

Bally Foundation's new Lake Lugano headquarters is an art-filled paradise

The Bally Foundation inaugurates its new headquarters in a 1930s villa overlooking Lake Lugano, Switzerland, with the group show 'Un Lac Inconnu' (An Unknown Lake)



Mel O'Callaghan, *Respire, Respire*, 2019. Exhibition view of 'Un Lac Inconnu', Bally Foundation, Lugano, Switzerland, 2023
(Image credit: Andrea Rossetti; copyright Bally)

'Close your eyes' prompts a text work by artist Haim Steinbach inside Bally Foundation's new space on Lake Lugano in Switzerland. Printed in black serifed letters, the message is emblazoned on a wall-sized window looking out on the spectacular view, and appears to float just above the water, encircled by lush green hills. But closing your eyes is the last thing you'd want to do inside the foundation's meticulously restored 1930s Villa Heleneum. As I took in the stunning scenery from inside the palatial, wooden-panelled first-floor space, I felt overwhelmed by the two conflicting urges sparked by the text and the vista – to close my eyes but keep looking – and defaulted into a meditative soft focus.



Haim Steinbach, *Close your eyes*, 2003. Exhibition view of 'Un Lac Inconnu', Bally Foundation, Lugano, Switzerland, 2023
(Image credit: Andrea Rossetti; copyright Bally)

This is precisely the mental state that Vittoria Matarrese, the foundation's director and curator, attempts to induce with the inaugural exhibition 'Un Lac Inconnu' (An Unknown Lake), which opened on 20 April 2023. The exhibition's title is borrowed from Marcel Proust, who referred to the subconscious as an 'unknown lake' in the novel *Time Regained*.

Spread across the villa's three storeys and garden, the show is filled with artworks that oscillate between internal narratives and their poetic, physical expression, such as Petrit Halilaj and Álvaro Urbano's forsythia flowers, or H  l  ne Muheim's delicate drawings made with eyeshadow and graphite powder. A series of gossamer silk works on a loom by young French artist Elise Peroi depict imaginary natural landscapes, whereby some parts are kept unwoven, letting the negative space be filled in by the viewer's own connotations.



H  l  ne Muheim, *Horizon - R  manence - 11*, 2022. Exhibition view of 'Un Lac Inconnu', Bally Foundation, Lugano, Switzerland, 2023
(Image credit: Andrea Rossetti; copyright Bally)

'For me, it's the discovery of this lake and this landscape which, for whatever reason, inspires introspection; it's quite radical! The idea for the show was to do a back-and-forth between a physical landscape and an inner, deeper one,' says Matarrese, who took the helm of the foundation in November 2022, following a 12-year tenure at Palais de Tokyo. She plans to establish Villa Heleneum as a vibrant cultural centre that would draw a contemporary discourse to this magical location on the foot of the pre- Alpine mountain range. 'My ideas were similar to Bally CEO Nicolas Giroto's vision, which is to make something that's linked to this place, its history, geography and mythology.'

Part of that mythology is linked to the villa's namesake, Parisian dancer and art patron Hélène Bieber, who commissioned the Heleneum in 1930 to be modelled after the Petit Trianon of Versailles. She sought to establish a free-spirited community of interdisciplinary artists there, in the vein of the Monte Vérita commune in nearby Lake Maggiore, but abandoned her plan as the Second World War broke out.

To honour the location's history, French author Yannick Haenel was commissioned to write a text for the show, titled *Lac*, and on the second floor, visitors can open a hidden compartment in the door frame and listen to it in several languages. 'I wanted to let the house speak, literally,' says Matarrese.



Exterior view of the new Bally Foundation headquarters, inside the meticulously restored 1930s Villa Heleneum on Lake Lugano, Switzerland
(Image credit: Andrea Rossetti; copyright Bally Foundation)



(Image credit: Valentina Casini; copyright Bally)

Villa Heleneum's garden and waterside entrance, reachable by foot or by boat, are some of the few publicly accessible spots around Lake Lugano, and the Bally Foundation plans to keep it this way. (The Heleneum is owned by the city, and the Bally Foundation, which has a 15-year lease, footed the bill for the historical renovation.)

