



EVA ROTHSCHILD with Tom McGlynn

On the occasion of her third one-person show in New York, Tom McGlynn took the opportunity to speak with Eva Rothschild about her thoughts on simply-accreting forms and animatedly-suggestive meanings.

Tom McGlynn (Rail): Let me start off with a quotidian question—this being your third one-person show at the 303 Gallery in New York, do you consider the context of New York as inflecting your choice of presentation?

Eva Rothschild: The context I consider the most is the actual space that I have to place the work in, rather than the specific geographic location. It's interesting with 303, as this will be my third show, but it's also in their third space over that period of time. When you do an exhibition, if you have a longstanding relationship with a gallery often you end up doing more than one show in the same space over a span of years, and for an artist like me, who really thinks about the room and people's interaction with the work within the architectural space, then doing multiple shows in the same venue can be quite challenging because you're very aware of how your work was there initially. With 303, as we have worked together for many years, there is a deeper relationship with the gallery, and they have a knowledge and trust of the work so that's a really positive thing in addition to having these different spaces. In terms of the audiences though, I always think of the audiences for my work throughout the making, as essentially the works are made for the viewers.



Pencil Portrait of Eva Rothschild by Phong Bui

Rail: You've stated elsewhere an appreciation of Cady Noland's work when you were a student. I find her work very different from your approach, in the sense that she's involved in a formal presentation of a de-sublimated cultural content—the American political content in her work and part of her project seem to be to take the abstract Minimalist aesthetic, often quite allergic to anecdote, and de-sublimate it.

Rothschild: I saw her work first when I was doing my degree in Belfast. I remember being in a tutor's office, and there was this Cady Noland book or catalogue on the table. Just seeing her work in that catalogue was like a light going on. It articulated so many things that I was interested in. I was very frustrated by work that was being done around me at the time—I hadn't yet really decided that I wanted to do sculpture and was mainly doing printmaking. Noland's work seemed so contemporary, so urgent. I also remember feeling quite alienated from the work I was seeing around me, which was very big in Ireland at the time, a very kind of Expressionist male painting.

Rail: Can you give an example of that type of painting or work?

Rothschild: The painters who were very present around at that time—and it's not to disparage their work, it was just not the direction for me—were people like Michael Mulcahy and Patrick Graham. An Irish canon of painters, expressive and very much of Ireland. This was also quite present where I was studying, although there was also a lot of performance—Alastair MacLennan taught at the art school in Belfast, and he was always a very engaged and influential character. I had not moved to making sculpture really at this point—this was in many ways due to a kind of lack of confidence about making that came from the educational system I'd come out of, which was an all-girls, Catholic school with no access to the idea of making or anything remotely like that. So seeing Noland's work just opened up another arena of possibility. Here was this work that was so angry, and yet so contained. That was the thing that was really key—it was about expression and content, as you say, and yet the form it took was formal, pared back, contained—I can't really describe it. It was just a distilled aggression in these totally delineated forms. The masculinity that was present in Noland's work was also overwhelmingly liberating to see.

Rail: That's really interesting. Do you think of “masculinity” in terms of a personal/political stance to power, as in the title of your 2016 show at the New Art Gallery Walsall in the UK, *Alternative to Power*? In reading your interview on the occasion of the show, Anna C. Chave's essay “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power” immediately came to mind. It seemed like there was an intention on your part to use that title to undermine received notions of power, even though such content was not explicit in most of the installation.

Rothschild: Yes, it felt really important to me to call the show that name. The gallery had a five meter by six meter window that artists could use, or in which the title of the show would be announced. I made a banner of tie-dyed fabric, then over-printed, taped-on text that said “Alternative to Power.” So the title itself was an artwork, a public work that was presented on the outside of the gallery. It was both for the exhibition, and for the people who just walk on by. The banner had this feeling like something that could have been a backdrop to something very active. It had a certain kind of punky feel to it, very handmade, like a banner that might have been carried at a protest march or something, and I really wanted it to have that energy.

The show was made when the Brexit vote was happening, which I totally opposed and which is so profound for the UK and for me as a European. And I guess in the simplest terms that's what it is about. It's both asking and suggesting that there must be an alternative to power. Something else, you know? I



Eva Rothschild, *Alternative to Power* - Installation image
1. Installation view New Art Gallery Walsall, 2016.
Courtesy The artist, Stuart Shave / Modern Art & The
Modern Institute / Toby Webster.

always think of Bruce Nauman's neon spiral which reads: *The True Artist Helps The World By Revealing Mystic Truths*. This sort of crazy beautiful idea which obviously makes the artist infinitely fallible but suggests that it doesn't always have to be about a power structure. And I suppose that art might, ideally, offer us some way into that. It can't replace a political system—I believe in political systems—but I think that the idea of making art or doing something that points towards an alternative is valid, and it feels very important to me.

