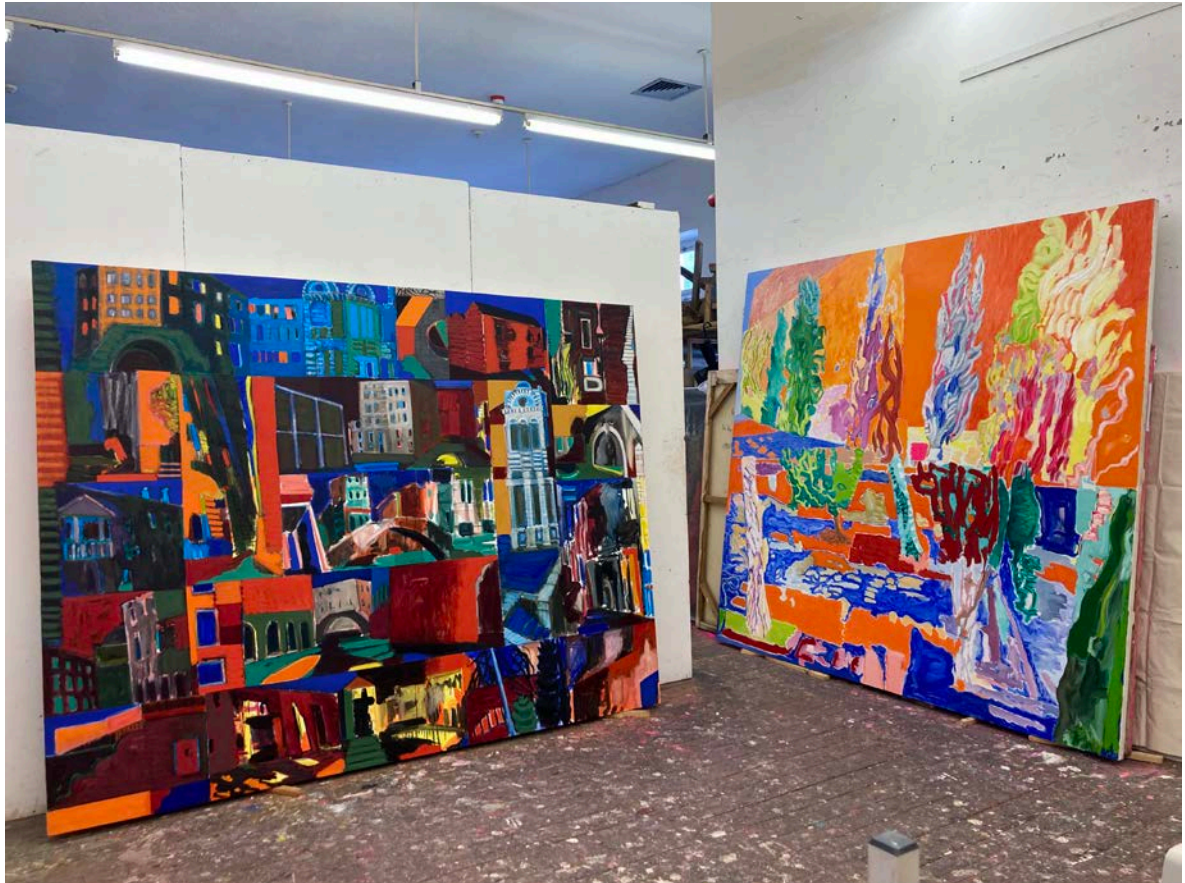


## *Venice: a Perplexion*



*Studio: Work in Progress, May 2022*

I first went to Venice in 1981 and have been a number of times since, during a visit to the Biennale in 2017 I fell madly in love - it had never had this effect on me before. Afterwards aspects of 'Venetian-ness' – specific forms and colours began to creep into my on-going paintings. Since then I have been perplexed by what I thought would be a passing infatuation and have struggled to understand how Venice which by now had become a passion, fitted into the trajectory of my work.

Across the Autumn/Winter of 2018-19 with the aim of getting-over-it, I made a 4-month visit to Venice – it didn't work. Instead, I returned home to England even more 'in love' 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, driven purely by the pleasure of being there and by what excites me - there is no plan. The 'being', imagining, walking, looking and thinking I do there, the sketchbooks and small paintings that I've made and photographs I have taken have fuelled continuing research and a body of large-scale paintings made in my Sunderland studio between

visits. Since the visit in 2017 when I am not there, I have 'suffered' the delights of what I call Venice flashbacks. I can be doing something quite mundane, thinking about nothing or about something else entirely and suddenly, unbidden, a place that I know and like in Venice will come to mind in a powerful and very present way.

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 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 inform the paintings.

---

After this visit and still perplexed I had to accept that making work 'about' Venice, (not 'of' Venice) was my on-going concern. 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.*

Herbert Marcuse's opinion later echoed by Maxine Greene and Malcolm Miles that, "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness ... of the men and women who could change the world." Marcuse, (quoted in Miles, M. 2016,) helpfully suggests to artists that the means at their disposal, in this instance, colour, scale, materiality, image etc. has agency and that making work 'about' Venice, which comes with much historic/cultural baggage, has currency, value and urgency. My initial uneasiness and reluctance to accept Venice as a valid subject (and not just a privileged infatuation) I hope results in work that is demanding, visually entertaining, engaging and possibly useful.

