THE RULES OF ATTRACTION

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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 opinionformers 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



'We hear a lot about a working-class voice in theatre and literature, but what is it in visual art? SEAN EDWARDS

from a private home that the rationalist architect Franco Albini had designed early in his career, with elements of Carlo Scarpa's designs for Museo di Castelvecchio in Verona.

Usually, it's more common for Antunes to look to the histories of women in design for inspiration. For her 2017 installation at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, she went into the archives of Alison Smithson, and met her daughter. 'I'm interested in the human being as well as their design,' she says. This year in Venice she pays homage to Saviana Mesieri, a client of Carlo Scarpa, and the architect Egle Trincanato, the first woman to study at the Royal Institute of Architecture in Venice, who went on to be the director of the Palazzo Ducale, where she staged significant exhibitions about the city.

'These are women of a certain time, who in spite of constraints did incredible things,' says Antunes. She has borrowed the extraordinary chandeliers that Trincanato created for the INAIL building in Venice in the 1950s ('really crazy, very big and strange'), and is making her own with the craftsmen in Murano. 'I want to use the ancient crafts of this city,' she says. Antunes often talks about 'reactivating' old

craft skills. She has frequently worked with a leather-maker in Lisbon, who she tracked down for an early piece, and found him to be the last of his kind. For this installation, she is also collaborating with Capovilla, the company who made all of Carlo Scarpa's carpentry and restores his work today. They will create elements that refer to the home that Scarpa designed for Mesieri once she had moved to Zurich.

'Scarpa designed every single thing in the house - from furniture to lamps and fabrics and we're using ash and mahogany to make pieces that refer, for example, to a bed leg, a column or a bannister,' explains Antunes. 'I'm working with a lot of vertical elements because this exhibition is in a historical palace - the Palazzo Giustinian - and I can't drill into the ceilings or hang anything.'

If that sounds deferential, the artist's ambition for her installation is anything but. While she is adhering to the rules of the building, she has also made her own. 'I'm taking out all the curtains and the chandeliers, everything decorative,' she says. 'It really has been a lot of difficult negotiation.' Unable to remove the huge, uninspiring paintings that hang in the

space, Antunes has taken them down and placed them on the floor facing the wall. 'I am hoping at least that the space will be more open to my work and freer for visitors,' she says.

Sean Edwards's venue for the Welsh pavilion is Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, a church so old it was renovated in the 17th century. Edwards, the son of an Irish Catholic mother who moved to Cardiff, is not immune to its religious identity. Every day at 2pm, his installation will be punctuated by the sound of his mother reading a text. 'It does connect to the Catholic mass and its performative nature,' says Edwards, 'but it's also about quite literally identifying a "workingclass voice". We hear a lot about that in theatre and literature. But what is it in visual art?'

Edwards's work is generally autobiographical. His best-known piece is a large installation from 2011 called Maelfa, after the working-class area of Cardiff where he grew up, which silently focuses on the lives of those who exist there with low expectations. A subsequent residency at St Fagans, part of the National Museum of Wales near Cardiff, introduced him to more historical notions of Welshness, including an exhaustive archive of traditional quilts. 'There was such



SEAN EDWARDS

Left to right: unun นทนทนทนทนทนทนทนทนทนทน. newsprint on newsprint, seven parts, 2005-ongoing; Assembling The Index (1), 2019, photograph; Quilt, 2019, cotton sateen, carded wool, thread, quilted by Karen Cocksedge

a wealth of material,' says Edwards, 'I'm like a kid in a sweet shop in those places – and St Fagans is the best sweet shop in Wales.' Quilting speaks of different working-class lives, and particularly women impoverished by the deaths of miner husbands, and extreme rural hardship.

Unsurprisingly, quilts have found their way into Edwards's Venice show, though in colours that recall the dull oranges and blues of sleeping bags – a contemporary manifestation of hardship. Visitors will be greeted by reading tables when they enter the church and pass through screens of MDF and steel, printed with graphics derived from The Sun and the Daily Mirror. 'These were the papers that were around in my childhood,' says Edwards. 'They might be sending out strident messages, but they just sort of blend in to people's thinking through their endless familiarity. That's how you end up with Brexit.'

Edwards bought The Sun and the Mirror for five or six years, extracting and finally abstracting their graphics. These also appear on the quilts. 'Newspapers and quilts come together as symbols of the everyday,' he says. 'The quilters would use anything to hand -

glasses and plates – to make the patterns for the stitching.' He describes the entire installation as 'like a book of poems, a series of pieces that work together as a whole'.

Karen Cocksedge, a professional Welsh quilter, worked with Edwards on two of the quilts. He had chosen to use carded wool for the wadding - 'the conceptual artist in me couldn't get away from what it would say on the panel for materials', he says – and polycottons for the whole cloth covers, in order to get the right 'sleeping bag' colours. 'It was a very different process for me,' says Cocksedge, more used to creating works for children. 'Sean wanted to convey history, as well as use these modern motifs that he drew onto the fabric.'

The monochromatic quilts will hang in the final space, like banners or paintings, or perhaps even sculptures. The stitching through the thick layer of wool forms a chiselled, threedimensional surface of shadow and light. Overlaid with the sound of his mother's voice, this meeting of memory and material might just stop those hurried visitors in their tracks. The 58th International Art Exhibition, Venice, 11 May – 24 November. labiennale.org