

## Print Article



Alison Gingeras and Jean-Jacques Aillagon



Robert Gober's *Door with Lightbulb* (1992) at the Palazzo Grassi



Mike Kelley's *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1 (Domestic Scene)* (2000) at the Palazzo Grassi

## PINAULT AND CO. by Ben Davis

"Sequence 1: Painting and Sculpture in the François Pinault Collection," May 5-Nov. 11, 2007, at the Palazzo Grassi, Campo San Samuele, 3231 CP 708, Venice, Italy

François Pinault is an art-world King Kong. He owns Christie's auction house. He has a collection of between 2,500 and 3,000 pieces of primo art and his own personal curator. He's a veteran of the number one spot on innumerable art-world "Power" lists.

It's time, then, to answer the proverbial question: Where does a 600-pound gorilla put his art?

Anywhere he wants, of course, but for now it's the stately Palazzo Grassi in Venice, where a formidable selection from his collection, titled "Sequence 1," has just gone on view.

Two years ago, frustrated at the slow pace of his plan to found his own museum on an island in the Seine in a Paris suburb, Pinault transferred his ambitions to Venice. Striking a deal with local authorities, he took over the dormant cultural space of the Palazzo Grassi and hired starchitect Tadeo Ando to perform a tasteful, workmanlike renovation.

Jean-Jacques Aillagon, former culture minister under Jacques Chirac, is captain of Pinault's Venetian endeavor, and he wants to be clear that all is exactly as his boss would have it. "It is not a consolation prize," he says of the Palazzo Grassi. Indeed, for Pinault has also scored rights to another enviable Venice site, the city's Punta della Dogana, which will eventually hold a more permanent display of his collection.

Pinault's polished, "anywhere he wants it" mastery is also what "Sequence 1" is designed to project. Organized with a sure hand by Pinault curator Alison Gingeras, "Sequence 1" boasts a roster of artists that seems calibrated to reflect the cheerful multiculturalism of tourism, Venice's lifeblood. The show includes scads of Americans (Kristin Baker, Robert Gober, David Hammons, Mike Kelley, Louise Lawler, Laura Owens and Richard Prince); Europeans from the richer parts (Urs Fischer from Switzerland, Martial Raysse from France, Anselm Reyle from Germany and Franz West from Austria); plus a selection of artists from further afield, including Takashi Murakami (whose new works for the Palazzo Grassi remained unfinished for the press opening), Subodh Gupta (India), the South Africa-born, Netherlands-based Marlene Dumas and, last but not least, Roberto Cuoghi and Rudolf Stingel, representing homegrown Italian visitors.

To Gingeras' credit, all of the artists seem right at home in the Palazzo Grassi, like pearls nestled in the baroque folds of an oyster shell. Ando has turned most of the rooms into clean white cubes, but he has left key bits of the traditional ceilings and walls visible, so that visitors don't forget where they are at.

Sometimes "Sequence 1" takes advantage of the obliteration of the historical space, as with Robert Gober's red light bulb above a door



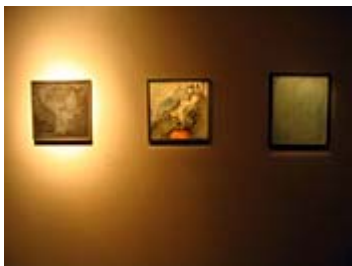
Subodh Gupta's *Very Hungry God* (2006) at the Palazzo Grassi



Richard Prince's *Entertainers* (1982) in "Sequence 1" at Palazzo Grassi



Kristin Baker's *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold* (2007) at the Palazzo Grassi



Works from Roberto Cuoghi's "Axis of Evil" (2007) at the Palazzo Grassi

flanked by stacks of newspapers, set in a darkened white room -- suddenly you're in a haunted amusement park. Elsewhere, the art purposefully vibrates against the context, as with Mike Kelley's spare, deliberately incoherent recreation of the set for a high school play, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1 (Domestic Scene)*, which features a bed and a stove surrounded by some drab walls and set on a blank rug. This pathetic setup clashes pleasantly with the grandiose, densely decorative ceiling.

For those who have been paying attention to contemporary art, there are iconic statements at every turn. Arriving by water taxi, one is greeted by Subodh Gupta's enormous skull made of pots beside the dock out front, fresh from serving as highlight of the "La Nuit Blanche" festival in Paris last year. On the first floor alone are a room filled with black monoliths inset with Richard Prince photographs of blurry movie stars, a funky homemade David Hammons basketball hoop leaning against a wall and a gallery with Urs Fischer's box of Camel cigarettes hanging on a string, moved slowly around the room by a mechanical arm -- one from an edition that turned heads at last year's Art Basel Miami Beach.

