

## THROUGH MY EYES: A VISIT TO THE GIUDECCA WOMEN'S PRISON

Venice Biennale of Art  
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4 pm  
Giudecca, Venice, Italy

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but the idea of a pre-arranged guided tour of the women's prison on the Giudecca, part of the Venice Biennale, had intrigued me from the start. It is the official pavilion of the Vatican, which has invited curators Bruno Racine and Chiara Parisi to commission artworks for the interior of the prison, and to work in collaboration with the inmates. I had read a review published on Artnet.com which didn't offer much except a skeptical writer wondering what the inmates got out of the experience, as if they were kind of being exploited. And given that the Biennale is full of wealthy art collectors who come in every two years from abroad for a culture and prosecco-fuelled holiday, that did seem to be a valid question. But none of that mattered once I entered the venue. The guards were checking documentation and had us place our belongings (including phones) in lockers before marshalling us down the hallway, where we were introduced to Giulia.

Dressed in a black and white robe-like uniform (I believe of her own making in the prison's workshops, as part of the event) which wrapped over her torso, she shuffled in trackpants and skater shoes, a small tattoo of interlocking female symbols visible on her neck and large plugs stretching her earlobes. She seemed gentle, cowed, as if she had once been a strong, feisty young woman, now vulnerable and beaten down by the system. We had no information about her. Clutching a pile of papers, she proceeded to tell us, in a quiet voice, in Italian, about the art on view.

In the first room, she described, softly and with downcast eyes, a series of gentle portraits that were nicely framed and hung salon-style on a wall. She said the subjects were some of the women inmates and their children. She told us that normally this artist would depict famous and important people, and that although these people were not famous and important, they were important for them. She found that idea to be beautiful. When asked if any were relating to her, she said no, although there was the child of her partner who was depicted. She pointed to a portrait of a baby about 10 x 12 inches in size, with pride on her face. She said the original photo had been very small.

In the next room, the chapel, there were a series of long, skinny abstract soft sculptures hanging from the ceiling by the Brazilian artist Sonia Gomes. They were brightly coloured, some bound tightly together. Giulia told us that they were made from the clothes of women prostitutes, house cleaners and others. She said they reminded her of cocoons which open to reveal butterflies. She found it very beautiful also because whereas the women in the prison are often looking down, you had to look up in order to see them, which suggested, to her, the idea of possibility. Then, unexpectedly, Giulia said she wanted to read a text that she had written for us. She proceeded to read, in Italian, four tightly hand-written pages of script. I didn't catch all of it, but it moved me deeply. She spoke about her feelings about being in the prison, about how meaningful it was to have this opportunity, that although the women inside had made mistakes and done bad things, there was maybe the possibility for forgiveness and for more...I truly don't recall the details as it was in Italian but the overall feeling was one of such raw honesty, vulnerability, regret and humbleness that I was in tears.

That was when I realized that the art that we were there to see was perfectly expressed in the exhibition's title: Through My Eyes. Forget about the visitors' experience of the artworks by professional artists who had been brought in. It was, instead, about the experience through Giulia's eyes. The crux of the art was in the way that Giulia appreciated the opportunity to be with the artworks, and the deep meaning that it held for her.

In the courtyard, there was a large statement on the wall reading SIAMO CON VOI NELLA NOTTE (We are with you during the night). She said she found it to be beautiful, that statement, because it made her feel a connection to the outside world, but most of all what she loved was that it lit up at night, and the women could see it from their rooms. She repeated again that she found it "veramente bello", really beautiful, and you could just imagine the understatement that this likely was.

We passed through a room, possibly the cafeteria, with a series of works on the wall by Corita Kent, depicting various slogans, all brightly painted in a pop-art style. Giulia told us that these were by an artist who is no longer alive. A journalist on our tour asked her which one was her favorite and she pointed to a bright red and green image of an eye. She found it very powerful. She said, you know that saying eyes are the windows to the soul? And sometimes people were afraid to look you in the eye, other times people do look you in the eye, but they're lying. She said that image really resonated with her. Some research revealed that Corita Kent was a nun and an artist who was a contemporary of Andy Warhol. Her work often combined logos with sayings from her favorite writers, in this case Camus: "Should like to be able to love my country and still love justice."

Then we paused briefly in a room with a blue and white mural covering the walls. Giulia told us that this artwork was not part of the Biennale. This was the room where the women met their families and their children who came to see them. So she said for some people, this was a very joyful room, but then for others it was a very sad room because no one ever came to see them. And she thought it was a room for very brave people, because the women who used it would have to be strong, to show that they were ok, when in reality things were often very much not ok, and when saying goodbye to the family that had come, it was a long walk down a corridor to stay strong as long as they were in view.

We were shepherded into a small cinema where a short film screened, about one woman on the verge of being released from the prison, and another one on the verge of entering. A scene in the film tracks the faces of the inmates, including Giulia's. She said it was a great experience being part of the filming process. After the film was done, we applauded. The guard told us that the tour would have to be cut short today (with no explanation as to why), and that instead Giulia would read a poem that she had written. Part of it read "I want to see without seeing, hear without hearing, speak without speaking..." It was heartfelt and beautiful, and I thought of the impact of art on someone like her. Before I could process my thoughts, she was gone. The guards took her so quickly there was no opportunity to say anything other than a brief thank you. When we wanted to say so much more.

The journalist asked if there would be the possibility of writing to Giulia, as we both wanted to express our gratitude in a more profound way. But the guard said no, they could not guarantee that any letter would reach her. Nonetheless we both agreed that if we sent something identifying Giulia and the date and time of the tour, it might reach her. The journalist plans to send her a copy of her article, and I plan to send a genuine thankyou.

-Andrea Carson Barker