

## **Venice: a Perplexion**

a presentation given on 15.11.2022 at the Bolivia Pavilion,  
Biennale di Venezia 2022, by kind invitation of the Warmichcha  
Collective (exhibitors).



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ITALIA  
VENEZIA

**5:00 PM**

**MARTEDÌ 15**  
**NOVEMBRE 2022**

**GALERIA CHAKANA**

**BA CO**  
BOLIVIA ARTE  
Contemporáneo

**MIKO ART** Gallery

La Biennale di Venezia

**59. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte**  
Partecipazioni Nazionali

ESTADO PLURINACIONAL DE  
**BOLIVIA**  
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**WARA  
WARA  
JAWIRA**

Hello. My name is Virginia Bodman, I am a painter based in the North East of England in the UK. Thank you for inviting me to present some of my recent work here today, it is an honour and a privilege. As you may know I met Samuel, one of the Warmichcha Collective artists when I was making paintings outside on Fondamenta Sant'Andrea.

The first 4 images are taken from A4 sketchbooks that I made in 2019-20. Making work outside directly from the 'seen' is not my usual studio practice as you will see.



<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks45.html>



<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks44.html>





<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks33.html>

For more than 40 years my practice as a painter has been driven by issues that affect me personally, I usually start with visual material of some kind, as the work progresses and the subject matter/concerns become 'nameable' I read and research widely to establish whether my personal concerns have wider significance and relevance. Important and interconnected subjects, all approached from a feminist standpoint have included: family relationships, motherhood, the female body and the landscape, abuse of power and invisibility /aging/disability. I usually make large oil paintings on canvas, I also work with drawing, printmaking, 3d making, video and photography, aspects of which may inform the paintings. In many respects my working process has not changed in relation to the work that I have made 'about Venice'.

During a short visit to the Venice Biennale in 2017 I fell madly in love with Venice. I have visited Venice periodically for 40 years but it had never had this affect on me before. When I returned to my studio in the UK unexpectedly aspects of *Venetian-ness*, certain forms and colours began to infiltrate my on-going studio paintings. Since then I have been perplexed by what I initially imagined would be a passing infatuation and I struggled to understand how Venice, which by now had become a passion, fitted into the trajectory of my work. Since the visit in 2017 I have 'suffered' the delights of what I call 'Venice flashbacks'. I can be doing something quite mundane thinking about nothing or thinking about something else entirely and suddenly a place that I know and like in Venice will come to mind in a powerful and very present way.

In 2018-19 I was fortunate to be able to make a 4-month visit to Venice with the aim of *getting-over this infatuation*. But it didn't work! Instead I returned home to England with lots of sketchbooks and photographs that I had no idea what to do with. Since then, I have made several more long visits to walk, to look and to draw. I do this for pleasure and to gather visual information, driven purely by what excites me - there is no plan. Doing this I also meet lots of interesting people such as Samuel and Saul.

As I have already said I usually start new work with visual information some of the work that I will show you today though has also been informed by reading widely about Venice in the fields of art history, history and sociology as well as fiction and poetry.

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I have also had a lot of on-going conversations with other artists about how a contemporary painter might go about making paintings that reflect **Venice now**.

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Initially I selected single drawings as starting points, some of which were made after dark. I find working outside in Venice at night very exciting and exhilarating, the rich darkness is helpful in 'editing' subjects. There are places such as these 2 palazzi on Fondamenta de la Misericordia that really 'shine' for me at night but do not interest me as much in daylight.



