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Standout Works at the 2022 Biennale de Lyon, From Erotically Charged Sculptures to a Dystopian Jungle-Like Installation

Sarah Belmont

11–14 minutes



Installation view of "Les nombreuses vies et morts de Louise Brunet," at the 2022 Lyon Biennale, at macLYON. Wall hung works, from left, by Mohamad Abdouni, Antoine Coysevox, Semiha Berksoy, and Carlo Portelli. Sculptures by Ann Agee.

Blaise Adilon

Postponed by one year because of the global pandemic, the year's edition of the Biennale de Lyon, which runs until December 31, is the first time that ancient artworks have been displayed alongside contemporary creations. There are 66 commissions, including artists like Leyla Cárdenas, Zhang Yunyao, and Philipp Timischl, and it is also the first time the exhibition has expanded throughout the entire city.

In addition to the Biennale's traditional venues of the Usines Fagor and Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon (macLyon), a dozen institutions are participating not only as venues for the show but were consulted as part of the curatorial process by the show's cocurators, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, who were named co-directors of the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin earlier this year.

"We did not only turn to them for loans, but also for advice", said Isabelle Bertolotti, the Biennale's director, whose only instruction for the curatorial duo was to go as local as possible. They were to find the best possible theme to tell the story of Lyon.

And the winner was silk, the industry for which took over the city beginning in 1643 and is now celebrated each year around December 8. The curators' subsequent research on silk led them to the path of Louise Brunet, a silk spinner who came to Lyon to work. In 1834 she was arrested, among 10,000 other weavers, for joining what is known as the Canut Revolt. Once she got out of prison, she ended up in Beirut, Lebanon, where many silk factories had taken root.

In addition to a section in the exhibition devoted to a partially fictionalized telling of Brunet's life, this binational profile inspired

the Biennale's team to dedicate a second section, entirely devoted to Beirut, focusing on the period between the cultural boom the city experienced in 1958 to the beginning of the civil war in 1975; and a third part connecting Lyon to the rest of the world.

Those three chapters are underpinned by the idea of fragility as a form of resistance. Nothing is what it seems. One minute you are fine, but the next anything can happen. Prosperity, happiness, even luck, come and go. And so, Bardaouil and Fellrath titled their exhibition, "Manifesto of Fragility."

"As my mother once told me, while teaching me never to discriminate anyone: we are all going to die. Mortality is the one thing we have in common," added Bardaouil, who sees the Biennale as a platform for everyone to share.

"It takes a group of people to write a manifesto—it's not a one-man job," Fellrath, said. "A fragility told from the standpoint of an individual, Louise Brunet, of a people, and of humanity."

Below, a look at 7 standout contemporary works on view the 2022 Lyon Biennale that deal with how vulnerability is actually a strength in disguise and that one should never take anything for granted.

A sculpture by Kim Simonsson and a marble statue of Apollo are displayed together at the 2022 Lyon Biennale.

Photo : Sarah Belmont for ARTnews

Though not required, it's highly recommended that visitors to the Lyon Biennale start their viewing experience at the Renzo Piano–designed macLyon because it is the only place where all three chapters of the Biennale are told. Only the third one, titled "A world of endless promise," prevails in the other 11 venues. On the fourth

floor of the building a marble statue of Apollo from antiquity shares his wooden barred crate with one of Kim Simonsson's (b. 1974) green elf-like creatures, which were installed in various other locations of the Biennale. (These sculptures were also the mascots of the lille3000 art festival this summer.)

"Oh, we did not put him there! He sneaked inside the box all by himself," Bertolotti joked during a walkthrough. This association embodies the whole spirit of the display, thought as a huge installation where artists from various times and backgrounds, loans and commissions meet, to tell the story of Louise Brunet. Perhaps the protection cage is a metaphor for prison, where the Lyon-based silk weaver was trapped with older or younger inmates with different skills from hers. Who knows?

Khalil Joreige & Joana Hadjithomas, *As Night Comes When Day is Gone*, 2022, installation view.

Photo : Sarah Belmont for ARTnews

On August 4, 2020, a large amount of ammonium nitrated stored in the port of Beirut exploded, causing 200 deaths, 7,000 injuries, and \$15 billion in property damage. About 300,000 people were left homeless, including filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas (b. 1969) and Khalil Joreige (b. 1969). The Lebanese couple gathered security camera footage of that day from the Sursock Museum, which suffered structural damage and nearly 60 works in its collection were also damaged as a result of the blast. (The French government [pledged](#) €500,000 to help restore the museum in 2021.)

The screens displayed in circle switch on and off intermittently, keeping the viewers on their toes. On one may pop up a bride

carelessly striking a pose in the museum gardens; on another, waiters setting tables or an empty gallery ready to be filled with art. It only takes one second for the image to go dark. That's when dust comes in, sweeping away everything in its path. The installation, *As Night Comes When Day is Gone*, is poignant and stays with you.

Works by Eva Nielsen.

