

## FOCUS ON: MELISSA MCGILL, RED REGATTA

By Jean Dykstra

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Melissa McGill, *Riflessi (Red Regatta – September 1, 2019)*, 2019. Courtesy the artist and TOTAH

Melissa McGill's Red Regatta is a warning and an elegy, a red flag raising the alarm about climate change and the perils of mass tourism, and a love letter to the city of Venice. A large-scale public-art project, and photographs memorializing that project, Red Regatta was inspired by the *vela al terzo* sailboats that have been part of Venice's history for more than 1,000 years. McGill spent two years conceptualizing, organizing, choreographing, and photographing the project, in which 52 individuals boats, each with hand-painted sails in a different shade of red, participated in four separate regattas during the Venice Biennale last year. (To get a sense of the regatta, see Giovanni Pellegrini's meditative video, [here](#).)

An American who grew up in Long Island, where she learned to sail, McGill considers Venice her second home. In conducting research for an earlier artwork, a sculptural sound project (*The Campi*) that explored the way the soundscape of the city's public spaces was changing due to mass tourism, she met the president of the boating association to listen to the sound qualities specific to the smaller canals in Venice. The seed for her new project was planted. "On the plane on the way home," she says, "I was already drawing the project that became Red Regatta."



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A large-scale community collaboration, the project involved the members of the Associazione Vela al Terzo Venezia; more than 250 Venetian partners; as well as students and sailors. Curated by Chiara Spangaro, the project was managed by Marcella Ferrari and co-organized by Magazzino Italian Art Foundation in Cold Spring, New York. The photographs and a video were on view this winter at TOTAH Gallery on the Lower East Side, and book is scheduled to be released in September, published by Marsilio, a Venetian publisher.

The photographs, which focus on the water rather than the boats, the red sails – which shift subtly in hue from tomato red to vermilion to scarlet, ruby, cherry, and pinkish red – are reflected in abstract, sculptural ripples. McGill, who mixed pigments in her studio to create 100 different shades of red, chose red because she associates the color with Venice – from the Venetian flag to the bricks of its buildings to the pigments used by the 16th-century Venetian painters Titian and Tintoretto – but also because, she says, “Red represents so many emotions, love but also alarm.” The photographs bring to mind the way the water catches the setting sun, but also the residue of pollution, or the blood red of an emergency. They’re at once romantic and unsettling, reflecting McGill’s deep love of the city but also her concern for its future in light of the ramifications of the climate crisis and rising sea levels. “Since we sailed last September,” she says, “the city has flooded, then it was quarantined, and there have been tremendous upheavals.” But, she notes, there have been silver linings: with no motorboats and fewer tourist, the canals are cleaner. The Art Newspaper has reported that quarantined Venetians have been posting photographs, taken from their windows, of fish that have returned to the canals, and swans floating along the water’s surface.



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