Rail: In Chave's "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," she declares that although Minimalism had been historically primarily masculine it had been selling itself somewhat as a generically human orientation that might contain the barest utopian promise in its very reduction and refusal of variously articulated form. But ultimately, "Minimalism's refusal to picture something else, [constituted] a refusal which finally returns the viewer—at best a more disillusioned viewer—to more of the same."¹ She seems to be identifying male-dominated historical Minimalism with a refusal of difference, or of being able to picture something else. It sounds like what you're offering with regards to your banner is the opposite, an alternative.

Rothschild: So she's saying that minimalism always turns in on itself—that it only ever shows itself? It doesn't posit any alternative?

Rail: She describes the rhetoric of Minimalism in Donald Judd and Robert Morris's theoretical writings as being inscribed with sublimated narratives of male power, aggression, and dominance, but that any contrary inscription might be criticized (by the practitioners) as too subjective or anecdotal, and therefore, Minimalism doesn't offer the viewer much in terms of alternatives beginnings or endings.

Rothschild: Yet that's what really interests me. In my own practice there's sort of a corruption of the ideas of Minimalism. I used to refer to the work as "magic Minimalism" because I really liked the idea of bringing in something sort of corrupted—the idea of magic, which revolves completely around belief—into something that seems so essentialist. But there's the other side of the minimal, as you say, which is that it refuses something. It refuses the associative and then also plays into it in many ways, if you think of John McCracken or James Turrell and the meditative experience. It leads you to a whole other thing which is actually fraught with associative connection.

Rail: Right, it's the argument of representation versus abstraction, and also representational thinking versus multivalent allusion. I definitely picked that up with your work. I'd like to ask you about your position with regards to so-called post-Minimalism, which you just kind of answered. But also considering the historical deployment of Minimalism, perhaps we can posit the minimally determined form as a generic critique of signification itself—a kind of alternative to the



Eva Rothschild, *Soft Play*, 2016. hand dyed and waxed cotton, foam, wood, perspex. (290 × 180 × 103 cm)
Installation view New Art Gallery Walsall, 2016. Courtesy of The artist, Stuart Shave / Modern Art & The Modern Institute / Toby Webster

stand-off between signifier and signified? Conflating the two to come up with a third, unpredictable meaning.

The writings of Henry Louis Gates with regards to African American culture provide a good point of reference outside the realm of art theory. In his essay, “The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and The Signifying Monkey,” Gates refers to the story of an African American/Yoruba legendary monkey character who tells this lie to the lion about how an elephant has supposedly insulted him, but then the lion ultimately confronts the elephant and finds out the monkey was lying to him, and winds up castrating the monkey for his false witness. So the signifying monkey here can be an analogy for aesthetic contingency as the signifying plays with language of implication rather than a representational language. In other words, I can say “bird” and it might mean “stone.”

There is a relationship, I think, to your work with regards to the indeterminate dialectic that you set up between the abstract and representational signifiers. Certainly your titles such as *Empire* (2011) and *HomeTeam* (2014) and even the title of the aforementioned show, “Alternative to Power,” constitute a language of implication.

Rothschild: Yes, the titles are really important to me; that’s where the work is completed. When I’m making an exhibition, there’s always a point—generally the day before it’s supposed to be done—where I have this constant nagging, “Can you give us the titles? Can you give us the titles?” And usually I have this list of titles, and I have to assign them to the works, and the works really are not really done until that occurs. Because, as you say, while the work might appear almost wholly formal in some pieces, the titles are there to break that formality apart, and to add this layer of language that misdirects you, perhaps, from what the work itself is doing.



Eva Rothschild, *Empire*, 2011. painted steel. (600 × 986 × 690 cm) Installation view Doris C. Freedman Plaza, Central Park, New York, 2011. Courtesy of The artist & Public Art Fund.

Rail: That was exactly my point in referencing the signifying monkey, because it has that misdirection—the monkey is a trickster—but still has the intent of communication.

Rothschild: Of course. And the other thing about language is that although the work is present and it’s available to you, because we are more comfortable with language, obviously we look to the title for direction. And because you have all these pieces of work that create a conversation together—the titles have to create that conversation also. So they have to sort of amplify each other, or direct or misdirect together, to make the whole exhibition.

Rail: It’s an ensemble cast or play.