## Ecological Fragility/Climate Change

There are three images that re-occur in my paintings that I feel speak to the climate change issue, firstly what Charles Dickens called “the tear’s of Venice”, (Dickens, 1846) the irregular, marvellous and extraordinarily haunting stains 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.



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



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

Trees occur in many of my drawings, due to the unusual topography they have a very special and valued presence in Venice. Every time I'm there I like to make visits to my favourites and am always entertained by their constantly changing, subtle-coloured shadows animating walls and paving. I like to check on their welfare as they too are affected by rising saline water. I see Venice's precious trees as climate change 'canaries'.



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



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

The third recurring image is of paving, which I have become (oddly) fascinated with. There are several different laying patterns that employ both large and small squared-off stones, in some places the stones are laid in a uniquely Venetian tortoiseshell-like pattern using irregularly shaped and uneven-sized stones. Except for the white Istrian marble slabs used to denote the edges of the rii (canals) and for steps on some bridges, it is remarkably non-slip. It is always under constant repair because of damage caused by the wake, (moto ondosso) of motorboats to fondamenta (quaysides) and the undermining of the paving covering calle (alleys/streets) and campi (squares) caused by rising water levels. The daily maintenance, done by highly skilled and hardworking teams of paviors, is marvellous to behold as each stone is carefully lifted and numbered before being reset after its bed is restored.



***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://www.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://www.virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/29.html>

## Tourism

Tourism is, and historically has always been part of Venetian life and is often considered its “vocation”, (Bosworth 2014). Initially attracting wealthy pilgrims headed for Jerusalem, then C18th & C19th Grand Tourists and now with the advent of mass tourism, it is more widely and economically available to those who wish to visit the “Most Romantic City in the World”, (Robert Davis & Garry Marvin, 2004). New measures, (to be introduced in January 2023?) may limit the numbers of day tourists that enter the city, as they will be required to pay an admission charge, (as per Disneyland). But as the historian R.J.B. 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/would-be activist, (also perhaps a ‘guilty’ tourist/cultural traveller), be absolved? Both Salvatore Settis (2016) and Polly Coles, (2013) challenge their readers to respond to Venice now: to the visible and the invisible, to present and on-going difficulties, to the everyday, “to the highly delicate network of equilibriums that are centuries old” (Settis, 2016,). Both he and Coles advocate the return of production/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://www.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 and campi and almost silent rii. 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”. Walking, (giro and passeggiata - planned and unplanned walks), is for me at the heart of the Venetian experience. Enjoying the disorientating layout, getting lost, not knowing what to look at first, revisiting the familiar, spotting intriguing details, catching glimpses of 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, warmth and cold, asking questions and finding answers, this for me and many others is at the heart of the Venice experience.





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

Dipping into J.G. Links', (1966), gentle and affectionate, *Venice for Pleasure* on even the coldest of winter days in my studio in Sunderland, evoked for me the sensuous pleasures of wandering about in Venice in sunshine. 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 intriguing, engaging and sometimes frustrating mix of trying to decipher what you are seeing and using imagination to fill in the gaps. Darkness in Venice is of a very different depth and density to that of other European cities and adds to the disorientation (and wonder) experienced by many visitors. In Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo for example the electric light, particularly beautiful on a misty evening, 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, enclosing darkness until a passing pedestrian or dog-walker triggers the wall-mounted lighting.



**Shade Card, 2022-2023**, oil on cotton, 76 x 101 inches / 193 x 256cm (WIP)  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/55.html>

Working in my sketchbooks outside in Venice I was surprised to be warmly and generously greeted by many Venetians who often brought food and drink for me to have while I was working, (cheese, wine, tea, chocolate, biscuits). Surprised, because I imagined that Venetians would be tourist-weary. Venice being small you encounter the same people frequently, a Venetian friend described Venice as a drawing room, an extension perhaps of the C18th notion that Piazza San Marco was the drawing room of Europe. It is an easy place to make friends when working outside, including with other artists with whom I have on-going conversations about whether it is possible to make worthwhile work about Venice now.

### **De-population**

De-population is understandably considered a problem as the balance between residents and tourists has shifted dramatically in recent years with the result that Venice is becoming a mono-economy. My work is based on drawings and photographs made in areas off the main tourist beat, (the S.Marco / Rialto / Academia triangle), in Cannaregio, Dorsoduro and Castello sestieri (districts) where I have also 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.

### **Pictorial Strategies**

During this *Venice Perplexion* I have developed several pictorial strategies to explore, investigate and re-imagine the visual information, experiences, memories and ideas that I bring back from Venice. Initially I selected single drawings as starting points and contrary to the small-scale usually associated with souvenir paintings (vedute / views) brought back from Venice, made large-scale works that as the result of tight framing/editing, offer a physical proximity that enables the viewer (I hope) to experience a *Venice-ness* up-close and personal, not as a distant view.