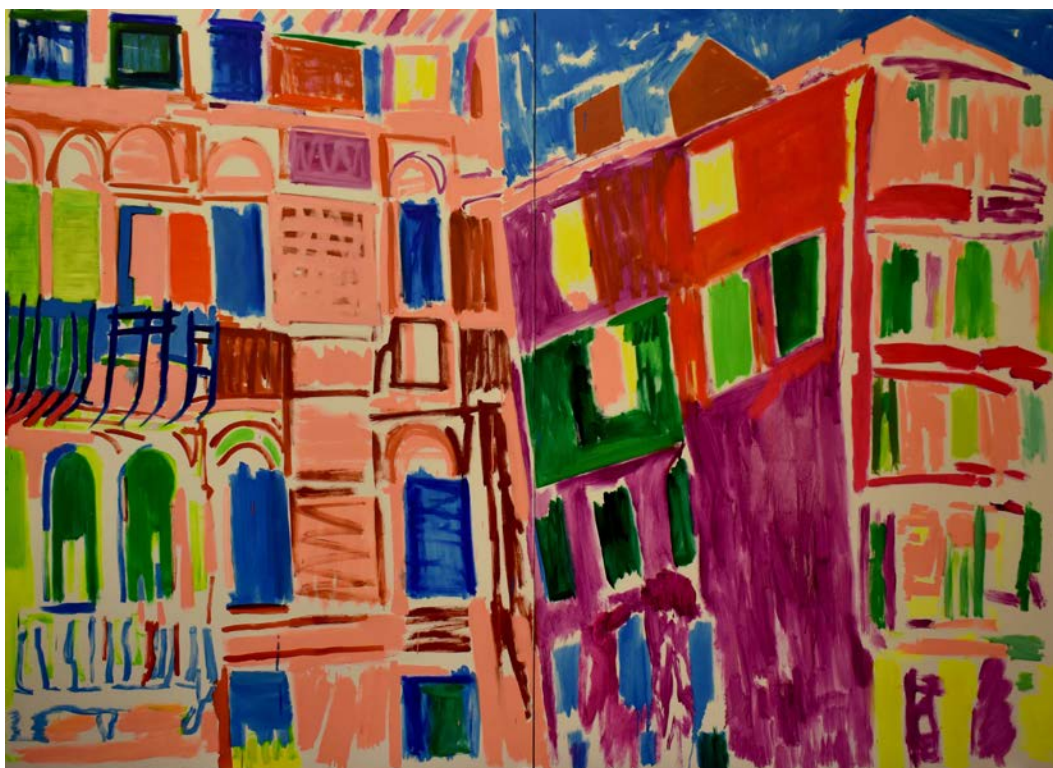
<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks25.html>

The paintings I made from these drawings are large - in contrast to the small-scale *vedute*, traditionally associated with souvenir paintings brought back from Venice, (for example by Canaletto, Guardi and even those for sale in Venice now). These large paintings - as the result of tight framing and editing, offer a physical proximity that enables the viewer to experience a Venice-ness up-close and personal, not as a distant view / vedute.

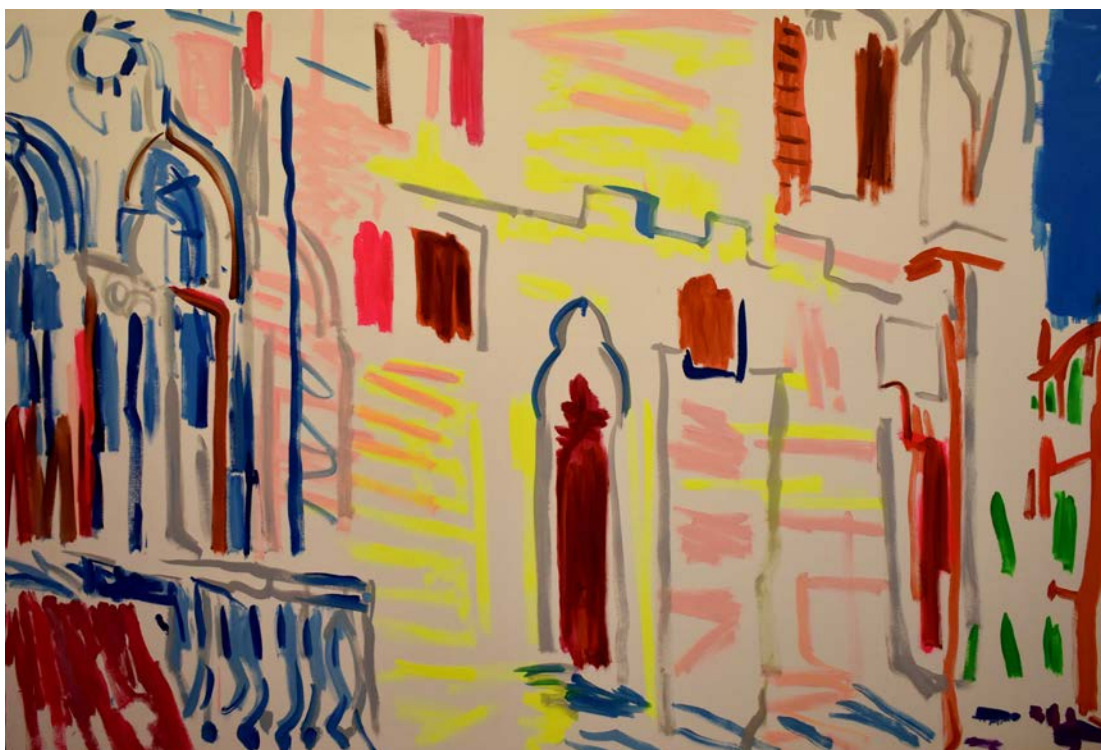


*Counting Windows*, 2019, oil on acrylic on cotton, 93 x 131 inches / 236 x 333 cm,  
(studio interior) <http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks2.html>