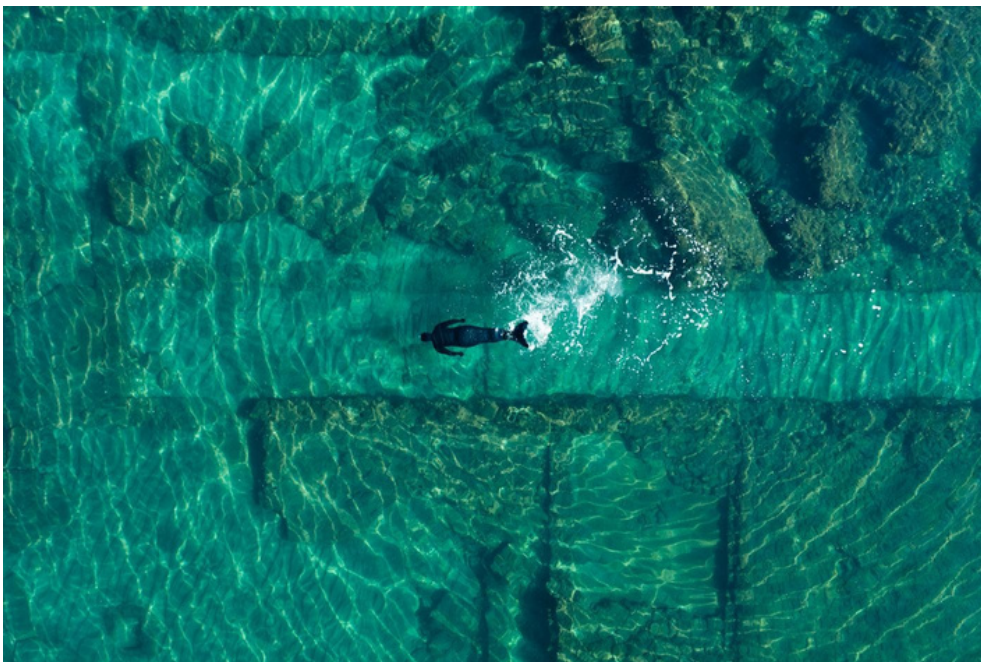
Two works in the show are placed outdoors, including Mathias Bensimon's site-specific commission *Le lac intérieur*, 2023, a sort of frescoed grotto atop a staircase that leads to the water. 'I love the sensation of being in this bubble above the water,' Matarrese beamed as she entered the cavernous azure work. 'We go through the Villa as we go through a personal diary'.



Mathias Bensimon, *Le lac intérieur*, 2023. Exhibition view of 'Un Lac Inconnu', Bally Foundation, Lugano, Switzerland, 2023
(Image credit: Andrea Rossetti; copyright Bally)

The water, its movement and deep colours are referred to in numerous works in the show. On the second floor, the film *Sunken Cities* (2021) by Lithuanian artist Emilija Škarnulytė stands out. The artist, who melds documentary and fiction in her videos, has developed a practice in which she dives into seas and rivers, exploring the ruins of vanished civilizations dressed in a mermaid-tailed diving suit, excavating the submerged landscapes of the mind.

'Un Lac Inconnu' features works by Vito Acconci, Wilfrid Almendra, Caroline Bachmann, Oliver Beer, Mathias Bensimon, Angela Bulloch, Ligia Dias, Adélaïde Feriot, Karim Forlin, Tania Gheerbrant, Petrit Halilaj & Álvaro Urbano, Yannick Haenel, Rebecca Horn, Paul Maheke, Hélène Muheim, Mel O'Callaghan, Philippe Parreno, Elise Peroi, Constant Puyo, Emilija Škarnulytė, Haim Steinbach, Willa Wasserman.



Emilija Škarnulytė, *Sunken cities*, 2021
(Image credit: Emilija Škarnulytė; Copyright Bally)



Adelaide Fériot, *Rayon vert*, 2021. Exhibition view of 'Un Lac Inconnu', Bally Foundation, Lugano, Switzerland, 2023
(Image credit: Andrea Rossetti) copyright Bally)



Mel O'Callaghan, *Respire, Respire*, 2019. Exhibition view of 'Un Lac Inconnu', Bally Foundation, Lugano, Switzerland, 2023
(Image credit: Andrea Rossetti, copyright Bally)