

'An Infected Landscape of Oozing Materials': The 15th Lyon Biennale

This year's edition of the French biennale asks how biological and economic developments inform one another

The title of the 15th Lyon Biennale, 'Where Water Comes Together with Other Water', stems from a 1985 poem by the American writer Raymond Carver, in which he declares his love for rivers, streams and creeks. Here it refers to the confluence of the rivers Rhône and Saône in Lyon. The main site of the biennale, the 29,000-square-metre former Fagor-Brandt home appliance factory, reflects the history of the commercial ebb and flow enabled by local geography: from the industrial revolution of the 18th century to our present moment of economic reconfiguration. Works by more than 60 artists are displayed in the abandoned industrial complex as well as in the more central locations of the Musée d'art contemporain (MAC Lyon) and the Institut d'Art Contemporain. A number of pieces are also situated in public places, such as Shana Moulton's sculpture Galactic Activation Portal (2019), which hovers over downtown Lyon.

The biennale's array of site-specific installations transforms the Fagor factory's abandoned halls into an anthropogenic ecosystem. Hailing from the Palais de Tokyo, the seven members of the curatorial team – Daria de Beauvais, Adélaïde Blanc, Yoann Gourmel, Matthieu Lelièvre, Vittoria Matarrese, Claire Moulène and Hugo Vitrani – have drawn from Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess's 1972 concept of 'deep ecology' to understand the space not merely as an environment that surrounds us but as 'a set of relationships that constitute our make-up at the same time as they constitute our environment', as Naess puts it in her 1989 book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. As such, the biennial branches out along numerous interlaced trails, winding through the factory's open-plan halls, intertwining biological, economic, political and cosmogenic phenomena. A number of artworks engage explicitly with the history of Lyon: for instance, Taus Makhacheva's *Aerostatic Experience* (2019), a response to the story of Le Flesselles – a hot air balloon that made its only flight in the city in the late 18th century. Combining dressmaking and construction techniques, Makhacheva weaves together histories of technology, spectacle and labouring bodies.

Works by Isabelle Andriessen, Bianca Bondi, Mire Lee and Pamela Rosenkranz all employ chemical solutions, synthetic materials and organic processes to create pieces that mutate for the duration of the biennial. The ceramics and metals of Andriessen's 'zombie material' sculptures *Ivory Dampers (battery)* (2019) liquidize as they interact, giving form to an infected landscape of oozing materials that operate beyond human control. Bondi imagines a household kitchen under a layer of salt, turning the drudgery of domestic labour into poetic alchemy (*The Sacred Spring and Necessary Reservoirs*, 2019). Rosenkranz fills a large circle on the floor with pink make-up powder, onto which Evian mineral water is poured each day, carving out rivulets and craters in this delicate miniature landscape (*Evian Waters*, 2019). Lee's tubular steel sculptures 'Saboteurs' (2019) employ low-tech kinetics to rotate, crawl and twist through clay, plaster and silicone emulsions.

In works by Rebecca Ackroyd, Sam Keogh and Megan Rooney, the human body is decomposed, dismembered or reconfigured. With *Singed Lids* (2019) Ackroyd presents a post-mortem crash-site of a resin-cast aircraft cabin, replete with exploded armchairs and scattered body parts. In Keogh's post-Anthropocene sci-fi story, treelike sculptures tangle around scraps of paintings and collages, suggesting a re-ordering of botanical taxonomy (*Knotworm*, 2019). Rooney's site-specific sculptures *In the Hullabaloo of Midnight* (2019) underscore the contemporary redundancy of the factory worker, leaving the industrial site in limbo between productivity and memory.

Elsewhere, we see social assemblies of bodies that suggest alternatives to linear historical narratives. Simphiwe Ndzube stages his hybrid sculptures *Untitled (Journey to Asazi)* (2019) and *In the Land of the Blind the One Eyed Man is King?* (2019) in political scenarios, here taking the form of a theatrical forest with carnival-like processions in a reimagining of the spectres of apartheid and post-colonialism that haunt his work. In *Shkrepëtima (Lightning)* (2018), Petrit Halilaj unpacks his experiences of ethnic conflict and exile from the small Kosovar town where he grew up, forging narratives that examine concepts of nationhood and cultural identity. And *Tetzahuitl (Omen)* (2019) is a mechanical ballet, choreographed by artist Fernando Palma Rodríguez, in which numerous children's dresses – informed by pre-Columbian cosmogonies of Latin America – dance through the air.

Inspired by Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977), Gaëlle Choisine's ethereal, contemplative *Temple of Love – Absence* (2019) at the MAC Lyon is a perfect counterpoint to the show's large-scale installations at the Fagor factory. An intricate assemblage of fountains, digital images of plants, wall-mounted fabric collages and ceramic fortune cookies, it sums up an essential component of human relationships: absence.

The 15th Lyon Biennale, 'Where Water Comes Together with Other Water', is on view at various locations through 5 January 2020.