*Counting Windows*, 2019, oil on acrylic on cotton, 93 x 131 inches / 236 x 333 cm  
<http://viriniabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks1.html>



*Scrivendo Venezia*, 2019, oil on acrylic on cotton, 63 x 94.5 inches / 160 x 241 cm  
<http://viriniabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks3.html>



*Palazzo on Red*, 2019, oil on acrylic on cotton, 104.5 x 140 inches / 265 x 355.5 cm  
<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks5.html>

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In 2019, after making the previous paintings, I felt that I had to accept that making work about Venice was the on-going concern of my work. I wrote: Venice is probably the most depicted, described, imagined and critiqued city in the world. It presents contemporary artists with aesthetic and ethical dilemmas. It cannot just be pictured as uniquely beautiful. Responses must be made to the effects of climate change, tourism and depopulation.

Three images emerged from my photographs and sketchbooks that I felt spoke to the climate change issue, firstly what Charles Dickens, the English C19th writer, called “the tear’s of Venice”, those irregular, marvellous and extraordinarily haunting stains and cracks that climb up the facades of many buildings as a result of the wicking effects of rising salt water, competing with and acting as a visual foils to the regular, ordered architectural features of much of Venice’s gothic and later architecture.





*There are Lots of Animals in Venice*, 2021, acrylic, oil and gloss on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 190 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/24>



*Wall*, 2021, acrylic and oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 190 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/25.html>



Trees occur in many of my drawings and, due to the unusual topography they have a very special and valued presence in Venice. I make visits to my 'favourite' trees every time I'm there to watch how their constantly changing shadows animate walls and paving, and to check on their welfare as they too are affected by rising saline water. I see the health of Venice's precious trees as climate change 'canaries'.



*Ombre 2, (Campo)*, 2022, oil on cotton, 64 x 88 inches / 160 x 204 cm  
<http://viriniabodman.com/walkingonwater/35.html>



*Ombre, 5, Campo, (Love Story)*, 2022, oil on cotton, 92 x 88 inches / 234 x 223.5 cm  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/38.html>

The third recurring image is of paving, in places laid in a uniquely Venetian tortoiseshell-like pattern maintained by extraordinarily hard-working and highly skilled teams of Venetian paviors. It is under constant repair as a result of damage caused by the wake, (moto ondoso) of motorboats to fondamenta (quaysides) and the undermining of the paving covering calle (alleys/streets) and campi (squares) caused by rising water levels.





*On the Way to the Supermarket*, (Walking on Water series), 2021, oil and acrylic on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 191 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/27.html>



*Destinations are Important*, (Walking on Water series), 2021, oil and acrylic on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 191 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/29.html>

Tourism is, and historically has always been part of Venetian life and is often considered its “vocation”, (Bosworth, RJB. 2014). Initially attracting pilgrims and European Grand Tourists and now, with the advent of mass tourism it is more widely and more economically available to those that wish to visit - what is often called, the “Most Romantic City in the World”, (Robert Davis & Garry Marvin, 2004). The British historian Bosworth asserts in his book *Italian Venice A History*, “...tourists of whatever kind are another form of history-bearing Venetian”, (Bosworth, 2014).

So how can the artist and would-be activist, (also perhaps ‘guilty’ tourist), be absolved? Both the art historian Salvatore Settis and the writer Polly Coles, challenge their readers to respond to Venice now: to the visible and the invisible, to present and on-going difficulties, to the everyday, and as Settis says - “to the highly delicate network of equilibriums that are centuries old”. Both Settis and Coles advocate the return of ‘making’ to the city, as a way forward from an almost total reliance on service industries.