Photo : Sarah Belmont for ARTnews

The Usines Fagor, a former electrical appliance factory measuring some 312,000 square feet that once teemed with 1,800 workers at the end of the 19th century, is one of the Biennale's historic venues but also the kind of intermediate spaces French painter Eva Nielsen (b. 1983) usually depicts in her art. The artist selected the back of the building to display her work, at the risk of not being seen by hasty visitors, because the floor there was most inspiring to her: grey enough to look industrial, with big splashes of green as on a football field. In a vast corner over a locally produced print on a scrim hang three monumental canvases.

Reversal shows a prefabricated house on the verge of collapse, which the artist spotted while driving to Lyon; *Zoled*, two juxtaposed manholes almost about to come out from the wall; and *Polhodie*, a surreal construction made of multiple fragments.

Nielsen's stratified images question the fragility of used-up materials, the inherent irony of the promise of their being recycled into something new. "I like the idea that my paintings exist here and now but could disappear tomorrow. I am not attached to objects per se," she said.

Detail of Eva Fàbregas's *Growths*.

Photo : Sarah Belmont for ARTnews

Are these giant testicles hanging from the ceiling? Perhaps pistils, the seed-bearing female organs of flowers? Or cocoons ready to hatch at any moment? This ambiguous body of orange, pink, and lilac inflatable sculptures, evoking the worlds of flora, fauna, and mankind, is by Eva Fàbregas (b. 1988) and titled *Growths*. “Please do not touch!” is precisely the rule the Barcelona-born, London-based artist encourages everyone to break. Her erotically charged works are meant to be poked, petted, flicked, squeezed—her way of bringing people and objects closer. And yet, no one around seemed aware of this possibility. The inclusion, not to say intrusion, of organic forms in the industrial architecture of the Usines Fagor is an invitation to look beyond traditional opposites. Where there is fragility there is strength, with growth comes decay. As for sexuality, well, it can sometimes look monstrous.

Sculptures by Sylvie Selig, from her “Weird Family” series, with *Stateless* (2017–19), visible in the background.

Photo : Sarah Belmont for ARTnews

As Shakespeare once put it, “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players.” Sylvie Selig seems to agree. At the Usines Fagor, the 81-year-old, Nice-born artist, who works across drawing, embroidery, painting, and sculpture, presents two older works that fit nicely into the Biennale’s theme. Fragility can often be physical or mental but also political, as demonstrated in *Stateless* (2017–19). This 16-foot-long painting tells the story of a young refugee about to be sent back to her war-torn country. She is at first rescued by a hare—a recurring character under Selig’s brush who does not always try to be the hero—but ends up dead.

“It may not show in this particular case, but I have a strong sense of humor. My stories rarely end tragically,” the artist said. In front of her monumental oil on canvas stand 28 sculptures from her ongoing series “Weird Family” (2006–22). Fierce monsters or enchanted creatures? There is something endearing about all of them.

Ugo Schiavi, *Grafted Memory System*, 2022, installation view, at Musée Guimet.

Photo : Blandine Soulage/Courtesy the artist

Welcome to a jungle-like data center, where nature and culture collide into a dystopian fiction. The top floor of the Musée Guimet, Lyon’s former natural history museum, has been taken over by *Grafted Memory System*, a monumental installation by Ugo Schiavi (b. 1987), his largest work to date. “The space is 9,680 square feet—I had to find a way not to get swallowed by it,” said the French artist, who imagined four blocks, which he termed “islands,” of window displays overflowing with plants and cables. It’s unclear if the former are emulating the latter, or if it’s the other way around.

“In my work, which has grown more and more narrative over the years, present, past, and future become one,” said Schiavi, who had branches and roots from a waste ground transplanted into the vast gallery. This “graft” as he puts it, somehow echoes the history of the Musée Guimet, whose collections were transferred to the riverfront Musée des Confluences in 2014. The screens clearly embedded in this techno-organic landscape show images of bones and architectural details which take us into a timeless dimension. It is the first time Schiavi has included sound to make his art even

more immersive, not to say believable. Charming indeed.

Chafa Ghaddar, *Exhausted Forms*, 2022, installation view, at Lugdunum, Musée et théâtres romains.

Photo : Blaise Adilon/Courtesy the artist and Galerie Tanit

Imagine you are coming home after a long day at work. You negligently throw your coat onto the sofa. This is exactly what seems to have happened to Chafa Ghaddar's (b. 1986) drapery-looking *Exhausted Forms*, a 132-pound sculpture that took four people to install it in the depth of the Lugdunum Musée et théâtres romains, an antiquities museum designed as an underground cathedral. It was important to the Lebanon-born, Dubai-based artist, who walks a fine line between sculpture and painting and figuration and abstraction, that this piece be arranged as if sitting by itself on a stone block.

"I wanted something fleshy, almost tender, inhabiting the space that had been offered to me," she said. This humanized canvas built out of 12 layers of stucco almost makes the museum feel like home. "The underlying promise of frescoes is that they will last forever. Yet their resistance to time is proof of their fragility," she added. Fold this piece, and it will crack or break. That's, in a sense, the beauty of it.

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