Rothschild: Yes, absolutely. I use a wide range of materials in the work, and part of that is about the idea that there isn’t a loyalty to any one way of making. It’s about whatever is necessary for the work to exist. And there is a sense of moving through materials and formats, and then the addition of language around the work, so that one element might almost seem to almost undo what another element is doing. One work may posit itself as absolutely rigidly formal, dealing with color, shape, and form, and then

another might veer towards the narrative, while another may have a cushion on it so you could just sit there oblivious and stare at your phone. That sense of confusion within the multiplicity of the works and the multiple ways of making is really important to me. I feel that the titles shouldn't elaborate on the work in terms of its presence—they should be about creating a further open space around the work. As you said, misdirection perhaps is a good way to think about it.

Rail: Also, as Gates notes, “a language of implication.” You're not spelling out any rational relationship between form and content. There's a language of implication that's left open to the viewer. It maintains a classic, modernist multivalency.

Rothschild: But also it can be a puncture to the work.

Rail: Yes, I can see that—you often seem to leave areas in your sculptures both rhetorically and physically perforated, or otherwise syntactically disjointed.

Rothschild: A work I always think about in these terms of a puncture is this piece I made in 2007, a huge, tangle on this spindly stand: in the studio, almost jokingly, it came to be called “Mr. Messy,” which is from a children's book. So you encounter the work when you see it, and then you look at the title, because usually one comes after the other, and it changes something about the work. It almost confounds what you're thinking about the work. It doesn't make it into a joke; it just adds a layer of confusion. I'm really interested in a way of looking where you're not going to find out an answer. You're not going to sort it out.

Rail: I'd say you've carved out your own category of that kind of semantic play, compared with some artist's attempts that might fall into the category of anecdote or joke, or something that gives the work weight in a shallow irony or in a pretentious way.

Rothschild: No, it's got to be something that is equal to the physical presence, it's another part of the work.

Rail: And there is a tradition in Ireland of playing with language like that.

Rothschild: Well, in some ways it's a cliché, but it's also actually true. The sense that how you would talk about things, how you would describe them—that is an important part of how we communicate, rather than just giving direct.

Rail: That makes me think of Flann O'Brien, especially his prismatic novel *The Third Policeman*.

Rothschild: Oh, I love Flann O'Brien!

Rail: And also Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, to go further back. The author sets up these characters, and they're saying things, yet often talking past each other, and it creates this sort of meta-context. But let's talk a little more in depth about your physical processes, as it's another important rhetorical aspect of your works—how you make them.

Rothschild: Yes.

Rail: Some of your work, such as *Technical Support* (2014–2016), brings to mind the minimal, systemic approach, but also a concern for the reuse of cumulative, contingent materials. Are you familiar with Cordy Ryman’s work and how he sometimes reassembles painted cast-off wood fragments in peculiar, somewhat anti-formalist arrays?

Rothschild: Yes, and I could see why you would make that reference.

Rail: You’ve also spoken about the use of mold-making and casting in works such as *Technical Support* and *Egyptians* (2011). How does that inflect the meaning of their objecthood for you, using a casting rather than the real thing?

Rothschild: Well the tapes for *Technical Support* come from this idea of the contingent, or what we are left with. They come from a sense that everything that’s available should be possible to be brought into the work. So, I began casting in the studio to make other artworks and then as I was making the other artworks, there would always be these leftovers, these bits at the end of the basin. And the other thing that was always in the studio were rolls of tape, which as well as performing the function of being used as rolls of tape—something that’s almost material perfection because it’s stored potential, this tiny object with which so many things can happen—when I was making head-shaped sculptures, I would always rest them on the roll of tape, almost like a plinth. So I began casting the tape to make permanent “plinths” and the attention shifted to these new hybrid objects. This accumulation of cast tapes began to form as something within its own right. This is also something that’s happened with works I’ve made out of leather, and then also out of polystyrene.

Recently, casting out of polystyrene has become a large part of my current practice. It is, I suppose, a kind of a noticing about the things that are about the edges and making them more central, or about there being a moment where something crosses over materially from being peripheral to being central. It’s like a shift in focus around what I want from the work.

Rail: Would you characterize this “crossing over” as “alchemical”?

Rothschild: That’s a very glamorous word. In some ways I’m happy to use that because it implies a magical transformation, which, while not being a popular idea within art and discourses around art, is kind of what I think the process of casting does. It is something transformational. It also upsets our assumptions about the objects in front of us. So it sets up a question in the minds of the viewers as to what they are seeing, and a mistrust of materiality, and that mistrust of the clearly present, absolutely embodied object is something that really interests me and says a lot about how we look at art and the material world as well. Because so many of the materials we see around us are just mimicking, they’re not what we assume they are.