I have made paintings that are about finding ways to examine the hundreds of images of Venice that I have accumulated. What does happen to all those photographs, postcards and drawings that are made, bought and taken away in the millions every year? Davis and Marvin helpfully state in their book *Venice the Tourist Maze*, that, “... the postcard is a convenient vehicle for linking here with there.” and that “...postcards must be bought in the location that they illustrate, and in this sense are the quintessence of place-ness.” (Davis, C. & Marvin, G. 2004)



*Souvenir*, 2021, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 191 x 254 cm  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/31.html>



At the beginning of March 2020, due to the Covid19 outbreak in Northern Italy I had to return early from a planned 2-month visit, but for a few days before leaving I had the pleasure along with the Venetians of enjoying empty calle (alleys/streets) and campi (squares) and almost silent rii (canals). Subsequently during lockdown in the UK I was very happy to be working on paintings that linked “here with there”, that attempted, through the use of multiple images from different times of day and night, to evoke some of the walks that I had made in Venice, and to try to achieve a “quintessence of place-ness”.



*Postcard from V, (Passeggiata Notturna, 1)*, 2022, oil on cotton, 76 x 101 inches / 193 x 256.5 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/32.html>

Walking, (giro and passeggiata - planned and unplanned walks), is for me at the heart of the Venetian experience. Enjoying the disorientating Venetian topography, getting lost, not knowing what to look at first, revisiting the familiar, spotting new details, catching glimpses of intriguing but unknowable courtyards, gardens and interiors, finding new routes and connecting places together, the mix of old and new - of then and now, of light and dark, asking questions and trying to find answers, this for me and many others is at the heart of the Venice experience.



*Postcard from Venice, (Passeggiata Notturna, 2, Perduta)*, 2022, oil on cotton,  
75 x 100 inches / 190 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/33.html>

On even the coldest of winter days in my studio in Sunderland, J.G. Links', (1966), gentle and affectionate, *Venice for Pleasure* evoked for me the sensuous pleasures of wandering about in Venice. As John Julius Norwich says so brilliantly in his introduction to *A History of Venice*, "I began to explore on my own, and discovered what I know now to be one of the major pleasures of life: that of walking through Venice at night". Painting, (and walking) after dark became one of the many attractions of working (and being) in Venice, an engaging and sometimes frustrating mix of trying to decipher what you are seeing and using imagination to fill in the gaps. Darkness in Venice, as observed by many visitors is of a very different depth and density to that of other European cities. In Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo for example the electric light, particularly beautiful on misty evenings, is filtered through rose-tinted Venetian glass. Calle are often in complete darkness except for a few beams of domestic light escaping through ill-closed shutters. Many places are in dense darkness until a passing pedestrian or dog walker triggers the wall-mounted lighting.

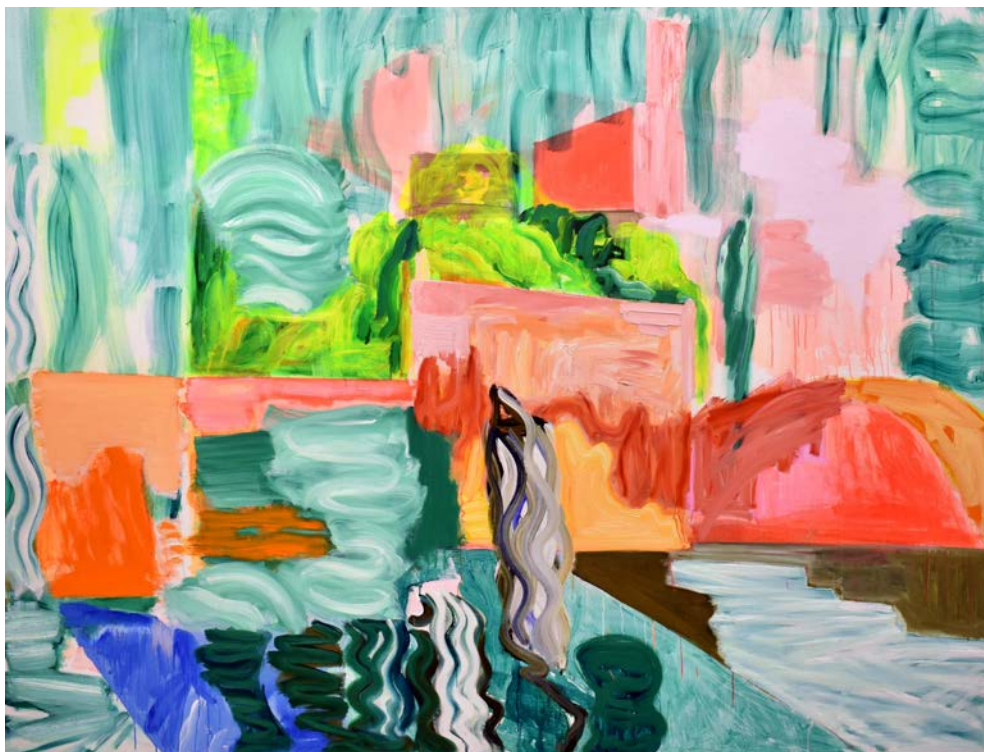
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Working in my sketchbooks and on paintings outside in Venice I was surprised to be warmly and generously greeted by many Venetians who often brought gifts of food and drink to consume while I was working. Surprised, because I imagined that



