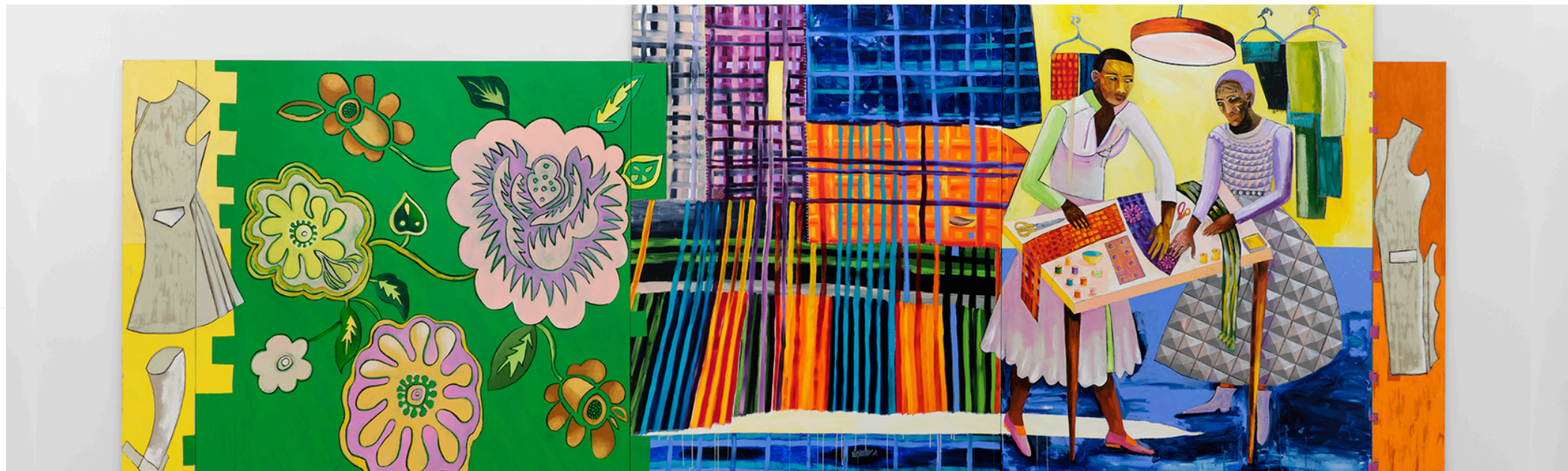


National Pavilions Review: Who's Afraid of Meaning?

A vacuous US presentation contrasts sharply with incisive and moving installations from Britain and Germany



By Andrew Durbin in Critic's Guides | 06 MAY 26



Nobody expected much of the US pavilion this year. The choice of artist was long delayed while the State Department overhauled the usual selection process. For a while, it was rumoured the honour might fall to right-wing 'philosopher' and blogger Curtis Yarvin, who campaigned publicly with a project based on Titian. According to *The New York Times*, artist Robert Lazzarini and curator John Ravenal were initially approved, only for the fiscal sponsor to drop out last year. Enter Jenni Parido, the newly appointed commissioner for the pavilion – and the former owner of a pet-food store in Tampa – who called in curator Jeffrey Uslip to find a suitable artist. A few declined, including Barbara Chase-Riboud. Finally, they settled on the sculptor Alma Allen, who currently lives in Mexico.



Alma Allen, 'Call Me the Breeze', 2026, exhibition view, US pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

Before the announcement, I was only dimly aware of Allen and had found his work largely harmless – like decor for a pricey fragrance store in Palm Springs. Here, in Venice, this harmlessness obtains a new, perhaps inevitable, political dimension in ‘Call Me the Breeze’, which brings together 24 works from the past 12 years. Allen and Uslip are at pains to say nothing convincing or meaningful either in the abstract works themselves, arranged in odd clumps throughout the building, or in the press release, printed on a mirrored panel at the back of the show. Uslip tells us Allen’s sculptures evoke the ‘visceral realities of contemporary life’ and that the pieces, referred to as ‘actants’, ‘generate meaning’ rather than ‘illustrate a fixed idea’. What those meanings might be is left entirely to the viewer to divine. A mirrored press release – get it?

Allen provides an artist statement that doesn’t much help the case for his work: he speaks vaguely of ‘cruelty’ and ‘violence’ and ‘cancellation’ without naming their causes, because, of course, you can’t officially represent the United States these days unless you are willing to speak the party line – or keep your mouth shut. The former may be offensive, but at least it’s honest; the latter, however, is just embarrassing, and as I left this embarrassing pavilion, I found myself wondering what might have been had the Trump administration brought in Yarvin after all. He may be a racist buffoon, but whatever he installed would undoubtedly have been a more accurate portrait of the US today: it certainly wouldn’t have been harmless.