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



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

---

The next group of paintings I made were “creative re-arrangements”, (Julia Shaw, 2016), I took colours and parts of images from made-on-site sketchbook drawings and small paintings, initially this way of working was explored in the studio through a group of larger works on paper, see below, usually working on several of these drawings at the same time. The subsequent paintings were made in the spirit of the drawings not from a particular drawing. This ‘creative re-arrangement’ allowed me to make spaces and scenarios in the paintings that I hoped would reflect some of the complexity that is Venice now.

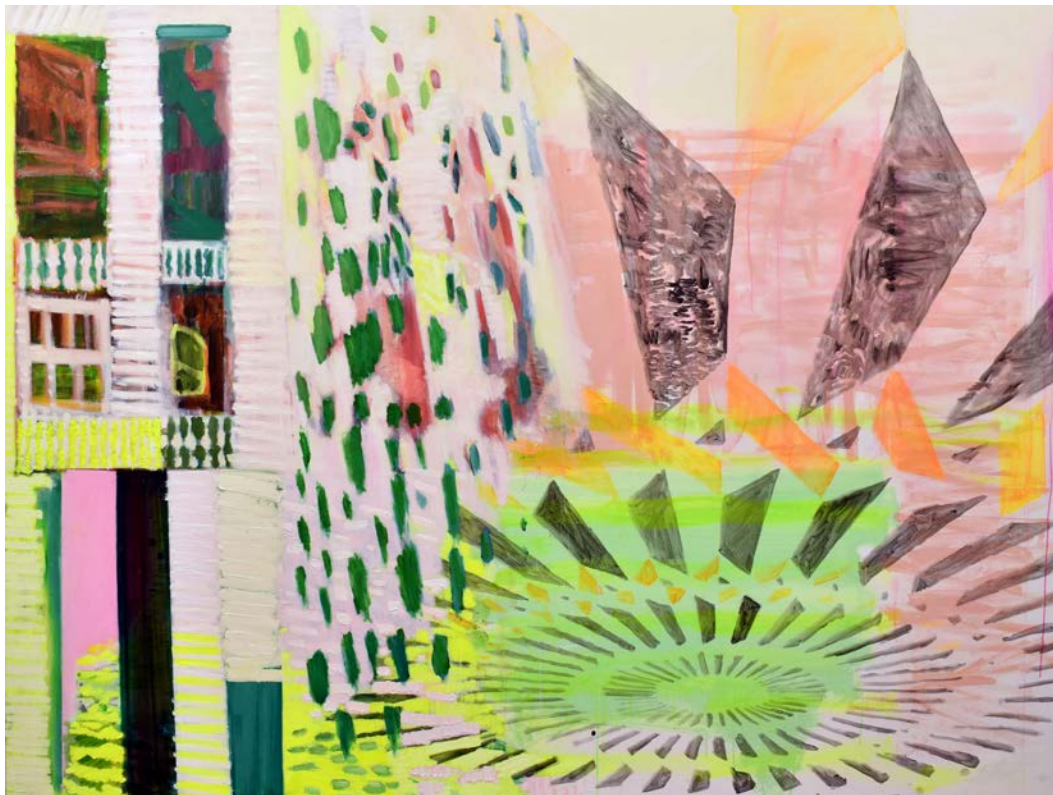
I recently realised that Italo Calvino’s extraordinary confabulation, *Invisible Cities*, may have influenced these paintings, he also uses a strategy of selection to enable Marco Polo to describe Venice to the Great Khan who eventually realises that it’s Polo’s hometown that is being described. I think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



VN, (*Drawings*), 2021, mixed media on Khadi paper, 50 x 70 cm / 20 x 28 inches



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



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



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



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

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 double-page 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 usually packed in protective sleeves in the 'wrong' orientations and often re-discovered in the backs of drawers; difficult to read images from a recent 'past'. The 2 paintings also refer to the structure and colour of two favourite Italian foods and to the format of comic books created to facilitate time-based narratives.



<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

---





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

---



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

The second painting (below): *What Shall We Look at First? (Traveller's Tales 2, Gelato)*, 2022, takes as its starting point drawings of the Baroque Santa Maria Assunta, (Gesuiti), and the Gothic Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, (Zanipolo), two very different churches in terms of architectural language/date, materials, colour and scale and yet connected by a short walk. It is possible to visit both of these 'past/presents' in a very short space of time 'in the now'. This painting 'bangs' two 'past/presents' together on one large-scale canvas to create a simultaneous, condensed and perhaps disorientating viewer experience, (as does *Tramezzino, (Traveller's Tales 1)*, 2022), It also seeks to 'see what happens' when the wonder of both places is experienced without the 'palate-cleansing' walk between the two, (but perhaps helped by a tramezzino (layered sandwich) or a multi-flavoured gelato / icecream on the way!) It was essential to find a materiality, colour palette and form(s) that enabled two very different experiences of form, space, light and time to exist together and to achieve a pictorial balance whilst at the same time enabling 'visual frictions or disruptions' to exist on the same surface. In *Venetian Life* W. D. Howells wrote of the Gesuiti, "The workmanship is marvellously skilful, and the material costly, but it only gives the church.... a poverty, a coldness, a harshness

indescribably table-clothly”, and is a real contrast to the ‘warmer’ brick built Zanipolo. As with almost all of my work these paintings are not planned, they begin with ‘excited’ or ‘obsessed with’ responses to particular drawings, photographs or memories. Moving from small-scale starting points to large-scale canvases often initially disappoints which results over an extended period of time involving frustration, inactivity, reading and experimentation, to the development of questions, responses and ideas leading (hopefully) to identifying the ‘real’ subject(s) of the painting, (intellectual / personal / formal) unanticipated at the start of the painting process.



