

Speech: Lord Ashton's speech at the British Pavilion opening event

Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon.

I am delighted to be here today, as the representative of Her Majesty's Government, for the opening of the British Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale.

I am very grateful to the British Council for inviting me to this auspicious event and allowing me to say a few words.

May I begin by congratulating the artist, Cathy Wilkes, for creating the incredible works on show inside this building, and Dr Zoé Whitley, for so skillfully curating the exhibition.

I had the pleasure of touring the pavilion this morning and I must say I was awed by the visually striking and thought-provoking display. I am sure that everyone here today and the many thousands of people who will visit the pavilion over the next 6 months will have the same experience.

On behalf of the UK Government I would like to thank the British Council for successfully managing the British Pavilion programme, which, together with their wider work around the globe, has promoted the best of the UK's arts and culture on the world stage.

And may I also express my deep gratitude to the many sponsors, supporters and patrons of the British Pavilion, whose kind and generous support is so vital to its continued success. Thank you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot underestimate the power of art and culture to bring people together from different places around the world. Often it is our cultural links which are right at the heart of cooperation between different nations, even when we may disagree in other areas.

As the world's preeminent arts festival, the Venice Biennale exemplifies the value of international cultural collaboration and exchange.

The British Pavilion holds a particularly special place within this magnificent festival, as one of the permanent national pavilions. And of course, it is also one of the longest-standing, having been established in 1909.

Therefore, I hope, you will forgive my lack of modesty when I say that the British Pavilion truly is a 'must see' for any visitor to the Biennale. And this year's exhibition truly lives up to its 'must see' status.

I am also delighted to say that, beyond the Pavilion itself, the festival this year has an incredibly strong showing of talent from the UK, not least of course with Ralph Rugoff, director of the Hayward Gallery in London, as

Artistic Director of the festival, becoming the first UK-based curator to hold the coveted title.

And in addition to this, the Central Exhibition will also feature the work of 5 further artists from the UK, all supported by the British Council.

The 58th Venice Biennale is therefore set to be a great showcase for British arts, demonstrating that the UK is an international cultural powerhouse, not only in our heritage but in our amazing and thought-provoking contemporary art.

So I would like to conclude by wishing the greatest success for the British Pavilion, and the UK artists in this year's festival.

Thank you.