

Making a splash in Venice

IN THE art world, the Venice Biennale means the newest, the most intriguing, the biggest, the broadest, the most buzzing contemporary festival around.

More than 70 countries showcase their top artists, 30,000 journalists, art critics and VIPs rush through the famous city and careers are made or destroyed in an instant.

But in New Zealand, where government money is helping to fund a fourth trip to Italy – this time for the artists Francis Upritchard and Judy Millar – the Venice Biennale means something quite different.

Ever since our 2005 representative, the art “collective” known as et al, came up with a site-specific installation, *The Fundamental Practice*, and then refused to talk about it, the festival has been associated with elitists – artists who take the money and run.

But what’s the art that we actually send over there?

And how crucial is it that you understand it?

Upritchard, a London-based sculptor, is best-known for her figures inspired by the paintings of Dutch painters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel.

She will display the figures, which she paints a range of eerie colours, in three chambers within the Fondazione Claudio Buziol overlooking the Grand Canal.

It’s an “amazing” space that she was offered at a party, she says – and she has had to build all the furniture to suit it, from three large tables to her own lamps.

“I think a white plinth would look very weird and modern and heavy . . . so I had to do something a bit more complicated.”

She started making figures, she says, “because there was actually not a lot of good figurist sculpture about”.

“It’s a hard thing to do. It’s very easy to make figures look really naff. So I started

with figures I liked from art, old medieval bone and wood sculptures. But then I started painting them really psychedelic colours to make the time of them look much more weird.”

Millar was to exhibit in a church that has just been restored after decades of lying empty. However, she is considering two other venues because the restoration project may not be completed in time. Her plan is to show work that “plays against” a classical location.

Traditionally a painter, she is using the ample space to make three-dimensional works that force the viewer to interact. “You’ll be able to walk right around them. One of them is a large cylinder that will take up a lot of the space . . . so instead of standing and being a passive viewer, you’ll be forced to be literally a moving viewer.”

She doesn’t like the term “abstract”, even though her exhibition is called Giraffe-Bottle-Gun after the various shapes people thought they saw in her works.

Instead, she says, she is about “image formation”, getting people to understand that what they are looking at is both a real work of art and an illusion of other things.

“I find that endlessly fascinating.”

Both artists say they are sad that many people find contemporary art baffling.

“Art’s really easy,” Upritchard says. “It doesn’t matter if you like it or not. You can just look at it and maybe you like it, maybe you don’t. People get wound up about it, but I think art’s like literature: you like some things, you don’t like some things.”

“Germany this time around is showing the work of a British artist . . . everyone understands that, to some extent, contemporary art’s an international language.”

■ The Venice Biennale runs from June to November.

Francis Upritchard and Judy Millar are heading to Venice for the world's most prestigious and controversial art show. They tell **Tom Fitzsimons** what they're planning.



Cutting edge: Judy Millar, left, and Francis Upritchard will represent New Zealand at the Venice Biennale from June