and ecology, where the possibilities of pleasure often get cast aside in favour of more readily justifiable goals like catalysing change or raising awareness, Biennale Gherdeina makes a case for joy – from walking and eating to lying and laughing. Ramos and Pietroiusti posit pleasure not as refuge from injustice, grief or anger but as a vital agent of resistance and subversion.

Biennale Gherdeina is on view at various locations until 25 September 2022.

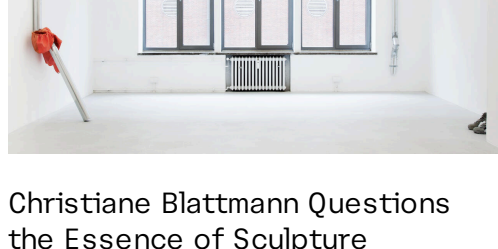
Main image: Barbara Gamber, *Somatic encounters – earthly matter(s), You River, You Tree, 2022, performance*. Courtesy: the artist; photo: Tiberto Sorvillo

TOM JEFFREYS
Tom Jeffreys is a writer based in Edinburgh. He is the author of two books: *The White Birch: A Russian Reflection* (Little, Brown, 2021) and *Signal Failure: London to Birmingham, 1922 via Gov* (Hafun Press, 2017).

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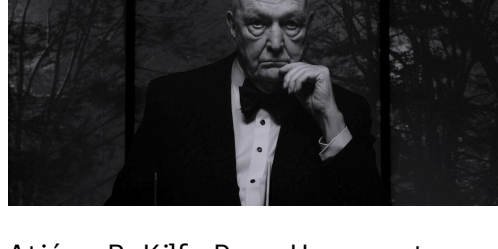
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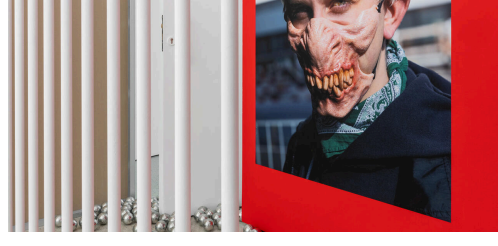
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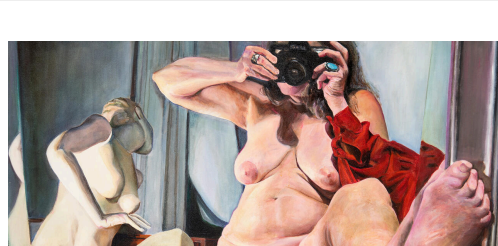
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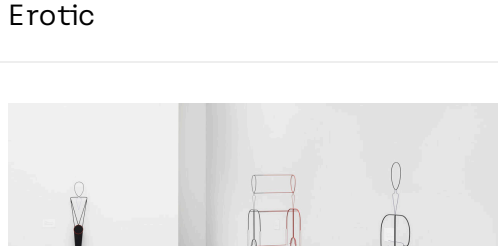
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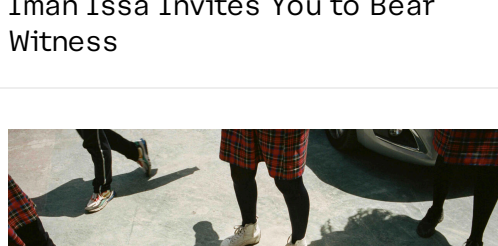
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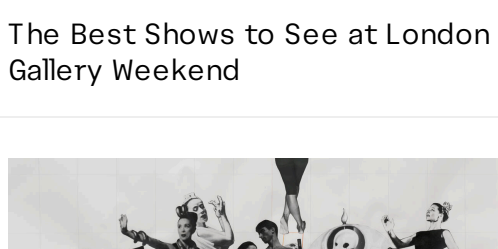
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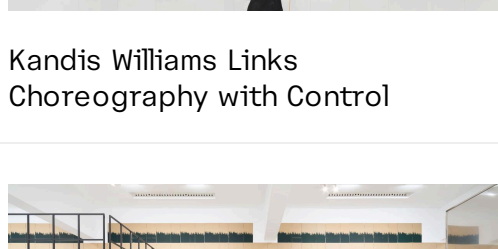
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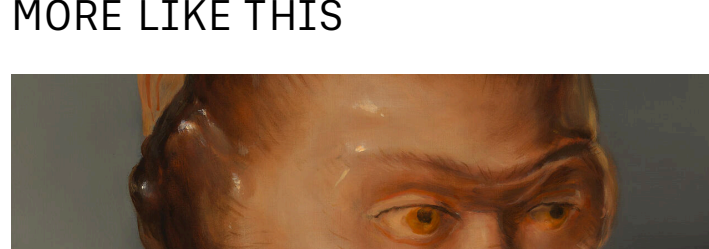


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