Venetians would be very tourist-weary. De-population is considered a problem as the balance in numbers between residents and tourists has shifted dramatically in recent years with the result that Venice has become a tourist mono-economy.

My work is usually based on drawings and photographs made in areas off the main tourist beat, (the S.Marco-Rialto-Academia triangle), mainly in Cannaregio and Castello where I have lived for several months at a time. I have come to understand through conversations with residents that making drawings in the areas that people still live, work and carry out their lives and that are generally less well represented in art, (unlike Piazza S. Marco, Rialto Bridge, Salute etc.) interests and pleases many.



*Waterline, Fondamenta Zen, (Walking on Water series), 2021, oil and acrylic on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 191 x 254 cm* <http://viriniabodman.com/walkingonwater/26.html>

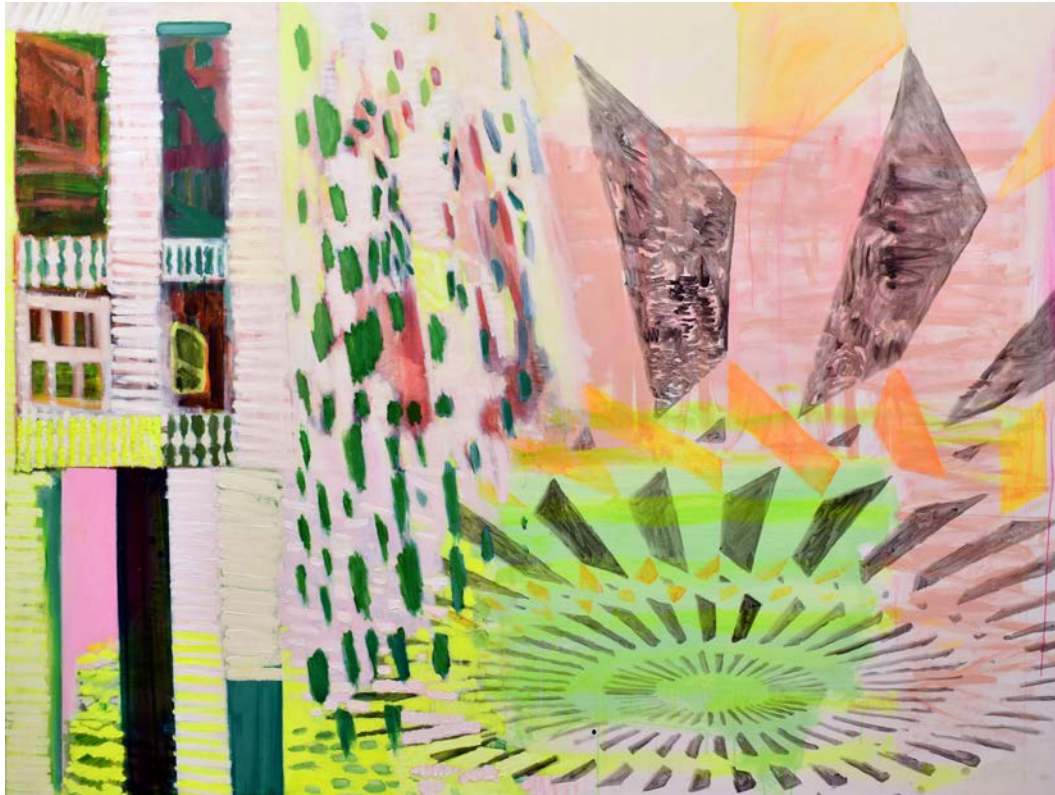
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So, to creative strategies: the notion of Creative Re-arrangement has been useful, in the next 3 paintings I selected images or colours from a number of sketchbook drawings to make a single painting with the aim of creating pictorial spaces and scenarios that I hope reflect some of the complexity that is Venice now.

