

## PALACE INTRIGUE

Olamiju Fajemisin around Palai 2023

August 07, 2023 • Lecce



Enzo Cucchi's *Untitled*, 1999, at Palazzo Tamborino Cezzi, Lecce.

**MY BRILLIANT FRIENDS**—musician Mykki Blanco, artists Jim C. Nedd and Raffaella Naldi Rossano, and *Artforum* editor Kate Sutton—and I called our last night in Naples early when we failed to procure tickets to an English-language screening of *Barbie*. The wagging tail of the heatwave Cerberus kicked hot dust into the faces of Kate and myself, as well as into the glasses of Coca-Cola we sipped as we waited for our elusive bus at the Risto Art Café, across from the unshaded platforms at Metropark Napoli Centrale. Around the hottest hour, we began chugging down into the heel of the boot. The verdant skin of the landscape peeled away slowly to reveal crumbly, crusty *terra rossa*, pimped with olive trees and smattered with clumps of bougainvillea, oleander, opuntia, and leaning agave blooms. The air conditioning sucked in smoke from small fires by the roadside and made my skin pucker. At the end of the line, in Lecce, Alexander Hertling collected us directly from the beach, his two elderly Cairn terriers, Mina and Monroe, napping in the back seat. Hertling was relaxed but felt guilty for it. “Really, I’m not stressed. Everything is ready,” his sunned face smiled. “We’re just still waiting for Kayode Ojo’s work to arrive from New York.”

Evenings are cooler in the Baroque city, whose limestone buildings absorb little heat. Walking through the historic center to Daniele Balice's birthday dinner—together with Hertling, Balice co-organizes the Palai project (pronounced "pal-eye") a group exhibition of work by artists from ten select galleries, now in its second edition—we didn't notice that the lights were out. After sunset, we navigated the warren of alleys and streets by iPhone torch. At L'Arte Dei Saponi, the blackout prevented all but the service of wine, water, and bread, typically dry, which some of the hungrier among us doused with olive oil without asking for plates, letting golden pools soak into the tablecloth. Gas lanterns giving amber light and the periodic flash of gallerist Tara Downs's disposable camera barely illuminated the long table of artists, gallerists, collectors, curators, and advisors. Just as impatience threatened the sanctity of the evening, the light returned, and the food, which came quickly, was happily gobbled up. Only when the sea-bass arrived did Balice scare his end of the table, loudly describing it as "uncharacteristically gray"—he had failed to notice that it had been baked whole in clay—and cautioning us against ordering the crudo (not that we ever saw a menu). Clinking glasses of lemon sorbetto which quickly melted into a viscous syrup, we toasted and sang to the birthday boy, who blew candles stuck into a tall slice of chocolate cake.

Rightly anticipating I would sleep through breakfast, Kate Sutton met me the next morning in the hotel lobby with a hard-boiled egg. We walked to a restaurant directly in front of Palazzo Tamborino Cezzi, which appeared like a sandcastle against the blue of the sky, and where work by thirty-six artists from ten galleries was installed sparingly throughout its chambers; Enzo Cucchi's bronze head (*Untitled*, 1999) sat in the center of the courtyard, like the remnant of some ancient cephalophore. The barrel-chested chef, Mauro, who would oversee that night's dinner in the garden, prepared us a lunch light enough so that we could still concentrate during our late-afternoon tour of "Wolves," a solo presentation of new work by Aria Dean at Progetto, a residency-slash-exhibition space operated by Jamie Sneider, who extolled the virtues of Lecce's light, and of the region in general, but admonished the slow gentrification of the peninsula by an influx of "soil regeneration projects," among other initiatives.

The experience of moving through the former noble home (which has passed through the hands of several political, intellectual, and feudal land-owning families since its erection in the mid-sixteenth century) and "finding" artworks surreptitiously hung against the peeling patterned wallpaper was like that of a depopulated Basel Social Club. All in attendance seemed happier, healthier—tanned, plumper, and better rested for being in Puglia—than at the scrum at the mayonnaise factory a month ago. One could easily imagine Cay Bahnmiller's undated series of acrylic-and-marker drawings on docket sheets having been nabbed from a restaurant in Taormina, or Xinyi Cheng's oil painting of a whippet against a gradient of black, orange, and white belonging to the personal collection of a nostalgic, maybe deposed aristocrat. Dotted discreetly on the walls, Julien Monnerie's series of hinged pewter sculptures—*Lemon, Fig, Tomato, Clementine, Asparagus*, et cetera (all 2023)—were like engagement ring boxes, their insides textured with the dents, ridges, and bumps of the fruit used to cast the negatives. Likewise, the mounting of Daniele Milvio's figurative collages on wool inside antique wardrobes suggested the desires of someone resolved to live among their treasures.