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

In Autumn 2021 I used an A4 concertina-type sketchbook for the first time and over 3 weeks, across its fully extended 4-metre width, made a series of paintings of the waterline of several rii (canals). Some images extend for up to ten A4 pages others to as little as two. It is possible to encounter this sketchbook in different ways either

on the horizontal plane viewed from above or in concertina form when it is best seen standing vertically at eye level.

Flat on a table it can be viewed as a conventional book-type sketchbook, (as pairs of facing pages), or it can be further unfolded to enable the viewer to see paintings that extend beyond the 2-page format. By placing it on the floor with the viewer walking along the complete width the complete run of pages can be viewed from above so that the dislocations as one image ends and butts against the start of another can be seen – another walk through Venice made elsewhere. In this format there are changes of scale, palette, place and timescale.

Conversely the painting below was born out of the notion of presenting a simultaneous selection of images from the sketchbook arranged on a conventional 3x4 proportion format canvas, (rather than the conventional page-turning episodic experience). It also responds to the need to make a group of lighter-toned paintings in contrast to the dark night-time palette of the previously mentioned paintings, (*Postcard from V, (Passeggiata Notturna, 1)*, 2022, and *Postcard from Venice, (Passeggiata Notturna, Perduta, 2)*).

The light-toned colour palette of ***Concertina Walk, (Venice), 2022***, with its 'wall' of images, changes aspects of the 'flat' experience of the sketchbook from an incremental, walking-time experience, to reflect the often perplexing where-to-stand-and-where-to-look- first experience familiar to those finding themselves in a visually rich perhaps confusing location for the first time. Like the slightly earlier (darker) works previously mentioned, this painting proposes "*getting lost*", an approach to enjoying Venice encouraged by Tiziano Scarpa in his book *Venice is a Fish*.



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

Over the winter of 2021-22 the concertina sketchbook stood on the mantelpiece at home, sitting on the sofa below it at 90 degrees I could, in one glance, see parts of several pages out of sequence, juxtaposed against each other.

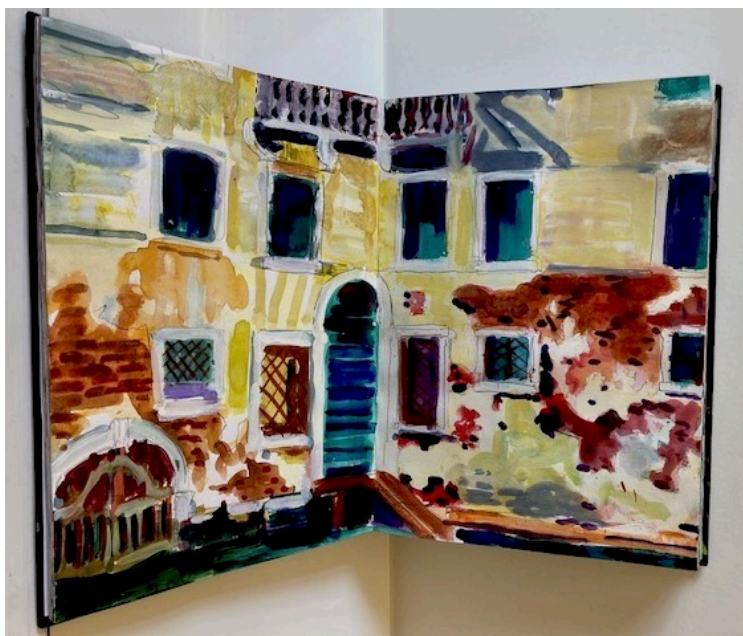


I began to think of this as an equivalent to the brief glimpses that you get looking down calle through doorways, into corte (courtyards) and across small campi when wandering around Venice. The concertina folding made the paintings of the near-flat

surfaces of canal-side buildings into calle-like alleys with disappearing and out-of-focus perspectives.



I photographed and videoed the concertinaed sketchbook through 180 and 360 degrees on a table in the studio (<https://youtu.be/rxel1OUBEjs>) and was excited by the unexpected juxtapositions, altered forms and spaces and as a result made the next 2 paintings. In the first, *Passaggiata Concertina*, 2022, I experimented with the use of 'human-scale' pages, unlike the near sketchbook-sized images used in *Concertina Walk, (Venice,)* 2022 the following painting re-creates the Venice-from-the-sofa experience at a 'human-page-scale'.





