



## The Milk of Dreams

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## EXHIBITION REVIEW

**The Milk of Dreams**, curated by Cecilia Alemani, 59th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April–27 November 2022

The stories assembled in a little notebook called *The Milk of Dreams* are funny yet weird, even disgusting. Although the author created it for writing and illustrating fantastic tales for her sons, it is compelling for readers of all ages. Unexpected associations and dramatic shifts provoke a confusing mixture of embodied reactions whereby the humor becomes terrifying and what is initially alluring morphs into a disturbing experience. Among an assortment of short stories, the anecdote of Lolita Stomach, which depicts a “nasty” woman who “smelled of caca” and gave rotten meat to children, is juxtaposed with Don Crecencio’s dilemma regarding his roses, which grow solely on ground goat meat. There is also the tale of a solidified vulture in strawberry gelatin served in a party, mixed with random illustrations, as is the case with a hybrid creature made of human, animal, natural and mechanical parts.

Surrealist artist Carrington (1917–2011), the author of *The Milk of Dreams* (written in the 1940s, published in 2017), believed in art as a form of psychic freedom and correspondingly treated art as a tool for political freedom. She transformed art into a tool to access the unconscious and a remedy to recreate alternative realities. She desired to subvert hegemonic value systems and to pervert the morals of conservative society. Her magical yet uncanny, even repulsive, children’s book expresses the power of dreams to transform the world. It acknowledges the capacity of illusion to make the impossible possible while raising awareness of the innate potentiality of human imagination to give birth to other forms of being.

Taking *The Milk of Dreams* as the foundation of its curatorial framework, the 59th Venice Biennale is titled with the same name. Similarly, curator Cecilia Alemani appropriates Carrington’s surrealist, metaphorical, political and methodological agenda. The exhibition juxtaposes folk tales, myths, indigenous cosmologies, esoteric knowledge, oral histories to later associate Donna Haraway’s post-gender, post-future theory with Ursula K. Le Guin’s science fiction. Five historical “art-capsules” act as conceptual frameworks for contemporary artworks. These sections recuperate artistic practices that were considered minor (Alemani 2022, 46), producing anachronistic disjunctures to the conventional art historical canon, making visible stories that were previously excluded.

However, what brings together the exhibition’s 213 artists, from different generations and geographies around the globe, is the theme of bodies. Through three main entry points – metamorphosis, technology and nature – bodies are portrayed as places of potentiality, fertile grounds of possibility. *The Milk of Dreams* evokes ideas around pregnancy and motherhood by alluding to the processes of life and female power: the birthing of living creatures, the giving of sustenance and care. It highlights processes of healing and spiritual growth while recognizing the transformative latencies within living bodies and energies contained in Mother Earth.

Sympathetic to Carrington’s fantastic imaginary, the bodies represented in the exhibition are hybrid bodies. Female or cyborg bodies, challenging patriarchal models and gender dominant ideologies, are juxtaposed with Indigenous and shamanic bodies, revealing the value of non-Western practices and knowledges. Human bodies becoming savage animals and merging with invasive plants, signaling the abolition of the anthropocene, are placed with bodies deeply rooted in earth, resisting ecological devastation and climate change. In short, the bodies



**Figure 1.** 59th La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams*, Capsule 1: *La Culla della Strega/The Witch's Cradle* (2022), installation view. Photo: Marco Cappelletti, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.



**Figure 2.** Sara Enrico, *The Jumpsuit Theme* (2022), installation view, concrete, pigment, 33 × 125 × 35 cm. Photo: Marco Cappelletti, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

represented in this exquisite mixture are the grounds where the politics inscribed in the metaphor of metamorphosis are also the poetics that conjure the birth of new forms of being.

In this context, the senses are the pathways that lead to the encounter with other bodies and their inherent potentialities. Through the senses people relate with others, themselves, and the rest of the world. However, visual perception acquires a leading role. The supremacy of the sense of vision is itself visible not only in the extensive amount of images hanging in walls, but also in the graphic material that gives identity to the exhibition beyond its walls. Posters, banners, billboards, flyers and other adverts depict a series of eyes looking in mysterious, meditative and flirtatious ways. These images are composed of fragments of works included in the show, such as Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña's Indigenous iconographies, Mexican artist Felipe Baeza's human-plant migrant self-portraits, Japanese artist Tatsui Ikeda's liquefying bodies, and the Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayon's Afro-Cuban spirits. Viewers look at these eyes and these eyes look back at them as they transit through vaporetos, bridges and public buildings across Venice, generating anticipation of what awaits.

