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Smith, Roberta: The Threads That Tie a Show Together. Rudolf Stingel's Carpeting Makeover in Venice
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In Venice, the exhibition “Rudolf Stingel” unfolds over the atrium and both upper floors of the Palazzo Grassi; in the larger salons, the carpeting reinforces the architecture of the building.

VENICE — François Pinault, the French megacollector and mogul, was smart to give the painter Rudolf Stingel the run of his regal Venetian exhibition space, the Palazzo Grassi, along with an elastic budget. Still, it was a risk. Quantities of money and space can bring out the worst in artists, including Mr. Stingel. But this time, the resources were well used.

The visually explosive, historically charged transformation of the palazzo’s interior is one of the signal achievements of Mr. Stingel’s fascinating career and just about the best contemporary art in Venice outside of “The Encyclopedic Palace,” the exceptional centerpiece of this year’s Biennale.

At a moment when art is swamped with big-ticket, high-tech spectacles that overwhelm, Mr. Stingel’s effort is the exception that proves the rule. It engulfs but also backs off, giving the viewer plenty to look at and think about, and plenty of room for doing so, often with a weird, unexpected one-to-one intimacy.

Mr. Stingel has achieved this rarity by lining most of the palazzo’s public spaces — the vast atrium and the two floors of enfiladed galleries overlooking it — with synthetic carpet printed with an enlarged, repeating digital facsimile of a predominantly red Ottoman carpet. He then countered the blazing color with noncolor: grisaille oil paintings hung sparingly throughout the palazzo, usually one, and occasionally two, canvases in each gallery. Abstract paintings dot the

second floor; the third has loosely Photo Realist paintings of carved-wood medieval saints and madonnas, some quite small, copied from old art history books.

The result of this makeover is a three-dimensional interplay of two-dimensional mediums (painting, textiles and photography) that carefully layers abstraction and representation; original and reproduction; East and West; art and craft; and personal, local and world history, all into an encompassing environment of exhilarating complexity.

Mr. Stingel is among the great anti-painting painters of our age, a descendant of Warhol but much more involved with painting's conventions and processes, which he alternately spurns, embraces, parodies or exaggerates. His art asks what are paintings, who makes them, and how?

Among much else, he has made paintings by walking on thick slabs of white plastic foam in shoes dipped in corrosive acid, creating the one-liner effect of footsteps in snow. He has made painting kits (canvas, paint, spray paint, instructions and a bit of ballet tulle to use as a stencil), whose purchasers can attempt their own Stingel abstractions, simpler versions of those on view here.

He has also installed silver foil-covered insulation foam that the public is allowed to mar and write on; he subsequently divides these "ready-made" surfaces into paintings. And in the past decade, Mr. Stingel has revisited his early training in representation with Photo Realist works: morose self-portraits, and portraits of people important to him, like his longtime dealer, Paula Cooper. These works signal the autobiographical subtext to his seemingly distanced approach.

Throughout his career, Mr. Stingel's installation pieces have expanded painting's physical borders in starkly efficient ways, including the unfurling of great expanses of carpet on either wall or floor and the claiming of them, often convincingly, as paintings.

The Grassi carpet painting is his biggest ever, the first to cover both walls and floors at once, and unusually freighted with history. It is from the early 18th century (the palazzo is mid-18th-century) and just the kind of exotic luxury item that regularly passed through Venice when it was a major gateway to the Middle East.

Such carpets sometimes ended up depicted in Renaissance paintings, with the result that certain patterns are forever linked to the artists who used them and are, for example, referred to as Lotto, Memling, Holbein or Crivelli.

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a Lotto carpet from 16th-century Turkey on view in Gallery 459 that is thought to be the carpet depicted in Lotto's 1542 "Alms of Saint Anthony," an oil-on-wood painting hanging in the Basilica of Santia Giovanni e Paolo, not far from the Palazzo Grassi.)

At first sight, Mr. Stingel's pictorial wonderland is mesmerizing; you seem to float like a fish in an aquarium or fall, like Alice, into some unusually lavish rabbit hole. The white cube is obliterated, absorbed completely into an encompassing, unending visual fact. Appropriately, the Persian word for "carpet" means to spread.

The mind is pulled in, too, figuring it all out: the carpet has a large central medallion on a tight field surrounded by an ornate border; its pattern is greatly enlarged (roughly eight times the original); it is the same throughout the building. Above all, it just keeps going: up the walls and the stairs, into the elevator. Always it softens sound (and comforts the feet). This built-in sense of "hushed awe" enhances the privacy of the experience.

Upstairs, space folds and unfolds, as patterned walls and floors seem to meld into continuous planes. You become aware of the care taken with piecing the carpet to fit the rooms. In the smallest, it seems magnified. In the larger salons, the giant motifs seem closer to human scale, chiefly because the carpet borders sometimes reiterate the architecture, implying wide molding around doors or wainscoting along walls. This makes sense: such carpets often had architectural inspiration in Islamic buildings, monuments and gardens.

As for the “normal” paintings: On the second floor, their loose, abstract gestures contrast with the considered craft of the rug. Some paintings with hints of brocade and signs of the stenciled tulle echo carpet’s foliate motifs and evoke the tiny grid of carpet weaving.

In a stately second-floor salon, overlooking the Grand Canal, a large portrait of the Austrian artist Franz West — a close friend of Mr. Stingel’s, who died a year ago — startles. West’s youthful image is flecked with paint and coffee cup stains, as if it had sat around his (or Mr. Stingel’s) studio for years. (One of Mr. Stingel’s darker self-portraits, based on a similarly damaged photograph, hangs in a corner of the ground floor, as if intended as a signature.)

The paintings of carved saints on the third floor set up an especially lively dialogue, contrasting Christian imagery with Islamic semiabstraction, European with Middle Eastern, opulence and love of nature with colorless deprivation and martyrdom. Moving in to examine the small paintings of St. Elizabeth, St. Barbara or John the Baptist brings you up against the Op-Art blurriness of the printed carpet, and also contrasts modern pixilation with one of its ancient precursors: hand-tied carpets.

In a sense, Mr. Stingel has merged two forms of local architecture, turning a formerly residential palazzo into a setting for religious art after purifying it with the high, sometimes religious, art of another culture. It is by far the best exhibition seen at the Palazzo Grassi since Mr. Pinault bought it from the city of Venice in 2004 as a showplace for his often tone-deaf, inordinately blue-chip collection. Maybe its run should be extended.

In a city full of centuries-old churches, whose in situ artworks never move, why not leave an aggressively contemporary site-specific one in place? Maybe the Dia Foundation could take it over; it has just as much startling displacement as Walter De Maria’s famed “New York Earth Room,” yet it is also profoundly at home.

“Rudolf Stingel” is on view through Dec. 31 at the Palazzo Grassi, Campo San Samuele, Venice; www.palazzograssi.it/en.