

FINE ARTS
LEISURE

Weekend ARTS

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To Big Bambú, a Big Buongiorno

A New York hit trades Central Park for the Grand Canal. The Starn twins' "Big Bambú," on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's rooftop last summer, is in Venice for the Biennale. Inside Art, Page 22.

2

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Inside Art

Carol Vogel

Above the Grand Canal,
'Big Bambú' Rises

VENICE — This jaded New Yorker wondered if it was really necessary to come all the way here to see "Big Bambú: You Can't, You Don't, and You Won't Stop," a hugely popular installation by the artist twins Mike and Doug Starn when it appeared on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art last summer.

The talk of New York, it was a network of roughly 7,000 interlocking bamboo poles craftily held together with nylon climbing rope. Over several months it evolved into a monumental structure, with walkways cresting some 50 feet in the air. By the time the installation closed last fall more than 600,000 visitors had trekked along its paths, taking in the panoramic views of the city and Central Park.

But it seems very different and even more magical here in Venice, where the overwhelming scent of jasmine and honeysuckle is the first thing visitors notice.

Now nearly 50 feet above the city (and rising), the structure offers a postcard-perfect scene of the Grand Canal, along with the occasional cruise ship and views of the Venetian rooftops.

From the ground "Big Bambú," here for the Biennale, resembles a giant bird's nest, settling in the courtyard of a space that was once the United States consulate, next door to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection on the canal. The space was last used to display art in 1964, as an annex to the American Pavilion, when Robert Rauschenberg was representing the United States in the Biennale.

For the last month the Starns, along with a crew of 11 rock climbers, have been here building "Big Bambú." On Monday afternoon, as they worked to the loud strains of Prince, Michael Jackson and Led Zeppelin (the same playlist that could be heard when they erected the installation in New York), Mike Starn noted that this site was somewhat smaller than the one at the Met. "But it's still the same piece," he insisted.

Except in Venice about 3,000 poles are required, shipped here by boat. Some are poles that were used in New York; others come from France. As the team keeps working throughout the summer



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

"Pseudogroup of Guiseppe Panza," part of Barry X Ball's exhibition in the Ca' Rezzonico palace for the Venice Biennale.

and early fall, it expects the installation to grow to around 75 feet high and use 30 miles of climbing rope.

Many concerns about the New York installation apply here as well, including weight restrictions. Rather than test the structure's strength using sandbags as they did at the Met, the artists lifted a kiddie pool and large containers with 7,000 pounds of water onto the structure to determine that it could easily support about a dozen people at one time.

With the Biennale opening to the art world on Tuesday, the Starns estimate about 60 people an hour will climb or walk on "Big Bambú," or 700 to 1,000 a day.

But not being associated with a giant institution like the Met means things are more relaxed. The crew can play the music far louder (something museum curators had constantly grumbled about). It also means visitor restrictions are simpler. The Met required timed tickets and guided tours; here visitors will be allowed up first come first served, and there will be no tours.

"We don't have the manpower here," Mike Starn said.

Nor will they require the public to wear rubber-soled shoes or check bags for hands-free climbing. "One woman dropped her BlackBerry yesterday," Mr. Starn noted. "But she didn't seem upset. This is Italy."

On Sunday night the artists slept under the stars atop "Big

Bambú," something they always wanted to do in New York but were not allowed to.

"It was so beautiful," Mr. Starn said. "And it sure beats a hotel."

A Patron's Nine Heads

The Starn twins were among dozens of artists who have come here either to install work or just see what everyone else is up to.

Among them is Barry X Ball, the New York sculptor known for using three-dimensional computer scans as well as traditional carving techniques. This week Mr. Ball was standing at the entrance to Ca' Rezzonico — the majestic Baroque palace turned museum of 18th-century furniture, frescos and paintings — where he had just finished installing "Portraits and Masterpieces." His lavish exhibition, of 27 sculptures placed in 19 rooms, consists of meticulous stone busts, some of which are his own takes on specific works in the palazzo's collection and some of which he created to echo the sumptuous interiors. Some he made years ago but installed so that they correspond to their new surroundings.

"It all started about four years ago, when I wanted to have access to two Baroque sculptures here so I could make 3-D scans of them," Mr. Ball said. "Subliminally Ca' Rezzonico started getting into my head. I've been here six times this year, holding up every

work I've made to try to integrate it with the place."

At the top of the grand staircase visitors are greeted by a row of nine heads — all of the same person. Fashioned from white Macedonia marble, each head has a different scale and surface. In some the eyes are closed; in others they are staring straight ahead; in still others they are looking up or down. The head is that of Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, the Italian industrialist who before his death last year had amassed a collection of 26 works by Mr. Ball. "These weren't commissions," the artist said. "I don't do commissions."

But he does delight in interpreting old sculptures, and two at the Ca' Rezzonico are installed next to their inspirations. One is "Envy," by the Venetian sculptor Giusto Le Court, dating from around 1670. It is in place next to Mr. Ball's 2008-9 version of Belgian black marble. The other, in the parlor, is "The Veiled Lady (Purity)" by Antonio Corradini, made around 1720-25. It is paired with Mr. Ball's white Iranian onyx version. "I removed her Latin cross," he explained of his interpretation. "I wanted to make her more universal."

Color in a Sepia City

Some artists use the idyllic backdrop of Venice simply to have fun. On Tuesday the German artist Katharina Fritsch made a visit to the tip of the Arsenale, the old dockyards that have been transformed into exhibition spaces for the Biennale, to see the installation of a group of her sculptures lacquered in hot colors. There was a giant neon yellow skull, an acid-green Santa Claus, a purple egg, a statue of a bright red St. Catherine and a white snake. The works echo a group of nine life-size sculptures now in the Museum of Modern Art sculpture garden in New York.

"It's more classical at MoMA; this is a little bit mad," Ms. Fritsch acknowledged. Dressed herself in a bright pink T-shirt, she explained, "It's an experiment, a bit psychedelic."

Still, she has more outlandishly colored sculptures in the works. She has been selected to erect, in 2013, a bright blue rooster atop the Fourth Plinth at Trafalgar Square in London.