I left my seat below the medlar tree during the sixth and final cheese course when an Iranian gallerist turned to me to express his profound admiration for Black American artists in general, Kerry James Marshall in particular. “I’m from Lun-dun,” I said wearily. I passed the colonnade at Piazzetta di Giosuè Carducci to solicit cigarettes from teenagers before walking to Cornetteria di Notte, a late-night pasticceria with a neon croissant blinking on its roof, just across from the hotel.

On the drive to Otranto the next day, I became acquainted with the parents Hertling, who had arrived from their *Ferienhaus* in Liguria the night prior. They watched agog as I dismantled the limbs of a raw langoustine the length of my forearm and sucked the soft meat from its shell. In lieu of seeing the Chagall show at the Castello Aragonese, and before a quick swim, I visited the Cattedrale di Santa Maria Annunziata, or the “Skull Cathedral,” with another group of mostly Parisians. The eleventh-century church is a renowned site of early intra-Mediterranean colonization and its artistic and social consequences, boasting a twelfth-century mosaic spanning the floor of the nave depicting scenes from the Old Testament and the Alexander Romance; coherently merged Islamic architectural motifs, namely the Moorish style gilded ceiling in the apse, and vaulted arches and botanical carvings in the crypt; and in the walls of the ossuary chapel, the skulls and bones of 813 beatified martyrs killed during the 1480 Ottoman Siege of Otranto—the very rock used to kill them is nestled under the altar. Still wet from the sea, I changed skirts in the retro-tiled bathroom at Soleto’s dilapidated Palazzo Carrozzini, about fifteen miles south of Lecce, where 15 Orient was hosting an off-site presentation of paintings by the late Serbian-Macedonian painter Ljiljana Blaževska, and where there were no cocktails, only sparkling water.

Rather than hike down to the preternaturally beautiful Porto Selvaggio with the Parisians, we drove instead to Spiaggia Ultima, a black sand beach club, past fragrant pines, dead olives, and yellow-flowering mimosas. Monroe the dog wore swim shorts over his diaper. Sutton napped. Alexander’s *stammgast* status meant men came frequently to brush the sand off our loungers, and we were later met by writer Christopher Bollen with his partner, Bottega Veneta’s Thierry Conrad Reutenauer, and Lee Foley from Bel Ami. Sun-tired at dinner, I was happy to let Balice Hertling director Anna Frera order for our table, especially after the others received a platter of oysters and Balice—in another seafood-related admonition—whispered to me, “I’d only order oysters in the south of Italy if I wanted to go to the bathroom.” He smirked, and then added, “They’re from France.” I was initially unsure if he was referring to the oysters or the table.

Monday in Lecce is quieter than Sunday. The Hertling family had driven to see *trulli*, typical Pugliese conical stone huts, in Alberobello; Kate Sutton was in a car to the airport; advisor Kelly McGee was halfway to Rome; and another bunch were out on a boat rented by artist Kim Farkas, somewhere on the Adriatic. Sitting in front of the palazzo at Mauro’s restaurant, I ran into Daniele and writer Judith Benhamou-Huet, but he didn’t have the keys, and there was nobody home. My phone was out of memory, so I couldn’t take any more pictures. I read about Bel Ami, the familiar 1986 Hermès fragrance with notes of leather and vetiver, and wondered if it would be worn by Georges Duroy, social-climbing lothario and

antihero of Maupassant's 1885 novel of the same name (subtitled *The History of a Scoundrel* in the later English translation). I take sips of *caffè leccese*—espresso over ice with almond syrup—as a souvenir. Pictures of Ojo's sculptures, beaded mannequin masquerades, arrived by email the next day.

— *Olamiju Fajemisin*



**Isla Flotante's Leopol Jose Maria Mones Cazon and Nani Lamarque, and Balice Hertling's Daniele Balice and Anna Frera.**



**Athanatos's Bruno Silva and Giovanna Silva.**



**Bel Ami intern Mathieu Joubert and Julien Monnerie.**



**Lecce Barbies.**



Montez Press's Christiane Blattmann and Barbara Weiss's Bärbel Trautwein in front of work by Julien Monnerie.



Alexander Hertling.



**Gea Politi and Cristiano Segnifreddo.**



**Gallerist Tara Downs.**



**Dinner in the dark.**



**Cornetteria di Notte.**





Clay-baked fish.



Bar Titanic.



**Artists Clémentine Adou and Julien Julien Monnerie, Bel Ami's Lee Foley, Bel Ami intern Mathieu Joubert, and gallerist Tara Downs in Otranto.**





Allison Jacques's Hannah Robinson and Ljiljana Blaževska's son, Viktor Šekularac.



LC Queisser's Lisa Offermann.

Artforum  
August, 2023



**Palazzo Tamborino Cezzi.**



**LC Queisser's Lisa Offermann.**



**Palazzo Tamborino Cezzi.**



**Teenagers in Otranto.**



**Ultima Spiaggia.**



**Monroe.**



**Ultima Spiaggia.**



**Tara Downs opens a fresh camera.**



**Bottega Veneta's Thierry Conrad Reutenaue and writer Christopher Bollen.**



**Metropark Napoli Centrale.**