***Passeggiata Concertina*, 2022**, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 190.5 x 254 cm

<http://www.virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/50.html>

By using a two-canvas (side-by-side) format the experience of taking a walk along the sketchbook when it is arranged in concertina form is extended, its 'human-body-page-scale' allows the viewer to look into some of the unknowable spaces of Venice, as one often does on a 'real' walk in Venice. At 4.5 metres in width this 2-canvas



***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://www.virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/49.html>

painting requires the viewer not only to do the 'dance' usual to the experience of looking at large paintings, (standing well back to get the complete picture and then moving forward to examine details), but it also requires the viewer to participate in a journey along the painting whilst also doing the 'dance'. I hope in the future to extend this group of two paintings to four or more so as to make a complete immersive *Camera di Venezia* (room) where the viewer is completely enclosed in the painted experience, (not unlike the popular C19th touring panorama paintings made by for example, the Sunderland-born painter Clarkson Frederick Stanfield (1793-1867) and his then assistant David Roberts (1796-1864), as a means of communicating the wonder of far-away places before mass travel was widely available.



### Venice Co-incidences



Work in Progress, 2022

When I am in Venice, I experience lots of wonderful coincidences and magical imaginings, co-incidences that are more vivid and 'significant' than those usually



experienced perhaps due to the sensual overload and the enhanced alertness that comes with being somewhere extraordinary that is not 'home'. The next 4 paintings celebrate co-incidence Venetian-style and are investigations into how I might communicate my very vivid sense of C18th Venice, an important time in its history and still very visible today. John Julius Norwich's writing on C18<sup>th</sup> Venice, (1977) and Ian Kelly's brilliant biography, *Casanova: Actor Lover Priest Spy*, (2008) were both influential.

In a recent BBC Radio 3 programme about Vivaldi (2023), Venice was described as the "Las Vegas of the eighteenth century", (where it has in part been 'copied', see Davis, C. & Marvin, G. (2004) pp. 284- 292, for a lively discussion about this and other 'Venices'). The C18th was one of Venice's longest periods of peace and prosperity whilst also being the period of its greatest decline in terms of international importance and influence although this was masked by an almost frantic beautification of the city lest its former enemies consider it a spent force. But as John Julius Norwich (1977) says: "Throughout the century hundreds – perhaps thousands – of the most cultivated men and women of Europe poured into the city every year: they cannot all have been wrong." Much of what is still admired today, its architecture, sculpture, painting, theatre and music come from this period. Whilst the revived Carnival seeks to re-invent this period it is more than possible, when visiting the now usually silent C18th Palazzi, to imagine and invoke that time from the rich remains, as St Augustine said, "The dead are invisible but not absent".

In Xu Lei's work, seen in the Pavilion of the People's Republic of China, Biennale di Venezia, 2022, I found a similar fascination with the elasticity of time. His work based on "time as a metaphor", (a core element in ancient Chinese arts such as gardens, painting and poetry), "attempts to reorganize art historical images" to present "moveable time" which becomes in his work 'the return of time', "the reincarnation of time" and "the interplay of time".

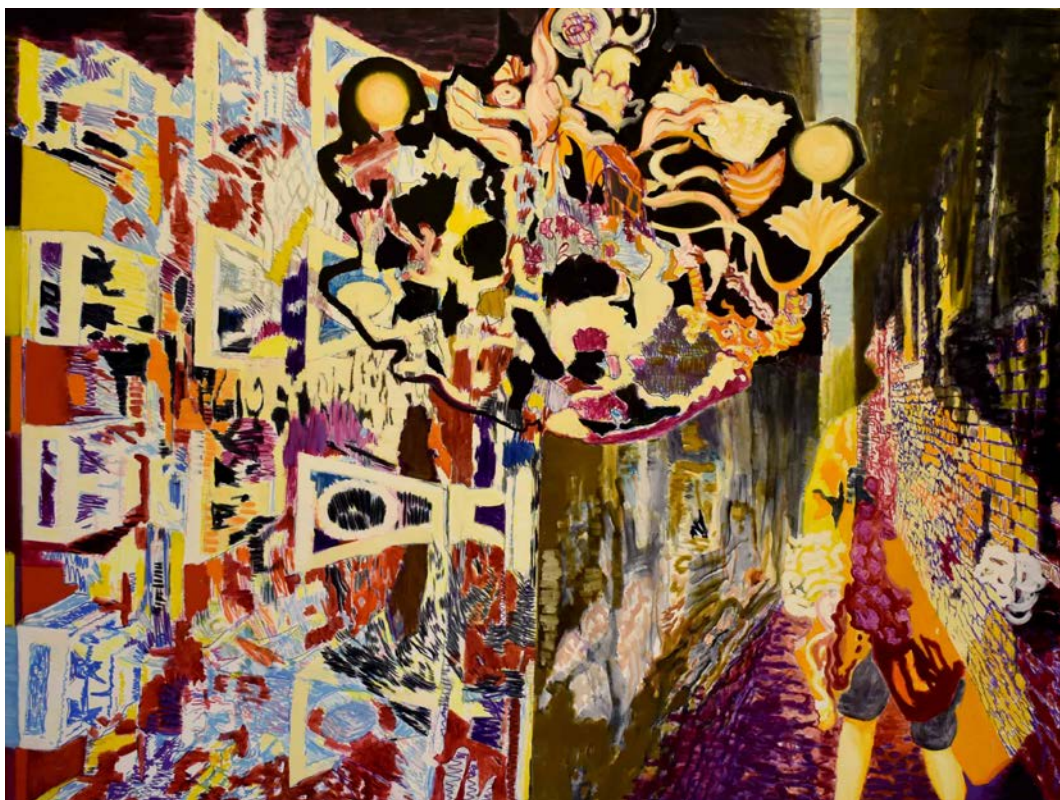
The disconcerting, uncannily life-like presence of C18th puppets from the Casa Goldoni, drawn in 2022, (thought to be from the puppet theatre at Palazzo Grimani), populate the first 3 of the *Venice Co-incidence* paintings.



