The **Venice Biennale** presents work by some of the world’s finest artists. The versatile selection is representative of each artist’s personal expression. Australian artist, Sam Leach (b.1973), currently has his oil paintings displayed in Venice, Palazzo Bembo. He is represented by **Sullivan+Strumpf**, Sydney Australia. Leach investigates through his paintings, the delicate and forever changing relationship between humans and non-human animals. Audiences are given an opportunity to view the paintings objectively and to reflect on the current issues that are affecting the environment and the creatures that live within.

The paintings in this series are modular; the smaller works are individuals that make up the larger picture. The surfaces of the paintings are made of resin, a material that Leach uses as a method to distance the viewer. He explains that throughout history brush marks and traces of the artist’s hands have been interpreted as: “An index of the artists emotions – either their emotional state while creating or to induce a certain feeling in the viewer when looking at certain passages of paint.” The use of resin acts as “a way of obscuring that reading of emotions.” The paintings are similar to tiles, a surface that can be treated and wiped clean in an attempt to remove contamination. The paintings are made in layers and stages with the larger works taking between one to two months to complete.
Three major themes encompass the series: scientists in the cleanroom, landscapes and the depictions of non-human animals. The early 17th century was an era that marked the beginning of modern culture. Leach has incorporated elements and aesthetics from this time and placed them within a contemporary setting: “I want to underscore the continuity of modernity from the seventeenth century to now.” These paintings are inspired from scenarios reminiscent of historical paintings, particularly from the 18th century and early romantic period.

The scenes show scientists working on an ambiguous experiment. The cleanroom is attached to landscapes based on Dutch Italianate paintings: “These landscapes were idealised constructions which reflected the world view at the very beginning of modern science. I want to make a connection between the clean-room as an idealised constructed space and the landscape as an idealized constructed space.” The landscape is an extension to the cleanroom. The two conflicting scenes are finely connected with a sense of uncertainty.

The appearance of the tiger dominates the display; its presence in the sterile and pristine setting is far removed from its natural and fitting habitat. The tigers are demonstrating their innate behaviors in this controlled space. They are eating, fighting and resting: “expressing their emotional state. They have agency and equal ontological status with the humans, they are neither subjects nor practitioners in the experiments” Leach explains. Rather than suitably positioned on earthly pastures, the tigers are sitting on tiles and aluminum tables. These cold surfaces trigger the discomfort and invasiveness associated with examination.

Leach hopes that his images invoke a certain mood: “The method of painting, the composition and scenario depicted hopefully work together to create a sense of the long continuity of modernism and this will be bittersweet.” He reflects: “It is part of the history of modernism that while it is a history of deliberate distancing and separation, our understanding and appreciation of the non-human world has improved even though the structures and technologies facilitated by modernism have radically worsened conditions for non-humans.” Leach is currently collaborating with skilled artisans to create object and sculptural work that are presenting new and enjoyable tasks. Admirers are left with eager anticipation to see what will come next.

By Sara Sweet, posted on 10 June 2015

Sam Leach: Crossing Borders, until 22 November, Palazzo Bembo, Riva del Carbon, #4793, 30124 Venezia, Italy.