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I Went to a Little-Known Biennial in the Foothills of the Dolomite Mountain Range. It Was Nothing Short of Spiritual

The Gherdëina Biennale takes full advantage of the ethereal landscape of the UNESCO World Heritage site.



A view from the opening of the Gherdëina Biennale, 2022. View of Vallunga, Selva Gardena. Photo: Tiberio Sorvillo.

Vivienne Chow (<https://news.artnet.com/about/vivienne-chow-1111>) June 3, 2022

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There may be only 24 artists, but the stage to showcase their creations is likely to be one of the world's biggest: the magnificent Dolomite mountain range in northeastern Italy, a UNESCO World Heritage site with 18 peaks as high as 10,000 feet. Yet the breathtaking landscape is more than just the stage; it is also a backdrop, and a source of inspiration for a range of poetic artworks reflecting on the complex relations between humans and the natural environment.

"In many cases, you see a mountain or a piece of land literally holding the work," said Serpentine Gallery ecology advisor [Lucia Pietrojusti](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/lucia-pietrojusti-serpentine-climate-change-1593163) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/lucia-pietrojusti-serpentine-climate-change-1593163>), who co-curated this year's Gherdëina Biennale with writer and curator Filipa Ramos. Artworks on show are scattered across various venues in Val Gardena, in the heart of the Dolomites.

“This is not a biennale of 240 artists. There are 24 practices. You are not looking at curatorial visions. We have some hints and conversations, but it’s the narrative of the artists themselves, and the context that holds them,” Pietroiusti said.



Eduardo Navarro, *Spathiphyllum Auris* (2022). Photo: Tiberio Sorvillo.

Family Business

Despite being in its eighth edition, the Gherdëina Biennale appears to be the art world’s best-kept secret. Most of the foreign journalists and critics who attended the opening events said they had never heard of the biennale before.

According to gallerist Doris Ghetta, the show began in 2008 as a parallel exhibition to Manifesta 7, with just five artists. It has expanded gradually over time, and now operates with a €450,000 (\$478,957) budget funded by local authorities and through sponsorships.

The goal, Ghetta said, was “to introduce them to our culture, arts and crafts, languages” and to “give artists the possibility to develop something specific.”



Angelo Plessas, *The Hand of the Noosphere* (2022). Photo: Tiberio Sorvillo.

Some of the participating artists in this edition were brought to the region on research trips over the past year to meet local craftspeople, members of the artistic community, and historians and experts in geology, the natural environment, and mythology.

Each artist went home with knowledge and connections to create works telling stories of the region, while exploring the possibilities human coexistence with nature. The artists also bonded with each other, forming an intricate network among themselves that mirrors that of the deep roots of trees and plants populating the mountain range. But not all the works on view are new: there are also paintings by the late Etel Adnan (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/obituary-etel-adnan-2034728?artnet-logout-redirect=1>) and installation works by Jimmie Durham (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jimmie-durham-obit-2036451>), who died as the exhibition was being organized.

“The dynamic in which everything happened was much more organic,” said Argentinian artist Eduardo Navarro (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/drawing-center-eduardo-navarro-art-1264238?artnet-logout-redirect=1>), who mounted a gigantic sculpture titled *Spathiphyllum Auris* at the foot of the Dolomites. “Since there was a lack of bureaucracy, it is as if my family was helping me. My family has always been very supportive, in an organic and a very loving way. And this biennale reminds me of that energy.”



At left, Kyriaki Goni's installation and video work, *The mountain-islands shall mourn us eternally (data garden dolomites)* (2022). Photo: Tiberio Sorvillo.

Memories of the Mountains

Navarro's 26-foot-tall, 11,000-pound flower sculpture may be made of concrete, but the artist tried to strip away as many human-made architectural elements as possible. And still, there is a little door on one side that allows visitors to enter and sit inside the belly of the flower, to take a moment to meditate on the sound and energy channeled by the surroundings.

"When you see a flower, the flower is observing itself, through you," Navarro said. "You cannot separate things from the universe."

The region's geological history has also inspired Greek artist [Kyriaki Goni](http://kyriakigoni.com) (<http://kyriakigoni.com>), who created a video work titled *The mountain-islands shall mourn us eternally (data garden dolomites)*, in which a non-human voice posing as a hybrid indigenous plant addresses humanity about its history, and as an oracle foretells the grim future of the Earth should climate change continue.

"Place was very much present and important in this biennale," Goni told Artnet News. "I learned a lot about this place, and this knowledge and experience were infused with the subjects I focus on in my practice."



Ignota, *Memory Garden* (2022). Commissioned by the Gherdëina Biennale. Photo: Tiberio Sorvillo.

Spirit, Be With Me

One key element in the show is spirituality: for its commissions, titled *Memory Garden* and *Seeds*, the artist collective Igonta (Sarah Shin and Ben Vickers) installed works in a garden that conjure a healing ritual following the moon's cycle. The artists also performed live rituals on site.

Among the most elaborate works is Alex Cecchetti's *SENTIERO*, an intimate performance that involved a three-hour hike up the mountains, led by a performer who acts as a guide. During my visit, the performer guided only one or two audience members each time, reciting poems and stories along the way while offering a helping hand from time to time through challenging trails.



Alex Cecchetti, *SENTIERO* (2022). Photo: Tiberio Sorvillo.

Upon reaching the top of the mountain, visitors were offered soup and bread made with local ingredients, conveying a sense of gratitude towards the surrounding non-human species inhabiting the mountains.

Cecchetti began developing his work after he first set foot in the area last June, and has walked the path multiple times through different seasons.

“The path is conceived as life itself,” the artist said. “I wanted a shift. I wanted everyone to feel the immortality of life through the dissolving of their individuality. We are nature—we are nature as much as a tree. We cannot be disconnected.”



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