Watercolours and pencil drawing made at the Casa Goldoni in 2022



**Thinking about the C18th, (Venice Co-incidences 1), 2022**, oil on cotton, 76 x 101 inches / 193 x 256.5 cm <http://www.virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/51.html>



**The Bravo, (Venice Coincidences 2), 2022**, oil on watercolour pen on acrylic on cotton, 76 x 101 inches / 193 x 256 cm <http://www.virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/53.html>



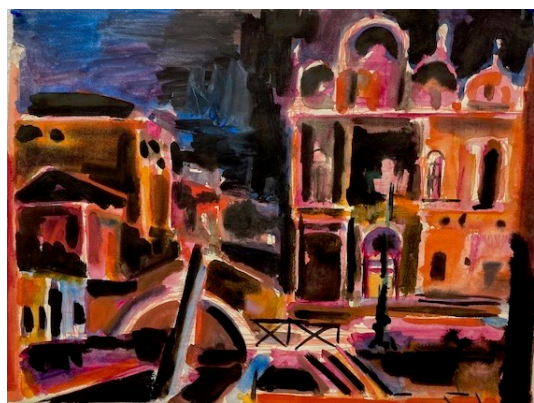
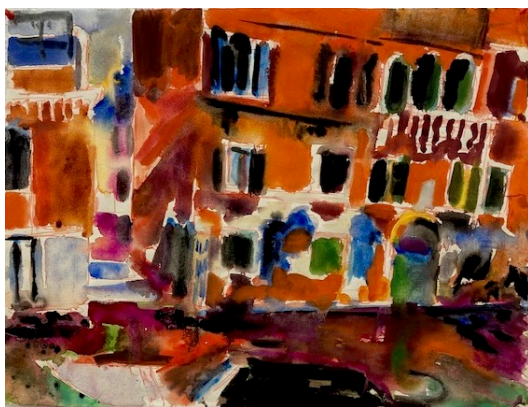
**Double Exposure, (Venice Coincidences 3), 2022**, oil on cotton, 75 x 100 inches / 191 x 256 cm <http://www.virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/54.html>



**Crossings, (Venice Coincidences 4), 2022-23**, oil on acrylic on cotton, 77 x 112 inches / 196 x 284.5 cm <http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/52.html>



Above and below: some of the 55 paintings on paper, each c. 20 x 28 inches / 50 x 70 cm, made in Venice, (Canareggio and Castello), October – November 2023





The next group of 4 paintings, (3 shown below, WIP), were made after returning from a visit to Venice in December 2022, during their making a sub-text of instability - possibly the result of concurrently re-reading *A History of Venice*, Norwich (1977), an often hectic and unnerving description of continuous threat, war and disease, particularly disturbing when read in the context of the current war in Ukraine. This combined with my growing awareness of how the long-term effects of labyrinthitis affect my 'sense of Venice' as the constant movement of water, light and reflections disrupt, in not an entirely unpleasant way, my sense of solidity. Stone-built bridges often feel as if they are gently swaying as I walk on them and the ground seems less certain than it is – although this 'uncertainty of ground' is indeed the condition of Venice (and perhaps of the world). These works were informed by paintings made in Cannaregio and Castello in October and November 2022 (see above) many of which were painted after dark.



**Dancin Palazzi**, 2023, oil on acrylic on cotton, 75 x 94 inches / 187.5cm x 239 cm  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/56.html>



**Castello**, 2023, oil on acrylic on cotton, 75 x 94 inches / 187.5cm x 239 cm (WIP)  
<http://virginiabodman.com/walkingonwater/57.html>



**Monument, 2023**, oil on acrylic on cotton, 75 x 94 inches / 187.5cm x 239 cm (WIP)

---

Venice can be experienced in many different ways when you are not there. There is a wealth of responses that have been made to the city, its peoples and cultures over centuries by writers, artists and filmmakers; through the still much-performed plays by Carlo Goldoni, (1707-1793), the music of Antonio Vivaldi and others and through such classic films as Nicolas Roeg's, (1928-2018), *Don't Look Now*, 1973, and the 2004 film of *The Merchant of Venice* by Michael Radford (1946-). Thomas's Mann's (1875-1955), 1912 novella *Death in Venice*, Luchino Visconti's (1906-1976), 1972 film of the same name starring Dirk Bogarde and the subsequent Benjamin Britten, (1913-1976), opera (1973), speak to the other-worldly, floating context of Venice and the Lido that combines with Venice's historic and ever-present threat of disease to become both metaphor and narrative arc. There are many other highly evocative texts by travellers and long-term residents such as Joseph Brodsky, Italo Calvino and Jan Morris. *Fable of Venice*, 1976, part of the much-loved *Corte Maltese* series by



the satirist and artist Ugo Pratt, (1927-1995), presents us with a Venetian's view of La Serenissima, much loved by Italians who sometimes use it as a guidebook.