Rail: One might also say that the alchemical operation happens between the original contingency of the objects and the solidity of them once they’re cast. The flickering relationship between those two...

Rothschild: That’s what’s so interesting about the cast object: it’s sort of neither. The use-value disappears, and then the object takes on different qualities. With the polystyrene that I’m casting at the moment it makes something that seems impermanent, seem permanent. But actually there is a double shift there as the material I use to cast it in probably has less of a shelf life than the polystyrene itself, because that’s something that we can never really get rid of. Like you said, a flickering sense of

materiality and presence is really the thing. For me that's quite an essential part of making at the moment.

Rail: Let's also talk about how you deploy color. It seems to me that some artists maintain a more conscious awareness of its deployment, as you do, and I've found that someone more conscious of its deployment tends to appreciate the potential for how an optical increment becomes, under the radar, a phenomenal experience, and that seems to relate to your own approach. You are using color not so much as a denotative thing, but as incremental steps toward a phenomenal experience, as in your meanders, the piece *Empire* (2011) and the meander you did in Dallas, *Why Don't You (Dallas)* (2012).

Rothschild: That's an interesting word to use.

Rail: "Meander?"

Rothschild: Yeah, that's interesting.

Rail: Well, I was thinking about that in regards to Leopold Bloom's progress through Dublin. Joyce deploys this meander almost as a declaration of narrative digression, as a the kind of indeterminacy of that wandering. It's a form of psychogeographic contingency.

Rothschild: This is something I would identify with quite a lot in terms of the work, and in terms of how the eye moves in seeing the work. One of the things I wanted to do, and in relation to my use of color more generally, is to break up a surface so that the eye is constantly moving over the piece and there's no sense of wholeness within our looking—we can't see it as a totality. We always have to move from place to place within it, while also being aware of its absolute presence. That sense of a lack of totality, or a lack of a unified whole is something that I think is very present through most of my work.

Even my columns and the architectural sculptures are never made singly—they're made of episodic elements. So there's a sense that something could be bigger or smaller; it could be higher or lower, where you're seeing it at that moment is where it's arrived at that moment, but those elements could disassemble and be reassembled in a different format. There's always an anxiety about the completeness or totality of something.

Rail: That's a wonderfully spatialized description.

Rothschild: I think that way about the color too; in the mid '90s I made a series of spray painted works. I worked with graffiti artists on pieces where they painted and wrote somewhere and then I painted it out in a way that covered up the wall or the surface, as far as the optical limit of the work. A limit which actually extended way past what you would have assumed was the edge of the work when the graffiti was present, because the spray extended way further once you'd taken away the very immediately visual text or drawing. I'm working a lot with spray painting now, on these polystyrene pieces in a different way.

Rail: Are those polystyrene pieces going to be in the 303 show?

Rothschild: Yes, there are going to be some—there's a few cast polystyrene pieces and there's some using spray paint, so those have quite an urban feel to them, and a sense of gesture, unusually. But with

the colors, if we're thinking about the piece in Dallas, *Why Don't You* (2012), what I wanted was to make the color transform from one end of the room to the other through these progressions.

It's similar to where I've woven color, where you take a strand in and you take a strand out. With spray paint, if you do a gradient, there's no point where you can say one has ended and one has begun. You can say that, if you look at *Why Don't You* or at *Empire*, this stripe here is red, this stripe here is black and this stripe here is green. But you can't say where exactly the green section ends and the red section begins, because there's this area in the middle where I'll progress the colors in different ways, working out the sequence of stripes I want to be there. Eventually they sort of switch, so there's an area in between that's neither one nor the other.

Rail: Are these are discretely painted hues in succession?

Rothschild: Yes, I use solid colors with the striped works and generally I use these very defined colors that I've used for many years, which are taken from a very basic seven color range of Liquitex paints. I really try not to deviate too far from them.

Rail: So you don't mix your colors?

Rothschild: No, I do mix them sometimes, but I generally I tend to stick to these seven colors.

Rail: So there's kind of a generic "given"?

Rothschild: Yes, in terms of an off-the-shelf choice. Although, I have made other works where I shift the tonality by adding white or black, but I don't tend to mix. I try to keep them sort of within the store-bought available colors.

Rail: These works bring to mind "folk" color arrays where there's this simultaneous contrast going on that effectively translate as signifiers of cultural energy—and the effect transcends many different codes of enculturation. For example the Ndebele house painting in Africa or the striping of traditional Polish dress.

