

A lot can change in two years. Opening in the summer of 2014, the loosely themed international group exhibition at the centre of the eighth Liverpool Biennial (a mainstay of the event's structure) was a sprawling show of new and older works, overseen by two curators under the title *A Needle Walks into a Haystack*. Nominally about subverting convention, it was installed in the atmospheric shell of a former school for the blind. Twelve months later the building reopened as a zoo-cover bar and kitchen.

Like its host city, the biennial seeks to renew itself. For 2016 there aren't two or even three main curators but a curatorial faculty of 11. There isn't one theme but six 'episodes', each focused on an idea of narrative fiction or journey through time and place. Commissions in response to this framework by 44 international artists are shown in different groupings across 22 venues plus public spaces, with each venue posited as a form of porous portal through which elements converge. Some artists have works in more than one episode,

many artists have multiple works in more than one venue and some venues are showing works from more than one episode. If it sounds overcomplicated, it is – but if you get into the spirit of it, this idea of layering and repetition does actually succeed in bringing the whole biennial together.

So where to begin? The 'Ancient Greece' episode, mostly at Tate Liverpool, which takes the city's rich architectural history, in particular its neoclassical buildings, as a reference is a good place to start. Andreas Angelidakis's 3D-printed sculptures and accompanying film reimagine Ancient Greek vases as architecture. There's Mumbai-based Sahej Rahal's installations of half-formed rough clay figures and shapes that suggest both fossilised artefacts from an ancient civilisation and primeval forms of life emerging from a new one. There's a colourful ceramic wall relief by Betty Woodman with motifs that also refer to pots or vessels. And there's a huge marble knee, a fragment of classical statuary from National Museum Liverpool's antiquities

collection. In the spirit of the biennial, this is a work that has genuinely time-travelled, from the fourth century AD to today. Small piles of leaves and litter also appear to have blown in from somewhere. This is part of another work, by American artist Jason Dodge. Collected over many years this ephemera is another archaeology of sorts, explained by the title of the work, *What the living do*.

The explanations of other episodes are both a little looser and more overlapping. There's 'Chinatown', about migration and in particular the city's established Chinese population, 'Children's Episode', about the ability of kids to blur fiction and reality, and 'Monuments from the Future', for which artists have been asked to imagine what a monument made to the Liverpool of the not-too-distant future might look like now. 'Flashback' relates to the idea of a rupture of the present by the past, and then there's 'Software', which in this context means performance, in terms of scripts, scores and choreographies.



Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, *Dogsy Ma Bone* (production still), performance, 12 June 2016 at Cains Brewery, Liverpool. Photo: Mark McNulty. Courtesy the artist, Liverpool Biennial and Sadie Coles HQ, London

The school for the blind may be gone as a biennial venue, but the next stop on the journey, the art deco style former ABC Cinema, closed since 1998, provides a similarly atmospheric, almost pitch-black setting for a group of 'Flashback' works. These include stuttering film clips by Samson Kambalu, and Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni's film *1922 – The Uncomputable*. Shown on a large screen, *1922* is the latest instalment in a series of theatrical films telling the story of a *Terminator*-style future where the machines have taken over. Its portentous narration sits perfectly against the dilapidation of the building's peeling gilt interior. At the film's end the lights come up, revealing other works in the space, including a small pile of litter.

Moving on to the former Cains Brewery, also a reclaimed building, there's another large installation by Sahej Rahal as well as film and sculptures by Dubai-based collaborators Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian. Crudely constructed from foil, paper, paint, fabric and plastic objects, their low-fi figurative sculptures (each its own character) were sent to Liverpool from Dubai with artworks from the artists' own collection (by Robert Mapplethorpe, Rosemarie Trockel and others) hidden inside

them. These smuggled works are also on display. It's the broader theme of migration that puts this under 'Chinatown'. Also at Cains is Marvin Gaye Chetwynd's *Doggy Ma Bone* (2016), a performance documented on film, and the main commission for the 'Children's Episode'. Filmed among the boarded-up properties of Toxteth, Chetwynd's signature improv-style, politically minded cultural mashups – this one combining Betty Boop's *A Song a Day* (1936) with Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928) – is given a new twist by being performed by local kids, rather than Chetwynd's usual gang of grownup friends and acquaintances. It's counterintuitive, but it comes across as more serious as a result.

Onwards to the boarded-up terraces themselves, the focus project of 2015 Turner Prize-winning architectural collective Assemble, and another location the biennial has used for the first time. Two large outdoor sculptural commissions, under 'Monuments from the Future', work particularly well. Made from the same perforated sheet-steel used to board up the nearby houses, Alisa Barenboym's dome-shaped structure contains a flesh-coloured sculpture. It's a clever extension of Barenboym's ideas about organic and synthetic hybridity that, as the holes in the tin sheet are frustratingly just too small

for the human eye to focus through, relies on a camera lens stuck against it for viewers to get a glimpse of the work inside. Lara Favaretto's huge rectangular granite monolith, which sits in the middle of the street, looks like the perfect imagined monument, but could equally be part of 'Chinatown'. It has a small slit through which visitors can post money. At the end of the biennial the monolith will be destroyed and the money given to a local refugee charity.

Back to the city centre and the Open Eye Gallery, where there's another sculpture by the Dubai-based collaborators, another small swirl of litter and a work by Koki Tanaka that perhaps best articulates the biennial's ideas about narratives past, present and future. Following a restaged walk through the city with some of the now middle-aged teenagers from Liverpool who took part in demonstrations against the UK's Youth Training Scheme programme in 1985, Tanaka filmed interviews with them about their views and experiences then and now. The subtext to their discussions, about how important it was back then to be able to join an active, vibrant labour youth organisation and gain a political education, is a reminder of just how different things are in the UK now.

Helen Sumpter



Lara Favaretto, *Momentary Monument – The Stone*, 2016  
(installation view, Welsh Streets, Liverpool Biennial).  
Photo: Joel Chester Fildes. Courtesy the artist and Liverpool Biennial