I am fascinated by accounts of life in Venice written by long-term residents from the Ambassador Henry Wotton, (Venice 1604 – 1623) to the scholar Rawdon Brown, (Venice 1833-1883). As a way of 'being in Venice' when I am working in my studio I sometimes listen to audio books set in Venice and enjoy following the protagonists journeys as they move around the city. Donna Leon's series of novels set in contemporary Venice featuring her Veneziano speaking detective Commissario Brunetti do more than hint at current and historic 'difficulties'. Phillip Gwynne Jones' *Venetian* series written from the perspective of a British Honorary Consul include journeys around Venice that even include some of my favourite bars. Paintings are of course another way that we know Venice, particularly as the UK is rich in objects and artworks brought back by generations of Grand (and later) Tourists. In my view the Venetian artist Emilio Vedova's (1919- 2006) seemingly abstract paintings also have as their source in this rich, complicated city.

As my artist friend Debby Akam perceptively wrote in an email to me: "Like the tourists on the Grand Tour, you seem to be finding contemporary relevance in Venice, an affirmative place for you that intensifies experiences to allow you to 'discover and name' the relevant things for you. Identifying a special place and making it your own is a part of a chosen identity, like inhabiting a skin you want to wear". Despite trying to find words to communicate my fascination with and fears for Venice, it is paint and painting that are the best 'means' for me, the painter Walter Sickert, who also worked in Venice, puts it well: "The plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts". After much personal perplexion about how this late-in-life passion fits in with the trajectory of my work, which for 40 years had been motivated by lived and contextualised personal (female) experience, Venice, I think has given me permission (as it has to 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)

Encountering Venice as a mature, female artist with a history of making responses through painting to issues such as the female body and the landscape, power imbalance / corruption etc. has been advantageous I think in formulating responses through painting, to questions about ecological fragility, time and space, pleasure

and delight, beauty and fear, as there are, I think real connections with some of the issues I have previously been concerned with.

To attend to issues related to ecologies, tourism, the body in space, evidence of entropy and decline (political and physical) and a curiosity about histories and cultures, I have developed colour palettes that quote colour used in Venetian architecture, that reflect paintings by Tiepolo and Tintoretto in addition to colour/ and use of material ideas generated to express the excitement that I feel when working and living in Venice. I have also devised and employed conceptual and pictorial strategies that use change of scale in relation to the body of the viewer, rhythm / all-overness, fragmentation, elision, drama and materiality to initiate conversation about Venice now and about how Venice and painting-as-subject could be brought together to enable the contemporary (female) painter to investigate and respond to Venice as both a contemporary and a historic city.

I still wonder at Venice, it continues to fascinate, provoke and intrigue me as it does others, as Proust said, "When I went to Venice I found that my dream had become – incredibly, but quite simply – my address". John Julius Norwich, acknowledged as an important historian of, and instrumental to the 'saving' of Venice after the catastrophic floods of 1966 reminds us that "...that in Venice, more than anywhere else the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

## **Current**

The places and objects that I draw and photograph when I am in Venice, (i-phone camera only as I hate being encumbered and visible with a 'proper' camera), are those that catch-my-eye, surprise or excite me, there is never any thought at that point of future use, just the need to take something away from that interaction to look at later. I often look through the now vast file of photographs and it is easy to spot unexpected consistencies. I note that I have photographed the same places over and over again on successive visits and that certain types of objects encountered on visits to palazzi and museums crop up again and again: water, paving, stains, crumbly surfaces, intarsi floors, quirky Venetian hall furniture seen in the androne of many palazzi, Venetian mirrors and chandeliers, woven silk hangings, historic clothing, puppets, paintings of social events, architectural details, to name a few.

## Mirrors

Venetian mirrors, (mainly from the C18th) often seen in their original palazzo settings and occasionally out of context in museums, were an instant fascination – mirrors that barely function as such now but have over time have witnessed or deflected much visual information, inform a current and on-going group of paintings and drawings. Joseph Brodsky's (1940-1996) account in *Watermark*, (1992), of his encounter with a now 'dead' mirror during a visit to the crumbling and neglected interior of a minor Venetian palazzo and his *Sonnet to the Mirror* have both been influential. These dead or almost dead mirrors, (dead due to their disintegrating and distorting silvering), with their gilded frames featuring bucolic imagery are perhaps in strict contrast to what generally attracts artist to the actuality or conceit of mirrors (from Velasquez onwards). Writing in an online review of an exhibition of paintings by Cecily Brown, (New York, 2023) Katie White writes, "Mirrors, with their flat reflective surfaces swallow up scenes from the world around them, have long held a special place in history of painting: a metaphor for the art of making itself. The mirror, both as a symbol and as a compositional device, materializes time"



Series of 9 over-drawings, (each 8 x 8.5 inches / 20 x 22 cm), made using W&N watercolour pens and a white Posca pen on an I-phone photograph printed on copy paper, of the penultimate stage of *Mirror (1)*, 2023.