Rothschild: There's a kind of joyfulness in the generic and generative nature of it as well that I find interesting. Something like using a stripe or a solid. I find it kind of...I suppose infinitely interesting. I suppose that's what artists do, we become engaged in a way of seeing and find it inexhaustibly interesting.

Rail: There's also a lyrical progress in your use of color which I would attribute to a rhythmic, playful, yet also poetic symbolism. I think of its minimally-determined forms joined with its rhetorical address as reminiscent of Arthur Symons's description of Paul Verlaine's poetry. He writes that it contained, "a simplicity of language which is the direct outcome of a simplicity of temperament, with just enough consciousness of itself for a final elegance...he had only his divination: and he divined that poetry, always desiring that miracles should happen, had never waited patiently enough on the miracle. It was by that proud and humble mysticism of his temperament that he came to realize how much could be done by, in a sense, doing nothing."²

Now it's not that you're doing nothing, but by using a "language of implication" in minimal, yet additive, constructs you release their poetic potential for transcending their materiality, though like you've said, it

might be considered unfashionable, or even cliché to think of poetic alchemy in art in that way

Rothschild: Well, I don't make my work from any kind of ironic position. It's also about that much maligned word, "earnestness"—I make it; I mean it. In some way we could look at all artistic pursuits as, what are we doing? Putting colors on surfaces, putting shapes together, but there's something that's there that drives us, and that's always been there. And that's a very basic thing to do—basic in a fundamental way, not in the contemporary way that's deployed.

Rail: The kind of irony that you're referring to is more of a cultural irony. You could probably say that our Western culture has a signifying monkey on its back. And so that's why I find your work refreshing. I have an inclination towards post-minimalism anyway, but I think there's content there that's highly formal, but not formalized to a definitive point.

Rothschild: For me, the ideal way to think when you're looking at art, is that, as well as seeing something as complete, you should also always have the sense that it could be different, that it could change. That the work may only be just as it is at this moment in time and that's what happens when you make an exhibition—it is that moment; it is that time. There is always a tension though between the desire for that sense of the momentary within a sculpture and the orthodoxies of conservation and documentation that we know exist around artworks, but I do always attempt retain that sense of openness within the work. I was just talking about that, in another context, in relation to my film, I don't know if you've seen it, *Boys and Sculpture* (2012).

Rail: No, but I did read a bit about it. Is it available on YouTube?

Rothschild: A short clip of it is on YouTube, enough to get a picture of what happens. In the film, which was commissioned by the Whitechapel Gallery in 2012, I made an exhibition of works, and then I invited a group of boys to come on and look at the works. They were pre-adolescent boys, up to the age of twelve. I asked them to look at the works as long as they could, and then, once they felt they had done as much looking as they could, they could touch the work. That's all I said to them. So basically, they look at the work for about ten minutes and then they dismantle the whole exhibition, and repurpose it for different things. Like, swords, football, armor, they kind of made one into a horse! So it becomes a very active illustration of how sculptures could be used another way.



Eva Rothschild, *Film still - Boys and Sculpture* 2012. film duration 24mins 39seconds. Courtesy The artist. Made for The Whitechapel Gallery Children's Commission, 2012

Rail: You gave them permission to deconstruct the work?

Rothschild: No, I didn't give them permission to do that. I said that they could touch the works after they had had enough of looking at them—and I said that they wouldn't get in trouble—that's the only other thing I said. For me, that's a very important piece, because it brings two of my interests together, boys and sculpture—my life basically, I'm a sculptor and I have three sons. I have always been interested in masculinity and making though. That's something I have had an interest in really from when I went to art school, gendered differences in approaches to making. It may be different in the U.S. but I feel the generally single-sex education in Ireland leads to quite different attitudes toward making. Although, that said, there's a very strong tradition of Irish female sculptors. So I was interested in the boys, both as

new makers and as a social group, and I was interested in sculpture and it's potential within that setting. The film played out all the possibilities for the sculptures at that moment, which looked like chaos, but the objects, the materiality, even in its destruction, was all still present throughout. It was still all there at the end. That sense of regeneration or change, it's sort of implicit within a way of making that is additive and subtractive rather than complete or whole and that is a quite central how I think about making.

ENDNOTES

Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", *ARTS Magazine*, January, 1990 p.
Arthur Symons *The Symbolist Movement in Literature, 1899-1958* EP Dutton and Co. New York) p 47

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TOM MCGLYNN is an artist, writer, and independent curator based in the N.Y.C. area. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Cooper- Hewitt National Design Museum of the Smithsonian. He is the director of Beautiful Fields, an organization dedicated to socially-engaged curatorial projects, and is also currently a visiting lecturer at Parsons/the New School.

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