The exhibition starts in the Giardini, where three of the time-capsules are located. The first, *The Witch's Cradle* (Figure 1), is inspired by Surrealist exhibitions. Paintings in ostentatious frames and other historical art objects are laid out in replicas of old cabinets or displayed inside glass cases. This section includes works by avant-garde artists that explore metamorphosis and the fragmentation of the body as the means to subvert dominant ideologies around gender identity. Some examples are the mystical human-plant characters by Carrington herself, and the Indian born, British artist Ithell Colquhoun's violent yet erotic paintings of amputated shapes of genitalia and other body parts. Immersed in a conservative atmosphere, viewers take the passive role of observers, looking at images through anachronistic showcases with curiosity and morbidity. Shifting from past to present, as well as from sight to touch, it is relevant to mention the work of Chiara Enzo, whose small-scale paintings depict close-ups of marks on naked skin. Comparatively, Sara Enrico, in her anthropomorphic sculptures (Figure 2), merges clothing with the human skin. Both Italian artists address ideas about the surface, the interrelation between interior and exterior and the limits of bodies, evoking sensorial stimulation through the sense of touch. The effects that surface from these encounters oscillate between feelings of sensuality or corporeal intimacy and the contagion of affections of rejection or cutaneous intolerance.

Upon entering the Arsenale, one feels immersed in a sacred place. This section includes the two remaining historical capsules. Beginning with the work of contemporary artists, colossal ovens by Argentine artist Gabriel Chaile (Figure 3) stand out. Inspired by idols of Mesoamerica, these raw clay sculptures allude to community rituals around food (eating as a collective event), taste (culture, geographical identity, territory), and alchemy (the transformation of elements in processes of cooking and digestion). The sensorial experience is enhanced with Colombian artist Delcy Morelos' installation made of soil, clay, fabrics, fibers and other natural elements (Figure 4). Quoting Walter de Maria's *Earth Room*, visitors move around a labyrinth of earth. A mixture of aromas come out from this organic compound, penetrating the visitor's nostrils. Consequently, particles of hay, cassava flour, cacao powder, cloves and cinnamon get implanted onto people's bodies, transforming them into carriers of Andean and Amazonian Amerindian cosmologies.

The organic body becomes artificial in the final capsule: *Seduction of The Cyborg*. By the end of this section, visitors walk through a landscape in decay by British artist Precious Okoyomon to then pass through an abandoned industrial container by American artist Robert Grosvenor. The desolated aspect of these scenarios evoke silence. However, the absence of sound ceases when a musical score is subtly heard. In a damp and dark room, there is a video-installation by Italian artist Diego Marcon. Combining 35 mm film and virtual animation, it depicts a sinister



**Figure 3.** Gabriel Chaile, *Francisco Chaile* (2022), installation view, metal structure, adobe, and bricks. Photo: Roberto Marossi, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.



**Figure 4.** Delcy Morelos, *Earthly Paradise* (2022), site-specific installation, mixed media with soil, clay, cinnamon, powder cloves, cocoa powder, cassava starch, tobacco, copaiba, baking soda and powdered charcoal, dimensions variable. Photo: Roberto Marossi, courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

white-male human-puppet inside a bedroom who sings an account of murdering his family and suicide while a blackbird chirps on the edge of a window. The uncanny combination of a melody inspired in the Golden Age of musical cinema with the message it bestows, travels through visitors' ears into their brains, hearts and guts, taking the form of embodied vibrations that shake and confuse the skeleton by alternating pleasure and discontent.

Although the exhibition's surrealist dream ends up transforming into an apocalyptic nightmare (*à la* Carrington), the overall experience remains positive. The position of looking at bodies as territories of potentiality or wombs, where metamorphoses are conceived, is dynamic and engaging. Through a juxtaposition of intriguing yet confusing, even bewitching, embodied encounters, *The Milk of Dreams* awakens the unconscious longing for spiritual transformation while recognizing alternative ontologies and cosmologies. It raises the urgent need to protect an ecosystem in danger while acknowledging the certainty that everything existing in this universe is interconnected. Casting a binding spell upon the structures and ideologies that have dominated the planet over the last few centuries, this biennale envisions the possibility of birthing extraordinary forms of being.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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