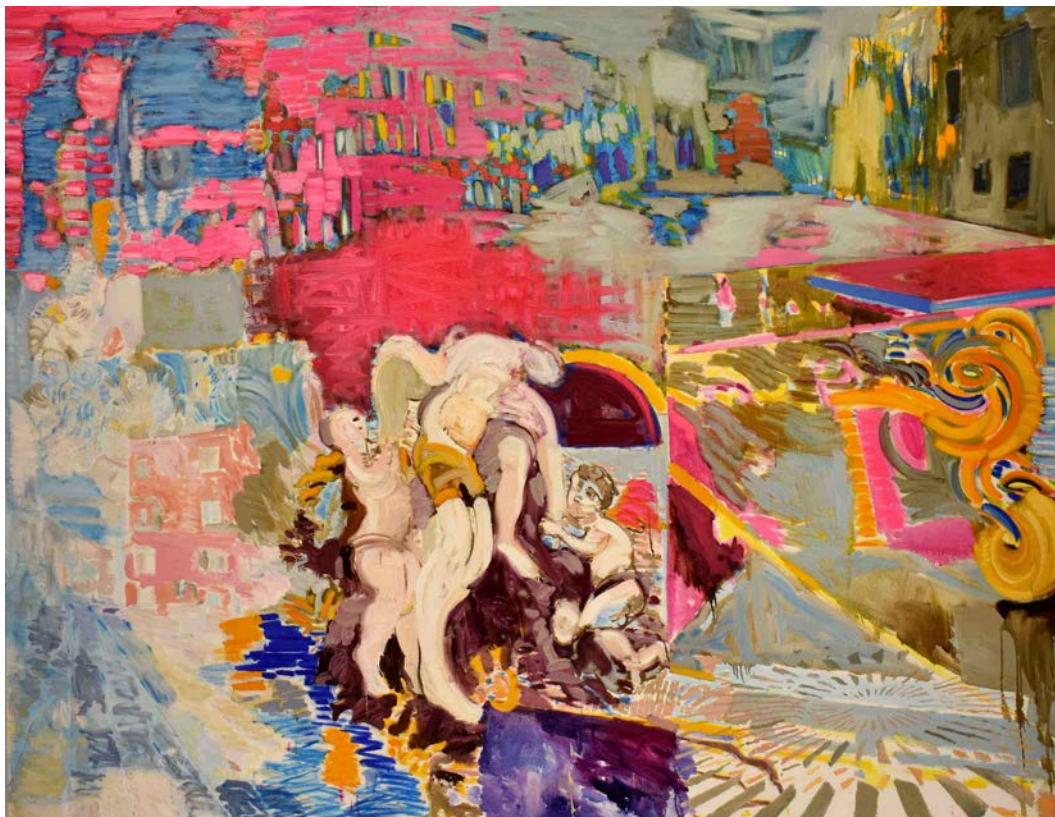


*Campo at Night*, (*Walking on Water* series), 2021, oil and acrylic on cotton,  
75 x 100 inches / 191 x 254 cm <http://viriniabodman.com/walkingonwater/30.html>





*Palazzo*, (*Walking on Water* series), 2021, oil and acrylic on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 191 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/28.html>



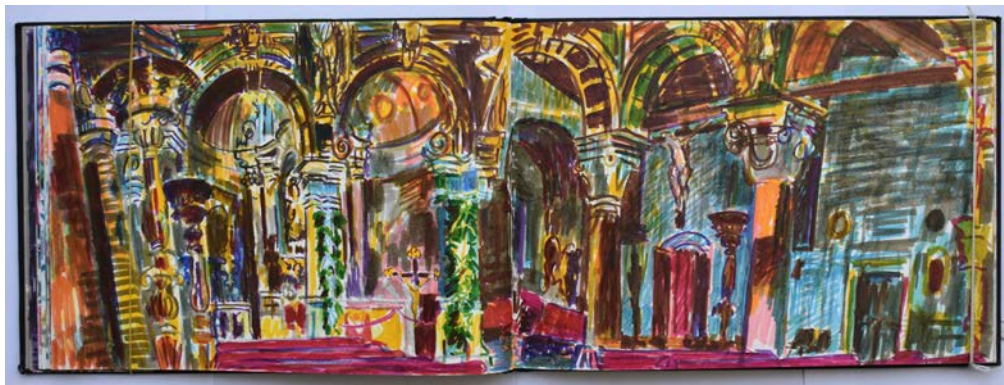
*A Place for the Heart*, (*Souvenir 2*), 2022, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 190.5 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/36.html>



I realised recently that Italo Calvino's extraordinary confabulation, *Invisible Cities*, may have influenced these paintings, he too uses a strategy of selection to enable Marco Polo to describe Venice to the Great Khan, who eventually realises that it's Polo's hometown that is being described. I think like Calvino, that Venice is a place of wonder, delight, pleasure and some difficulties and I would like the paintings to reflect this.

