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At This Year’s Venice Biennale, Blood-Red Regattas Aim to Remind Attendees of Environmental Threats to the City

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Melissa McGill, Red Regatta (Coppa del Presidente della Repubblica), 2018.

COURTESY THE ARTIST/MAGAZZINO ITALIAN ART FOUNDATION

This May, during the 58th Venice Biennale, attendees will be privy to a large-scale public art installation by artist Melissa McGill in the form of a navy of about 50 traditional Italian vela al terzo sailboats on the Venice waterfront. The piece, which is independent from the bienniale, is titled Red Regatta, and each sailboat will have a hand-painted sail in a slightly different shade of red created by the artist in her studio.

McGill said in a phone interview that she is aiming to remind viewers of Venice’s fraught relationships to its waterways, which are threatened by rising sea levels. “It represents all that red can reference in a city like Venice . . . red has that urgency,” she said. “[Venetians] travel by water, but it’s being taken by water. I have personally seen this city change in my lifetime dramatically.”

As for the sailing involved, “It’s not a competitive regatta,” she said. “It’s more of a presentation. Basically, we are presenting these regattas as a way to bring together all these local boat owners with these beautiful traditional boats.”

The installation is a collaboration involving the artist, the Magazzino Italian Art Foundation, and more than 250 Venetian sailors, artisans, and art students who have  been helping ready various aspects of the project. (A photographic rendering of what the installation will look like is currently on display at Magazzino’s exhibition space in Cold Spring, New York.)

Traditionally, such boats would have their sails decorated with a family crest, McGill said, “but for this regatta, I’m referencing that tradition by hand-painting the sails with these different unique shades of red that I’ve developed. Each red can stand for a different thing, I wanted to embrace all of the readings of what red can reference.”

The piece will be on display in different forms from May through November, with four full regatta events: two in May, one in June, and one in September, and smaller appearances by the boats in between.