*Mirror (1)*, 2023, oil on cotton, 75 x 80 inches /19.5 x 203 cm WIP

---

### **Showing the work?**

I have several ideas in relation to exhibiting the paintings, (and sketchbooks and other works made in situ). The presence of large canvases: their size, materialities, dramas of scale and use of colour has always been important to me, the immersive scale of these paintings will provide, I hope, some sense of what it feels like for me 'being' there. There are now more than 30 paintings which I look forward to installing in gallery spaces that provide the opportunity to see many of them together and in juxtapositions that provide powerful, exciting immersive experiences and where the colour and materiality of the work can be properly experienced. This installation may include the previously mentioned *Camera di Venezia*.

I am also interested in exhibiting my paintings 'about' Venice alongside Venice-related objects and artworks from museum collections thus providing a sense of the longevity and depth of our (perhaps very British) relationship with Venice. This might include artists, Grand Tourists and other's sketchbooks and diaries, paintings, Venetian glass and other items brought back by Grand Tour travellers and others. The Holburne Museum in Bath's founding collection the gift of Sir William Holburne, contains many items that he brought back from his visit to Venice whilst on his own Grand Tour in 1824-25. Tyne and Wear Museums and Archives (TWAM) has a long list of intriguing Venice associated items including a painting of a Sunderland-based brig leaving the Molo in Venice and a scale-model of the last surviving, Newcastle built Armstrong hydraulic crane still in existence which is in the Venice Arsenale still awaiting restoration.

I am also interested in proposing events that might be held alongside exhibitions of the work including a programme of Venice related films, a day long symposium with speakers who respond to some of the issues investigated in my paintings, (ecologies, futures etc.) and perhaps even a food festival featuring wonderful Venetian chiccetti accompanied by Prosecco and Campari Spritz.

I was fortunate in Autumn 2022, to meet some of the artists from the Warmichcha Collective showing in the Bolivia Pavilion of the Biennale di Venezia who invited me to give a presentation in their pavilion on the work that I had been making about Venice. It was a slightly unnerving experience talking about paintings 'about Venice' when you could see it through the open door.



Virginia Bodman, 29.6.2023 [www.virginiabodman.com](http://www.virginiabodman.com)

## **Bibliography**

- Bosworth, R.J.B. (2014), *Italian Venice A History*, UK & USA: Yale University Press
- Brodsky, J. (1992), *Watermark; An Essay on Venice*; Penguin Modern Classics
- Calvino, I. (1974), *Invisible Cities*; translated from Italian by Harcourt Inc. New York: HMH Books
- Coles, P. (2013), *The Politics of Washing: Real Life in Venice*; UK: Robert Hale Ltd
- Cristiano, S. & Gonella, F. (2020), 'Kill Venice': a systems thinking conceptualisation of urban life, economy, and resilience in tourist cities. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00640-6>
- Davis, C. & Marvin, G. (2004), *Venice: The Tourist Maze, A Cultural Critique of the World's Most Touristed City*; USA: University of California Press
- Dickens, C. (1846), *Italian Journey*; UK: Penguin Classics
- Fondazione Neri Museo Italiano della Ghisa, (Date?) *The Origins and History of Public Illumination in Venice*, <https://www.museoitalianoghisa.org/assets/images/pdf/Storia-illuminazione-VE-EN.pdf>, (accessed.14.6.2023)
- Gwynne Jones, P. (2017-2023), *Venetian series*, (1 – 6), featuring the Honorary British Consul Nathan Sutherland
- Kelly, I. (2006) *Casanova: Actor Lover Priest Spy*, London: Hodder
- Leon, D. (2013). *My Venice and Other Essays* (First; hardcover ed.). New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Leon, D. Commissario Brunetti series 1-30, Transatlantic Monthly Press
- Links, J.G. (1966), *Venice for Pleasure*; London: Pallas Athene
- Mann, T. (1912) *Death in Venice*, Vintage Classics (2001)
- Miles, M. (2016), *Eco-aesthetic dimensions: Herbert Marcuse, ecology and art*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311983.2016.1160640> (accessed 13.1.2020)
- Morris, J, *Venice*, (1993); London: Faber and Faber
- Norwich, J.J. (1977): *A History of Venice*, London: Penguin Non-Fiction
- Pratt, U, (1976), *Fable of Venice*
- Scarpa, T, (2008), *Venice is a Fish*; translated from Italian by Serpent's Tail. London: Serpent's Tail

Settis, S. (2016,) *If Venice Dies*; translated from Italian by Andre Naffis-Sahely. London: Pallas Athene

Shaw, J. (2016), *The Memory Illusion: Why You May Not Be Who You Think You Are*; London: Random House

Solnit, R. (2005), *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*; USA: Cannongate

White, K. (31.3.2023), *On View*, Artnet News  
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/cecily-brown-met-museum-art-history-references-2277258> (accessed 1.6.2023)

Xu, L. (2022) *Correspondences*, artist's statement, Biennale di Venezia, 2022.  
<https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/china-peoples-republic> (accessed 10.6.2023)