On the whole, however, "Sequence 1" wrestles mightily with what the *New York Times* recently called the "I'm Rich, Here's My Stuff" syndrome. This show wants to be taken much more seriously than a random collection of great and important things you can buy with \$14.5 billion (Pinault's fortune, according to *Forbes*). It pursues this goal, first of all, by commissioning brand new great, important things for the exhibition, thus signaling it as an event that is more than just the sum of preexisting parts. Thus, we have Kristin Baker's *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold* -- a mural-sized work that resembles a Futurist skateboarding ramp turned on its side -- and Roberto Cuoghi's "Axis of Evil" cycle, nine paintings displayed in a low-lit back gallery, each one taking the borders of a country "considered hostile to the West" and making a semi-abstract composition of it, layering together glass, lead, ink and, according to the label, cocoa butter.

From Louise Lawler is a new suite of photographs that document the installation of Gingeras' 2006 show of the Pinault collection at the Palazzo Grassi, "Where Are We Going?," capturing details like the hoof of a preserved Damien Hirst animal sculpture. Another photo, titled *Adolf (Must be Installed 8 Inches from the Floor)* features a crated version of Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture of a tiny Hitler, and is found, as per the title, randomly placed at shin level among the other art treasures.

Both in its knowing play with the space and its self-reference to the idea of Pinault as supercollector, Lawler's piece is emblematic of a kind of labyrinthine, self-aware spin Gingeras gives the show. The experience resembles a slightly more genteel version of the keep-'em-guessing curating of the last Whitney Biennial -- but there, it was meant to stand in for the sense of fragmentation and centerlessness of contemporary America, whereas here it is an attempt to make Pinault's artistic personality seem total, the way putting two mirrors face-to-face yields the effect of an endlessly receding space. It is in this sense, finally, that "Sequence 1" is owned by the trio of Fischer, Stingel and West.

Gingeras speaks enthusiastically in conversation about the elusive Hammons' personal participation in the installation of his works -- a not-so-subtle way of telegraphing the weight the Pinault project pulls. Next to these three Europeans, though, Hammons' participation is (characteristically) invisible. Fischer, Stingel and West's involvement is all over the place. They are out front when you approach from the street, where stands a rickety white kiosk on stilts designed by Stingel and West.



Louise Lawler's *Adolf (Must Be Installed 8 Inches from the Floor)* (2006) at the Palazzo Grassi



Rudolf Stingel and Franz West's *Untitled* (2006), installed outside the Palazzo Grassi



Urs Fischer's *Jet Set Lady* (2000-2005) and Rudolf Stingel's *Untitled* (2006) carpet, at the Palazzo Grassi

Stingel and Fischer dominate the entry to the show. The rug is a Stingel artwork, a jittery black-and-white simulacrum of a carpet pattern, while the atrium is dominated by a giant Christmas-tree-like construction by Fischer. Assembled from a chaotic and dense myriad of metal-framed images, Fischer's sculpture is billed as a 3D depiction of the inside of the artist's brain, which, to judge by what we see here, contains mainly cartoons and porno.

And the whole shebang climaxes on the third floor, where the contributions of Fischer and West come into glorious, playful collision down one long hall. On one end is a West work titled *Oasis*, a new collection of West's signature furniture, but made with air mattresses on steel frames, accompanied by "instructions for use" videos featuring comely black-clad young people cavorting on the furniture. West brought in another artist, Tamuna Sibirladze, to repaint the walls, and visitors are encouraged to sit and interact with all the gear (in comic contrast to Fischer's cigarette-pack-on-a-string piece a floor below, where the poor guards frantically attempt to warn each new visitor of the invisible thread).

Neighboring rooms also contain Fischer's ghostly gray copies of classic post-war paintings that were previously displayed in the palazzo. Faint images of Rothkos, Mardens and Serras -- termed "wallpaper" by Fischer -- haunt the space, complete with copied wall labels easily confused with the contemporary ones. The artist's work becomes both an homage to and a mockery of curator, collector and space.

Compared to these artists' open, anything-goes enthusiasm for their Pinault-approved license, the other participants can only appear a bit standoffish, as if they don't quite get what game they are playing. Gingeras seems to favor the anti-art gestures of this European trio, not just in the number of their works she includes but also temperamentally. Incestuous, slippery flirtations with power run to her taste. After all, she has already become an artwork herself in *Untitled (Ginger Ass)*, when her boyfriend Piotr Uklanski ran a photo of her naked posterior as a "centerfold" in *Artforum* magazine, for which she wrote an accompanying essay on the esthetics of self-promotion (also revealing that "Uklanski likes porn.")

At the Palazzo Grassi is a sly repetition of this gesture, found in a painting that greets visitors as they ascend the grand stairway to the first floor. A large mock-up of an invitation to the show itself, executed in a vaguely expressionist style by Franz West, it features the title of the exhibition, prominently highlighting the name of François Pinault, and a list of the names of the artists in the show -- with Gingeras inserted seamlessly among them. Somehow crass and classy at once, sleek and self-mythologizing, conceptual and trophy-like, the work makes one believe that King Pinault has found his perfect Fay Wray in Gingeras.

**BEN DAVIS** is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.





Franz West's *Oasis* (1997-2007) at the Palazzo Grassi



Urs Fischer's *Not titled, yet (wall paper)* (2007) at the Palazzo Grassi



David Hammons and admirers at the opening of "Sequence 1"



Franz West's *La Sagra* (2007) at the Palazzo Grassi