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# The Washington Post

VENICE BIENNALE 2007

## At the Cyprus Pavilion, Fruit With an Unexpected Bite



Renée Van Halm with artist Mustafa Hulusi's oil on canvas "Lemon Tree" and "Untitled (Grapes 2)." (By Blake Gopnik -- The Washington Post)

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Tuesday, June 12, 2007

VENICE -- Each day this week, The Post will look at some of the best art at the Venice Biennale.

Renée Van Halm, a hard-nosed artist now living in Berlin, couldn't imagine liking photo-realist paintings of fruit. Neither could Washington collectors Barbara and Aaron Levine. That couple's taste runs to Marcel Duchamp, and they're happy to buy art that's not much more than some words on a wall. For my part, I have often railed against art that's all about looking back toward

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traditional technique rather than forward with new ideas.

That's why all of us were surprised to exchange notes and find that we'd enjoyed just such paintings, in a sweet little rented palazzo well off the beaten track that houses this year's Cyprus pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Artist Mustafa Hulusi, born in Cyprus but now doing well in London, has filled two rooms in the palazzo with his pictures, which reach almost from floor to ceiling in the light-bathed space.

As usual, God -- or rather, Art -- was in the details.

In the subjects, to begin with. Hulusi has chosen fruits -- figs, oranges and purple grapes -- that are classic icons of Mediterranean landscape and culture. More than icons: cliches, in this case blown up so that each grape is the size of your head, each orange the size of a beach ball. Instead of worshiping these symbols, the paintings seem to gently mock them, now that they've been enlarged to the point of absurdity. The paintings point to airbrushed travel ads; they don't read as directly realistic pictures of the fruits they represent. The show's press release even cites the slick look of fascist and communist propaganda that lurks behind the work.

Then there's the way the pictures are made. For all the natural splendor implied in these paintings' subjects, the extreme artifice involved in making them is ever present. The paintings' surfaces are absolutely matte and smooth, without a sign of how they're built. That lets you read right through them -- to the equally artifice-filled photographs they're based on. They are about culture, not nature. They're at their best when they work hard to hide the marks of the human hand that made them, and then

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inevitably fail as we recognize the hackneyed realistic style that they're worked up in. (One painting of pomegranates works less well than the others, because it has a highlight rendered with a splash of thick, bright-white paint. That splash seems too much like the heroic stroke of some great artist's brush.)

In Venice, Hulusi's art looked best under bright spotlights, which felt all the more palpable and artificial in contrast to the daylight from the nearby windows. With the lights briefly flicked off, the works seemed more conservative, less interesting.

If you assume that this artist knew precisely what he was doing -- and at the Venice Biennale, that's the assumption you make -- then this complexity and irony becomes part of the content of his pictures, not a happy accident read into them by others. But even then, all this explanation really comes after the fact. What's crucial is that, one bright day in Venice, swimming in a sea of video and installation art, these paintings seemed to work. They even worked for people who wouldn't have imagined that they could -- who might almost have been happier if they *hadn't*. Once again, a particular experience of art beat down preconceptions and position-staking.

*The Venice Biennale* continues through Nov. 21. For further information on the Cyprus pavilion, visit <http://www.cyprusinvenice.org>.

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