

TEXTILES AT THE 49th VENICE BIENNIAL

10th June to 4th November 2001

The third millennium of art is expressed through electronic techniques: observing is imperative, and the object observed often changes in the eyes of the observer who is used to digital life. Harald Szeemann, the Director of the 49th International Venice Biennial, chose to illustrate the art of our new century by means of videos, although there are also numerous installations, photographs and paintings as well as some unforgettable monumental sculptures.

Szeemann chose "Plateau of Humankind" as the title of his famous international exhibition. The artists invited look at the world and address it, searching and recounting all the multiple dimensions of contemporary humanity. Their works concern people's lives and behaviour, without distinguishing between aesthetics and politics, or art and communication.

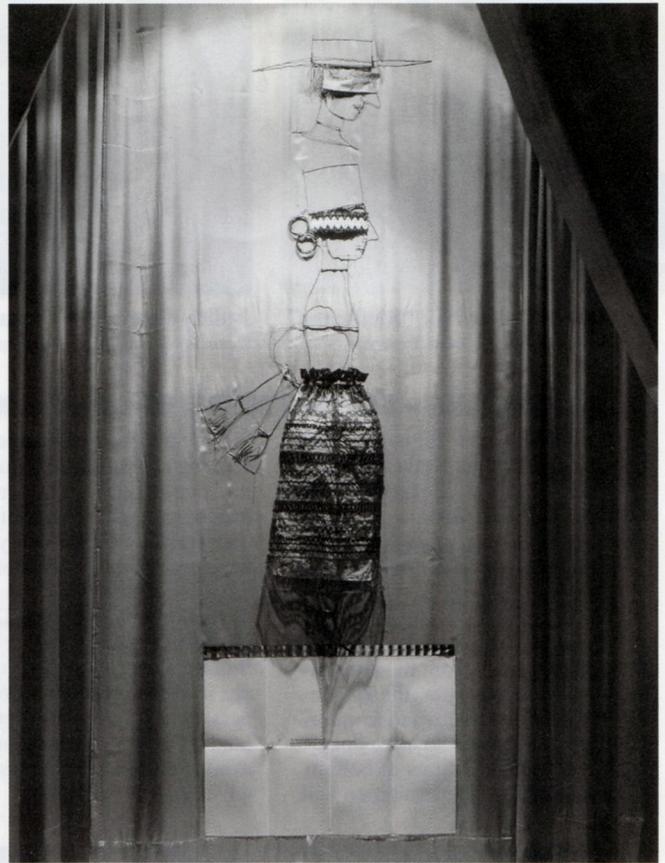
Where to find textiles? They are encountered in the soft, monumental, involved installations by the Brazilian Ernest Leto (displayed at the "Corderie" and the "Giardini"); the poignant textile tales created by the New Zealand artist Jacqueline Fraser (at the Museo di Sant Apollonia) and in the embroidered photos by Francesco Vezzoli (at the "Corderie").

Ernest Leto (born 1964) shows two voluminous environmental installations using soft, stretchy and flexible lycra. One is made of a white, elastic material: long

breasts hang from the ceiling to the floor, giving off a pungent smell of spices - black pepper, cloves, curry etc. Visitors stroll into this white and perfumed space like an organic temple with textile columns. Leto would like to revive and stimulate all our human senses; he considers the body a planet and its organic character an aspect of nature, both implying spirituality. In the second room, sensuousness is stimulated by use of the body. Visitors are invited to enter a soft area of white lycra bolstered with polystyrene where they are free to touch, walk, bounce ... The installation re-animates the relationship between the body and its environment, sensuality and living space.

Jacqueline Fraser (born 1956) depicts a social tale in eleven tableaux set in a space transformed by fabrics, veils and canopies. She tells a story about the repression of a Maori boy and his reconciliation with society after her discussions with him.

The text and fabrics form two fundamental parts of her narration. The text is written into a luminous box in three languages - Maori, English and Italian - and appears as corrupted and ungrammatical as hip-hop slang. Fraser contrasts this uncultured language with a fashionable mood. She says that she watches "Fashion TV", beamed into her Auckland home from the catwalks of Milan, Paris and New



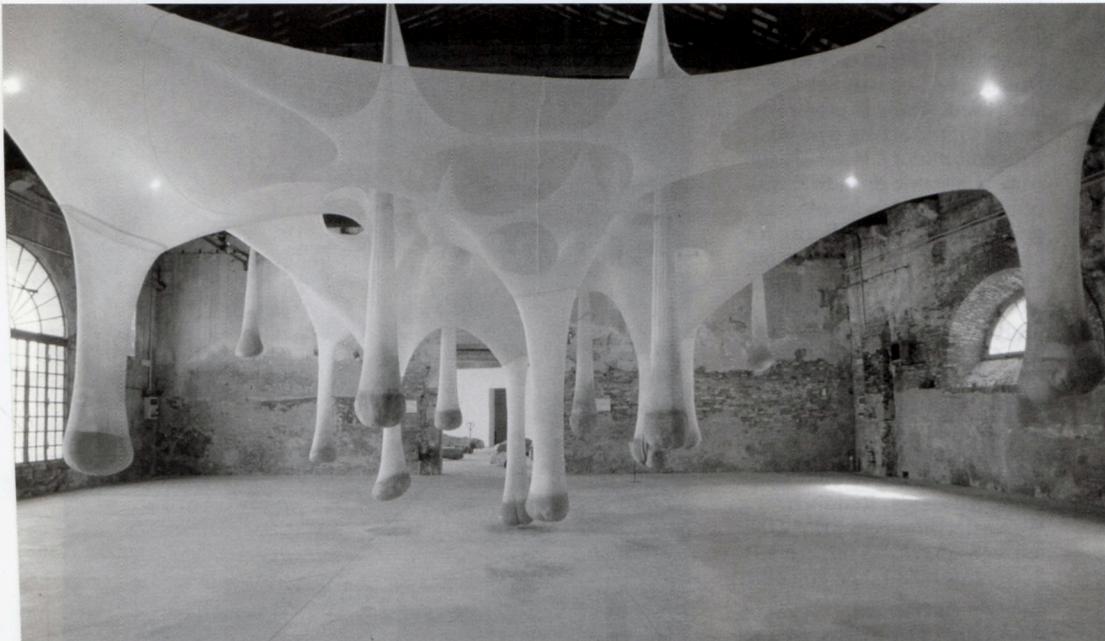
Jacqueline Fraser: Installation made of wire and luxury fabrics depicting paradoxical contrast in society

York, and gets all her ideas about fashion from that. Thus she uses wire and luxury fabrics from a range of cultural sources, creating paradoxical contrasts with the tragic quality of topics such as poverty and a dispossessed and violated youth.

At the Biennial opening, the Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli (born 1971) presented a curious performance. For ten hours, the famous ex-model Veruska embroidered a photographic portrait of herself, dressed by Valentino and sitting on a sofa

from the film set of "Senso" by Luchino Visconti. The connection between stars of the cinema and this lonely feminine activity is repeated in other works. Vezzoli chose some portraits of famous stars from the book by Ira von Fürstenberg, and printed them in black-and-white in laser technique; afterwards, with patience and perfection, he embroidered the details of the faces, e.g. eyebrows and upper eyelids, sometimes adding silver tears. Vezzoli says that several famous actors and film makers like Cary Grant, Vincente Minelli and Silvana Magnano used to embroider, often when faced with personal tragedies, perhaps in an attempt to control their suffering. Szeemann believes that Vezzoli's work is a metaphor for the conflicting demands of public and private life.

Renata Pompas



Ernest Leto: Installation made of lycra like an organic temple with textile columns