

How many stories are there in a single piece of art? Another ride in the ambivalent lane.

Fernando Palma Rodríguez, *Tetzahuitl (Omen)*,
Mexican Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022

I enter a bright atrium open-ended to the outdoors, canal glinting in the dewy Venetian sun. *What I see* is a host of pretty little-girl dresses of the sort I wore as a child. Innocent little robots, they dangle from cables affixed to beams high-up on the industrial ceiling. The dresses begin to tremble. At the level of the viewer, they start to jiggle excitedly more or less in unison. A dress begins to rise toward the ceiling. Soon, one or two more follow. From above, the 'risen' dresses continue to jiggle ever more insistently until, one-by-one, most of those below appear to follow, rising toward the ceiling. There is no overt suggestion of menace: even the industrial mechanism that moves and suspends the dresses is mostly reminiscent of familiar conveyors used in fast food restaurants or for the hanging of outdoor holiday decorations. And yet, standing there amidst such natural and manufactured beauty, what I see, absurdly, is an allegory of the human tribe in which one rises to the top and seems to dictate to the others below, insistently gesturing for them to follow. It is arresting. It is all of the dictators existing over eons spreading their lies to adoring crowds, who seem to see these monsters as enhanced, glorified, and benevolent versions of themselves. Such pretty little things. It gets to me. I am transfixed by the sneaky charm of the piece.



What Rodríguez says - The title, "*Tetzahuitl*," Omen or Harbinger in his native language, characterizes the piece as emblematic of the relentless victimization of the innocent and the vulnerable. That there are 43 of these child surrogates refers also to the 43 "desaparecidos," the Mexican students who disappeared in 2014, evidently at the hands of organized crime abetted by corrupt officials. Nothing personal, perhaps simply a case of having been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but disappeared nonetheless, like Rodríguez's native language, into the great jiggle and thrust of modernity. The piece is rich enough to contain many stories, of course - no harm in that - and, indeed, our two views have much in common, particularly in the psychologies of viewer and creator. Problem is, in the context of the great contemporary art gathering that is the Biennale, it takes little imagination, really, to 'read' just about everything as a statement of injustice, untruth, complicity, horror, and harm. I'm not suggesting this is not the current state of affairs, not by a long shot, just that the ubiquity of such statements can seriously diminish the power of art to move or enlighten. After so many days immersed in this great pool of human creation, love, rage, hypocrisy, and grief, it's all pretty numbing.

So what remains, after all the blah, blah, blah of now? What will I remember? I think I will remember the beauty, the idiosyncratic mystery of imagination, hand (the uniqueness of individual artists,) the sheer joy and passion in the making, even the echo of myself in the mind of a stranger. In mind-numbing soul-crushing times these are victories.