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The passage of time and how it is depicted or referenced in paintings, always a fascination, become a major consideration in the next 2 paintings, both of which take as starting points sketchbook drawings made in 2018-19 of the rich and almost unknowable interiors of Venetian churches. The first: *Traveller's Tales 1 (Tramezzino)*, 2022, cites drawings of Chiesa di San Giacomo dall'Orio and Chiesa dei Santi Apostoli di Cristo, (Santi Apostoli), see below, and references those now unused strips of colour film negatives, familiar before the advent of digital technology, rich in colour, almost unreadable and often packed in protective sleeves in the 'wrong' orientations. These 2 paintings also refer to the structure and colour of two favourite Italian foods and the format of comic books created to facilitate a time-based narrative.



<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks19.html>



<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks18.html>



The 2 drawings above were made in the Chiesa di San Giacomo da l'Orio, 2018-19

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The 3 drawings above were made in the Chiesa dei Santi Apostoli di Cristo, (Santi Apostoli), Venice, 2018-19

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*Tramezzino, (Traveller's Tales 1)*, 2022, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 190.5 x 254 cm  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/37.html>

The second painting: *What Shall We Look at First? (Traveller's Tales 2, Gelato)*, 2022, takes as its starting point drawings of Chiesa Santa Maria Assunta, (I Gesuiti), and the Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, (Zanipolo), two very different churches in terms of date, architectural language, materials, colour and scale yet connected by a short walk.



<http://virginiabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks22.html>





<http://viriniabodman.com/fromthevenicesketchbooks23.html>

The 2 drawings above were made in the Chiesa di Santa Maria Assunta, (I Gesuiti), Venice, 2018-19

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The 2 drawings above were made in the Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, (Zanipolo), Venice, 2018-19

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This painting 'bangs' the 2 places together to 'see what happens' when the wonder of both is digested without the 'palate-cleansing' walk between the two. It was essential



(to me) to find a materiality and a colour palette that enabled these two very different experiences of light, space and time to exist together. The final outcome has something of the multi-flavoured gelato about it, I think!



*What Shall I Look at First? (Traveller's Tales 2, Gelato)*, 2022, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 190.5 x 254 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/39.html>

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In 2021 I used a concertina sketchbook for the first time and across its fully extended four-metre width made a series of paintings of the waterline of several canals (rii), including from the Fondamenta Sant'Andrea where we are now. Some images in this sketchbook extend for up to ten A4 pages and others for as little as two. It is possible to encounter this sketchbook in a number of different ways, (see video: <http://www.virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/>) enabling the viewer to take meandering Venetian walks that can be experienced elsewhere.

I kept this sketchbook on a shelf at home and could look at it from my chair in the evenings. *Concertina Walk (Venice)*, 2022, was born out of the idea of presenting a simultaneous, one-glance reading of some of the images from it.





*Concertina Walk, (Venice)*, 2022, oil on cotton, 76 x 101 inches / 193 x 256.5 cm  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/34.html>

The next painting attempts to re-create the Venice-from-the-chair experience at a 'human-page' scale.



*Passeggiata Concertina*, 2022, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 190.5 x 254 cm  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/50.html>



The next painting in this group uses a two-canvas format to re-create the experience of taking a walk along the sketchbook again at a human-body-page-scale and it allows the viewer to look into some of the unknowable spaces of Venice as one does on a real walk. I hope in the future to extend this group of paintings to four or more to make a complete, immersive Camera di Venezia.



*Passeggiata Autunnale*, 2022, oil on cotton, 76 x 202 inches / 193 x 513 cm, (2 canvases each 76 x 101 inches / 193 x 256.5 cm) <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/49.html>

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When I am in Venice I seem to experience lots of magical imaginings and wonderful coincidences - like meeting Samuel and being here now for example. The last 3 paintings I am going to show celebrate co-incidence *Venetian-style*. They include images of C18th puppets from the Casa Goldoni, which have a disconcertingly life-like presence.