Oriol Vilanova, ‘Los restos’ (The Remains), 2026, exhibition view, Spain pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. Courtesy: the artist and La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: © Roberto Ruiz

The US isn't the only pavilion to shy away from the politics of our moment, and particularly the wars those countries' governments have created. The Russian pavilion – open only for the preview days – will stage 'The Tree Is Rooted in the Sky', an inane music festival meant to highlight the many ethnic groups in Russia, and Israel's Belu-Simion Fainaru has mounted 'Rose of Nothingness', an aquatic installation inspired by the Kabbalah in which 'meaning' – ever elusive this year – 'emerges in the tension between one drop and the next'. Of course, many of the national pavilions in the rest of the Giardini do offer more thoughtful perspectives. Two standouts for me are Britain and Germany. At the British pavilion, Lubaina Himid – who is only the second Black woman to represent Britain in Venice after Sonia Boyce in 2022 – has presented a new body of paintings and sculptures (all 2026) which explore migration, family life and home. (These are recurrent themes throughout this year's Venice Biennale, from Ei Arakawa-Nash's excellent and very funny 'Grass Babies, Moon Babies' in the Japan pavilion to Oriol Vilanova's arresting 'Los restos' [The Remains] at the Spanish pavilion.) As the national pavilions increasingly turn to spectacular immersive installations, I appreciated Himid's spacious and meditative show, mostly centred on large paintings. (Towards the back, a wall of painted oars is accompanied by a soundscape by Himid's partner, the artist Magda Stawarska.)



Lubaina Himid, 'Predicting History: Testing Translation', 2026, exhibition view, British pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. Courtesy: The British Council and La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Eva Herzog

Himid's show, commissioned by the British Council and titled 'Predicting History: Testing Translation', opens with the multi-panel work *Architects*. One panel catalogues various spaces (a mosque, a church, a beehive) while another depicts two figures – one in a floral dress, the other in a kind of carnival costume – holding small structures. 'The protagonists in my paintings are trying to make choices about whether to stay or leave, trying to have agency about being where they are, and arguing about how you might choose your position,' **Himid writes in the latest issue of *frieze***. For me, the strength of her work lies in the illustration of such mental states as they coincide with everyday human activity, often across multiple panels, achieving a dreamy monumentality out of rather quiet scenes of domestic intimacy. Two gardeners are paired with a herbarium, for instance (*Gardeners*), while two tailors are enclosed in combinations of patterns – cross-hatched colours, flattened flowers (*Tailors*).



Henrike Naumann, *The Home Front*, 2026, exhibition view, 'Ruin', German pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Jens Ziehe

But perhaps the most astonishing presentation for me was Sung Tieu and Henrike Naumann's 'Ruin' at the German pavilion. Naumann, a rising star of the past decade, died suddenly in February after a brief illness, though she was able to complete the plans for her installation, *The Home Front* (2026), which occupies the central room of the pavilion. Naumann continues her long-running exploration of life in East Germany, the country of her birth, and the politics of reunification with a taxonomical display of various objects against a neon-green wall: paintings, ornate weapons, keys, chairs and other items. Two large tableaux, presented as slightly cartoonish-looking domestic interiors, face one another: one is populated with furniture, the other with flattened workers. The overall installation is dense and engaging, drawing on Naumann's long-standing interest in the ways elements of the past – specifically the Soviet past – survive in the odds and ends of domestic life.



Sung Tieu, *Human Dignity Shall Be Inviolable*, 2026, exhibition view, 'Ruin', German pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Andrea Rossetti

The bulk of Tieu’s contribution to the pavilion appears outside the building, in the form of a tiled mosaic that envelops all but the rear wall and obscures the iconic ‘Germania’ sign above the entrance (*Human Dignity Shall Be Inviolable*, 2026). The mosaic, forming a kind of smooth architectural skin tattooed with graffiti, alludes to the prefabricated concrete apartment block in East Berlin – largely occupied by Vietnamese contract workers – where the artist grew up. Inside, in the two wings occupied by Tieu’s subtle sculptures – including *They Have Eyes, But They See Not, They Have Ears, But They Hear Not* (2026), comprising a swarm of aluminium recasts of chocolate ladybirds – fragrances meant to evoke the interiors of the artist’s childhood home scent the air. Like Naumann, Tieu is preoccupied with the entwined histories of Germany, and particularly the legal limbo into which Vietnamese workers were thrown in the 1990s after reunification. In Venice, she has created something intensely moving. Here is an installation that really does generate meaning, that really does evoke the histories of violence, cruelty and cancellation that have dominated the 20th and 21st centuries – towards which the US pavilion only gestures lamely.

Main image: Lubaina Himid, *Predicting History: Testing Translation*, 2026, exhibition view, British pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. Courtesy: The British Council and La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Eva Herzog



ANDREW DURBIN

Andrew Durbin is editor-in-chief of *frieze*. His book, *The Wonderful World that Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek*, is out now, pub by FSG in the US and Granta in the UK.