

# THE RULES OF ATTRACTION

At this year's Venice Biennale, three very different artists are hoping their material worlds will make visitors pause and reflect. *Caroline Roux* meets them





There is no crowd more ruthless to artists than the one that congregates in Venice for the preview of its art biennale in May. Between breakfasts at the Gritti and parties in 16th-century palazzi, aficionados and opinion-formers race across the city to soak in hundreds of exhibitions of contemporary works, starting with the installations in the national pavilions of the Giardini and the nearby Arsenale (this year's 58th International Art Exhibition is under the curatorial vision of Ralph Rugoff, the director of the Hayward Gallery in London). Beyond this, buildings all over Venice are requisitioned for collateral events and, needless to say, each installation has to make an instant retinal and emotional impact to survive in the memory.

So this is why, when I visit Eva Rothschild in her studio in Hackney, East London, she is making seating. 'I want to get people to stay in the space,' she says, showing me a stool in moulded polyurethane, stained with blushes of colour, like a wall where graffiti has been scrubbed away. 'I don't care if they're on their phone. I just feel so strongly about people spending time with the work and at least this will bring them into contact with the material,

as well as making them become part of the exhibition. I can't explain my work to them, but I can extend a welcome.'

Rothschild is representing Ireland in Venice this year – she was born in Dublin and studied in Belfast, before moving to Glasgow and then London. She has spent the last four months in her studio clothes – warm sweatshirts under sturdy overalls – making the component parts of a show whose content she will not entirely divulge but will include the accumulations of jesmonite blocks and corrugated cardboard pillars, as well as the architecturally acute lines of spiky steel for which she is perhaps best known. These groupings will populate the space that Ireland occupies in the Arsenale, along with large soft objects – cones, and what she calls gym mats – covered in a fabric she has devised for herself in the studio. She uses gaffer tape and wax to create patterns that are faintly reminiscent of Rauschenberg's tyre marks.

It is not so much the materials that are connotative in Rothschild's work as the contrasts they deliver. The glossy and immutable metal works that clearly define space; the rough polyurethane blocks that seem more found than

## EVA ROTHSCHILD

Above: *Border*, 2018, painted concrete, wood, foam, polystyrene.

Right: *Ruins*, 2016, jesmonite, resin, spray paint, steel.

Previous pages: installation view of *Kosmos* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, in 2018







**LEONOR ANTUNES**

*Opposite: a thousand realities from an original mark, exhibition view at Marian Goodman Gallery, London, 2018. Above: installation of the frisson of the togetherness at Whitechapel Gallery, 2017. Previous pages: ...then we raised the terrain so I could see out, at the Venice Biennale, 2017*

made, as though excavated from the sides of an unloved old building; the textile works that have a grubbiness, a sense of use and abandonment. The narrative then is a visual one, where the eye roams across juxtapositions of forms, finishes and colours: the structural and provisional.

These days Rothschild speaks freely about craft and making, although it is something she struggled with earlier in her art career. 'I started being interested in materials at college,' she says, 'although making didn't seem to be a serious thing to do and, of course, I wanted to be taken seriously. I even wrote a "manifesto against making" when I was a student at Belfast, but in fact I was really drawn to anything that involved a skill, like print-making.'

Recently, though, a few fears returned when she finally started to work with fabrics. 'I had some anxiety about the textile pieces and female connotations – I don't want them to read as "soft",' she says. 'It's still frustrating that a man can make dinky ceramics and fabric works, and it's fine.' In fact, Rothschild's fabric works pertain more to the body than any notion of domesticity: the gym mats scaled to suit a person; the punch bags designed to be

pummelled by the human fist. And equally the notion of making prevails. 'I like to bring things into existence,' she says. 'I think there's a tendency to denigrate effort, and to applaud nonchalance and diffidence, but that simply isn't what my work is about. I want the effort to be there.'

Indeed, this ethos is characteristic of the practices of Leonor Antunes and Sean Edwards, too, though unlike Rothschild, both are story tellers, albeit of very different kinds. Edwards is representing Wales at this year's biennale, and Antunes, Portugal.

When I speak to Antunes in late March, she is about to leave her studio in Berlin for Venice, where she will carry out colour tests with glassmakers on the island of Murano. It's not her first time at the biennale. In 2017, she was invited to participate in the 57th International Art Exhibition, curated by Christine Macel, and her eight-part installation of brass tubing and fine golden netting appeared to rain down from the ceiling of the Arsenale. It was an astonishing and ambiguous piece, huge but delicate, with a powerful architectural presence in spite of its apparent solubility. Its structure was derived