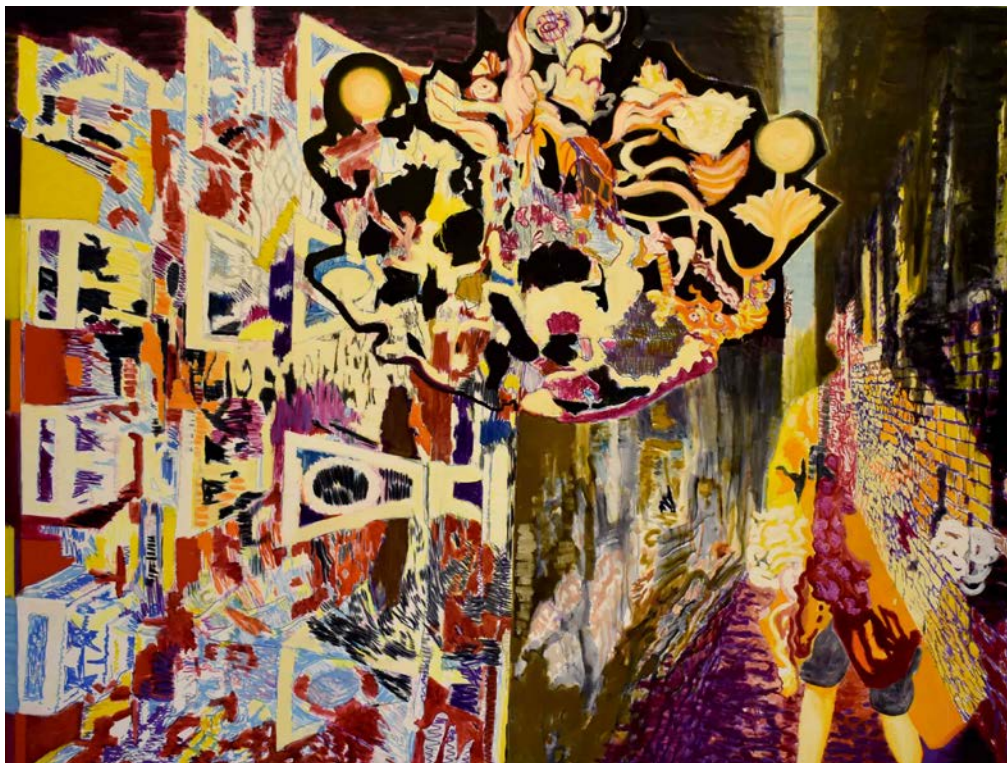


A watercolour and a pencil drawing (one of several) made at the Casa Goldoni in 2022





*Thinking About the C18th, (Venice Coincidences, 1), 2022, oil and watercolour-pen on acrylic on cotton, 74 x 101 inches / 193 x 256 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/51.html>*



*The Bravo, (Venice Coincidences, 2), 2022, oil on watercolour pen on acrylic on cotton, 74 x 101 inches / 193 x 256 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/53.html>*





*Double Exposure, (Venice Coincidences, 3), 2022, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 191 x 256 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/54.html>*

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My friend, the painter Debby Akam made a very perceptive remark, “You seem to be finding contemporary relevance in Venice. An affirmative place for you that intensifies experiences, a special place, part of a chosen identity, like inhabiting a skin you want to wear”.

Despite trying to find words to communicate my fascination with Venice, it is paint and painting that are the best ‘means’ for me. The presence of paintings: their size, colour and materiality have always been important to me, the immersive scale of these paintings will give, (I hope) a sense of being here/there. Walter Sickert the English painter, who also worked in Venice, puts it well: “The plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts”. After much personal perplexion, a word I invented myself, about how this late-in-life passion fits in with the trajectory of my work which for 40 years had been motivated by lived, female experience, I have come to the conclusion that Venice has given me ‘permission’, (as it has many others), to be the artist /person, I want to be now, as Settis says, “the historical city is



a thinking machine. It enables us to think about something other than ourselves and helps us to learn about ourselves in the process.” (Settis, 2016)

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Venice continues to fascinate and provoke me – so the work continues. I share my friend, the painter Mark Wingrave’s view, that another challenge is to make paintings that synthesise the distinctive feature that each of these groups of paintings have.

The many sketchbooks, paintings and photographs that I have accumulated (on-going) over the last 5 years continue to be a re-visitable resource, as of course is Venice itself.

Thank you for listening, and for generously inviting me here to talk about my paintings - alongside your wonderful and magical work. Thank you.