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Anne Imhof, Fierce Young Artist and Choreographer, Wins Venice's Top Prize

By Jason Farago

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VENICE — The top prize of the Venice Biennale, the world's oldest and grandest international exhibition of contemporary art, was awarded on Saturday to Anne Imhof, an artist and choreographer whose grim and threatening occupation of the German pavilion, complete with anti-riot wire fences and barking Doberman pinschers, was the talk of the art world last week.

Ms. Imhof was awarded the Golden Lion for best national participation, which is given to the strongest of the 85 exhibitions mounted in pavilions in the Giardini della Biennale and across Venice.

For her exhibition, entitled “Faust,” Ms. Imhof blocked the front door of the German pavilion, built during the Nazi era, and installed a raised glass floor through which a leather collar and bottles of hand sanitizer were visible. A dozen performers in black athletic wear posed and preened among spectators or on raised platforms. They crawled under the glass floor at times and walked slowly, like wraiths, against a harsh metallic musical score. The performances are to run throughout the Venice Biennale's six-month duration, though “Faust” is just as unsettling when seen empty.

“First off, I felt aggressively affronted,” said Catherine Wood, a senior curator at the Tate Modern in London and a specialist in performance. “The dogs were barking behind a tall wire fence, and I was being shunted around to the side of the building with a massive crowd. Yet the movement, mood and sound inside — the dronelike group poses, and a tall, thin woman slow-motion headbanging, tossing her long black hair — were exquisitely calibrated and seducing.

“I thought the sadistic state of hyper-visibility inside was brilliantly conceived,” Ms. Wood continued. “Between the glass architecture and the performance as a theatrical spectacle without a backstage, there was nowhere to hide. But she finds a space, in this impossible state of existence, for poetry and music and ways of being together that are classic and beautiful.”

Ms. Imhof's work, which disturbingly mixes totalitarian imagery with the slouchy looks made famous by fashion designers such as Balenciaga's Demna Gvasalia, divided spectators at the biennial's preview this week. Her dark vision was previously on display in "Deal," a performance and exhibition at MoMA PS1 in 2015 in New York, which featured several of the same dancers in an equally bleak exploration of anomie and repression.

An honorable mention for national participation went to Brazil, which featured a minimal installation of stones and welded grating by the artist Cinthia Marcelle. (Ms. Marcelle currently has an exhibition on view at MoMA PS1.)

Ms. Imhof's show was favored to win the Golden Lion, and the wait to get in stretched for nearly an hour during last week's professional preview. Other national presentations that garnered praise included those of the United States, which the artist Mark Bradford endowed with a downbeat but powerful sequences of paintings and papier-mâché sculptures, and Romania, which featured a poetic mini-retrospective of the 91-year-old artist Geta Bratescu.

The Venice Biennale is a show presented in two parts: Alongside 85 national presentations in which countries present solo shows or thematic exhibitions, a central exhibition takes the pulse of art worldwide. This year's exhibition was organized by Christine Macel, the chief curator of the Pompidou Center in Paris, and the jury also awarded several participants in the central exhibition.

The Golden Lion for the central show's best artist went to Franz Erhard Walther of Germany, for his hanging fabric works meant to be activated by viewer participation. His large, architectural textiles, in bright red or ravishing saffron, are both sculptures and performative pieces, meant to be handled however spectators wish (though visitors cannot touch the older examples on view). Mr. Walther is one of many artists who works with textiles and is featured in Ms. Macel's exhibition.

The Silver Lion, awarded to the most promising young artist in the central exhibition, went to the London-born Hassan Khan. Mr. Khan, who now lives in Egypt, created a multi-speaker sound installation playing string instruments and hushed voices in a park at the extreme end of the Arsenale, the former naval site that hosts most of the show.

The jury awarded two special mentions for artists in the central exhibition. One went to Charles Atlas, a veteran media artist, for his multi-projection video "The Tyranny of Consciousness," which intermixes everyday images of sunsets with a pointed political monologue by the drag queen Lady Bunny. The other was awarded to the Kosovar artist Petrit Halilaj, who exhibited large hanging sculptures of moths crafted out of traditional fabrics from his country.

Earlier, a Golden Lion for lifetime achievement was awarded to the American artist Carolee Schneemann, whose paintings, performances and videos explore the boundaries of the body and the political power of women's sexuality.

Ms. Wood observed that all three of the Golden Lions — for Ms. Schneemann and for the Germans of two generations — went to artists working with performance.

"I think we are seeing a fundamental shift in perspective, where our view of art objects pans back to explicitly reveal its social and political base," she said.

"People are part of art and what it means. It's a state of liveness, of potential for change, of positions and relations that artists are concerned with. It's an acknowledgment that our ways of doing things and our hierarchies of value are up for grabs."

The prizes were awarded by a five-member jury chaired by Manuel J. Borja-Villel, the director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.

The Venice Biennale runs through Nov. 26.