

Art World

This Artist Has Tapped Into Venice's Rich Maritime History With 100 Hand-Painted Sails That Will Float Through Venice During the Biennale

Artist Melissa McGill will stage four regattas throughout the course of the biennale.

Sarah Cascone, May 10, 2019



Melissa McGill with one of the boats for her project *Red Regatta*. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

For two years, artist [Melissa McGill](#) has had a vision: A fleet of traditional wooden boats, rigged with sails in shades of vivid crimson, sailing across the Venetian lagoon. Tomorrow, that vision will finally come to life in the inaugural outing of [Red Regatta](#), a public art project that is both a celebration of the city's maritime history and a cautionary tale about the effects of climate change and mass tourism.

"It's all about the wind and the waters, and this rich sailing culture," McGill told [artnet News](#). "Sailing is an environmentally friendly tradition. The motor boats throw wake that eats away at the city."

When we met, she was preparing to set sail on *Borin*, one of the 52 locally owned boats that will take part in *Red Regatta*. The boat's captain, a Venetian native in his 70s named Giorgio Giacometti, was hoisting the bright red sails. The boats were custom-made for the project, and hand-painted by local college students and other volunteers.

"It became this huge community bonding thing. It was really magical," McGill said. To paint the sails, her team used large paintbrushes and brooms. "They're very expressive brushstrokes, so when the sails are raised and the light comes through, it becomes a painting."



Red Regatta sail painting workshop in Spazio Thetis, Venice, March 2019. Photo by Melissa McGill, Marcella Ferrari, and Luca Marella, courtesy of the artist.

The artist first visited to Venice 30 years ago, as a recent college graduate. She stayed for two years, and has continued coming back regularly ever since. She staged another project, called *The Campi* —inspired by Venice's historic public squares—during the opening of the 2017 Venice Biennale.

It was then that she met Giorgio Righetti, president of the Associazione Vela al Terzo Venezia, a private club for sailors of *vela al terzo* boats. Flat-bottomed with a removable mast, the *vela al terzo* are designed to navigate the Venetian canals, with their many bridges and often shallow depths.

Although Venice is most associated with the gondola, the *vela al terzo* have been a fixture of the city for more than 1,000 years. Boats have been handed down generation to generation and lovingly maintained by their owners. Enchanted by these unique vessels, McGill came up with the idea for *Red Regatta* almost instantly.



Melissa McGill with one of the boats for her project *Red Regatta*. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

The Associazione quickly came on board with the project, with 52 members volunteering to lend their boats for the occasion. (They each get to keep the red sails.) McGill has taken photographs of each participating boat owner—four women and 48 men—against a red sail backdrop. The portraits and the stories of the sailors and their ships will be part of a forthcoming book.

“A huge part of this project is to connect the visitors and the people who live here. There’s one Venetian for something like every 350 tourists,” McGill said, noting that she can’t think of another international art project here that has involved hundreds of local residents the way *Red Regatta* has. “The *vela al terzo* is a really important tradition, and they’re really excited about sharing it more widely.”

The red color represents both a sense of strong emotions and the city of Venice itself, with its red-brick buildings and terracotta roofs, its flag, its historic trade in Venetian red pigment, and the use of red in the work of local Old Masters such as Titian and Tintoretto.



Melissa McGill with some of the sails for *Red Regatta* at the Associazione Velaal Terzo Venezia. Photo by Juliet Vincente.

McGill worked with [Golden Artist Colors](#), which donated supplies for the project, to produce a unique shade of red for each boat, ranging from scarlet to orange to magenta.

In total, McGill made 104 sails, two for each vessel. “Every boat is a different size, so every boat has custom sails,” she said. “Bravissimo, Giorgio!” McGill called out before our first voyage under one of the red sails, as the elderly sailor finished rigging *Borin*, so-named for the northern wind.



Melissa McGill with *Borin*, one of the boats for her project *Red Regatta*, and captain Giorgio Giacometti and a student volunteer. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“I like it!” she said. It was the first time McGill was testing out one of the *Red Regatta* sails—“that’s why I’m about to cry,” she joked.

A few minutes later, the crimson sails flashing against the sparkling blue-green waters. His experienced hands on the tiller, Giacometti guided us across the lagoon, tacking back and forth with ease. “The man has the sea in his blood,” McGill said.

Red Regatta will offer a striking visual spectacle ripe for Instagram, but it also presents a picture both of Venice’s past, and of an alternate future, should the city survive the threat of climate change.



Melissa McGill with one of the boats for her project *Red Regatta*. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

McGill worked with more than 250 Venetian partners on the piece, which is curated by Chiara Spangaro and project manager Marcella Ferrari. It was co-organized by [Magazzino Italian Art Foundation](#) in Cold Spring, New York, while [Ocean Space](#) and [No Longer Empty](#) collaborated on the programming. The first *Red Regatta* will set sail in Venice's northern lagoon, taking place between Fondamente Nove and Isola di San Michele.

There will be four regattas in total, with additional stagings in different areas of the city on June 30, September 1, and September 15. But it all kicks off this weekend, on the first public day for the Venice Biennale.

"It's been a real challenge," McGill said, "but now I can enjoy it."

"Melissa McGill: Red Regatta" is on view in the north lagoon in Venice, May 11, 2 p.m.–4 p.m. Viewing points are along the Fondamente Nove, from Fondamente Nove vaporetto stop to Ospedale vaporetto stop; Calle Giazzo, from Celestia vaporetto stop to Associazione Vela al Terzo headquarters. A reception with the artist will follow at the Associazione Vela al Terzo headquarters, Calle Giazzo 30122, Venice.

The June 30 Red Regatta will sail along the Lido between the islands of San Servolo and Poveglia, 12 p.m.–2 p.m. Viewing locations are Riva dei Sette Martiri, Viale Giardini Pubblici, San Servolo Island, and Lido's Lagoon waterfront.

The September 1 Red Regatta will sail along Canale della Giudecca, Bacino San Marco, and Canal Grande, 12 p.m.–2 p.m. Viewing points are Fondamenta Zattere, Punta della Dogana, Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, Piazza San Marco, Riva degli Schiavoni, Fondamenta della Giudecca, side of Canale della Giudecca Canal Grande.

The September 15 Red Regatta will sail between Burano and Torcello, 2 p.m.-4 p.m. Viewing points are the Burano waterfront and Torcello waterfront.