

SEEING BEAUTY IN VENICE'S POLLUTION

While most visitors to Venice simply gape at the dazzling array of Byzantine, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture, architect Jorge Otero-Pailos sees something more: the layers of history that have accrued on the buildings' surfaces. His project, *The Ethics of Dust: Doge's Palace, Venice 2009*, on view in the Arsenale as part of Daniel Birnbaum's "Making Worlds" exhibition at the Venice Biennale, takes as its primary material the strata of grime and pollution detached from an exterior wall behind the loggia of the city's iconic Doge's Palace beside Piazza San Marco. The work consists of a 40-by-23-foot sheet of mottled latex hung on scaffolding. To create it, the architect and theorist, a professor of historic preservation at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) at Columbia University in New York, brushed chemically treated latex onto an uncleaned wall of the Doge's Palace and, when it dried, peeled off centuries' worth of pollution, like someone wielding a Bioré complexion strip.

Otero-Pailos received permission to clean the wall behind the columns of the loggia from the city's landmarks preservation commissioner, who—the architect explained to *A.i.A.* (in a phone and e-mail exchange)—was willing to explore cleaning alternatives for Venice's monuments. While the palace's exterior facade had already been cleaned using conventional methods (which, Otero-Pailos says, removes the natural patina of age along with the pollution), the wall behind it, mostly out of public view, had not. Because his method removes only the grime, his wall "looks cleaner than the surrounding walls, but not as bright as the facade." Often asked how to categorize his work, he admits that art-world observers say "it's just preservation," while preservationists dismiss his projects as "just art." Otero-Pailos claims it's both, and intends his work as a critique of preservation practices.

Otero-Pailos hopes that viewers first see the work in the Arsenale as a large-scale abstraction before identifying the compositional crud and the subtle imprint of wall features, such as the mortar between the stones. Like certain abstract paintings, he says, his panel focuses attention on material, in this case the most common yet unintended product of modern civilization. He created a similar project for the 2008 Manifesta biennial, that one comprising 175 smaller latex panels cast from a wall at the Fascist-era Alumix factory in Bolzano, Italy.

The Venice project is also the springboard for a one-day symposium, "The Last Temptation of the Contemporary: Art and Architecture in Dance with Heritage," organized by



The wall at the Doge's Palace in Venice prior to Otero-Pailos's cleaning. Inset, the architect peeling latex from the wall.

the GSAPP and the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary foundation and collection in Vienna (TBA-21), which commissioned Otero-Pailos's piece. The conference takes place on June 6 from 4:00 to 7:30 at the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti. Speakers include Otero-Pailos, Birnbaum, Columbia dean Mark Wigley, TBA-21 founder Francesca Von Habsburg and curator Daniela Zyman, former Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Museum director Thomas Krens, Prospect.1 New Orleans director Dan Cameron, scholar Boris Groys, and Lorenzo Fusi, curator of the 2010 Liverpool Biennial. The symposium marks the launch of the GSAPP's Global Initiative for Art-Architecture Experiments, which seeks to investigate issues pertaining to the built environment and cultural production.

—Stephanie Cash