

VOGUE

V LIFE



Red Alert

Melissa McGill unleashes a fleet of crimson sails on the canals of Venice to raise awareness of climate change.

ART The artist Melissa McGill loves a logistical challenge. A few years ago, for *Constellation*, she drilled seventeen massive light poles into the bedrock of a tiny island in the middle of the Hudson River that's home to a crumbling, historically landmarked ruin. Now, for *Red Regatta*, she has persuaded scores of Venetian sailors to let her outfit their boats—traditional wooden *vela al terzo* that are in many cases family heirlooms—with her own hand-painted sails. From May through November of this year, she'll lead 50 vessels in a series of choreographed regattas through the waterways of Venice, each craft hoisting a sail colored a unique shade of red. One might recall Venetian brick and terra-cotta, another the crimson hues in Titian and Tintoretto paintings. Together they will become a shifting patchwork, a symphony of fiery tones transplanted to the lagoon, and a reminder, says McGill, of “the fragile balance between the city of Venice and the sea.”

McGill, 50, lives in New York's Hudson Valley but considers the Italian city a sort of spiritual home. She moved there for two years in the early 1990s as a young RISD graduate who had never before set foot in Europe and spoke no Italian. She has returned regularly ever since, allowing her a front-row seat to the challenges faced by Venetian friends, from both rising seas and runaway tourism (20 million visitors a year). Everyone knows that Venice, which was built on boggy ground, is sinking: One study predicts it will be underwater by the end of the century if global warming isn't dramatically curtailed. But it's also shrinking: Currently only about 50,000 people live there, more than 100,000 less than in the mid-twentieth century. As locals flee, Venetian customs—like sailing the *vela al terzo*, which are

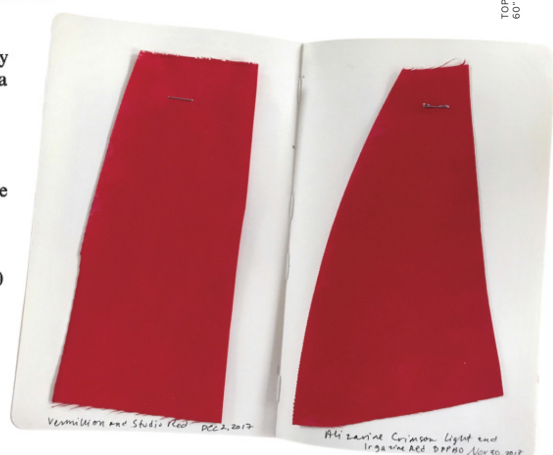
SHIP SHAPE
LEFT: MCGILL'S HAND-PAINTED PHOTOGRAPH OF HER NEW COMMISSION; BELOW: COLOR SWATCHES OF THE 50 SHADES FOR THE PROJECT.

more environmentally friendly than the now-ubiquitous motorboats—are imperiled.

An independent project that coincides with the Venice Biennale, *Red Regatta* is less an admonition than a wistful celebration of what climate change threatens—not just UNESCO-anointed art and architecture but people and their history: “She was able to develop this relationship with every single sailor, every single boat,” attests Vittorio Calabrese, director of the New York-based Magazzino Italian Art foundation, McGill's co-organizer in the project.

The artist, who grew up sailing off Long Island with her father, says she's “no technical expert,” but she has developed a familiarity with the terms of nautical life. *Red Regatta*'s curator, Chiara Spangaro, recently gave McGill an Italian/English technical nautical dictionary—“an incredible gift.” One term she gleaned directly from a captain who named his vessel *Gibigiana*, a word that describes the way Venetian sunlight bounces off water and dances on bridges or buildings nearby. “I've been taking pictures and making little videos of *gibigiana* for decades,” she marvels. “I had no idea it had a name.”

—JULIA FELSENTHAL



TOP: MELISSA MCGILL, RED REGATTA (COPPA DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA), 2018. UNIQUE FRAMED ARCHIVAL DIGITAL C-PRINT WITH PIGMENT. 80" X 96". BOTTOM: MELISSA MCGILL, RED REGATTA PROJECT NOTEBOOK, 2017. PIGMENT ON SAILCLOTH WITH HANDWRITTEN NOTATIONS.