

Things can speak for themselves: the confidence and uncertainty of Edwards + Johann

1. Them

Amongst the diverting miscellany of visual aids assembled by Edwards + Johann, one image strikes me as an especially fitting characterisation of their enduring creative collaboration. In *The Battle of Uji Bridge*, an ink sketch for a woodblock print made in 1882 by the Ukiyo-e printmaker Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1838 -1892), two samurai perform a high-stakes balancing act that is as balletic as it is martial. For one brief, breathless moment, as arrows rip through the air around them, one warrior leaps on and over the other in a desperate attempt to reach and turn back the oncoming forces. For an instant, the two men become one; a perfect hieroglyph of action and intention, united by their determination to hurl themselves forwards into the unknown.

Yoshitoshi's work, which depicts an event from more than 800 years ago, reminds me of witnessing Edwards + Johann in action up close in 2014, as they developed and resolved their installation **Rebels, Knights and Other Tomorrows** for Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu's temporary post-earthquake gallery in the Old Post Office in Tuam Street. That exhibition centred on two frieze-like presentations of large-format photographs – seven shadowy, faceless knights, and seven jagged stones (or 'rebels'), framed against brilliantly coloured backdrops. To these two existing bodies of work, Edwards + Johann added a new series of sculptures made from salvaged and scavenged materials, including wool, coral, wire and found objects, mounted on old organ pipes. Occupying the gallery like eccentric sentinels or wayward galactic rovers, these 'probes' were both products of experimentation and monuments to it. Unlike those artists who, finding mutual cause or synergy, temporarily bind together two separate practices, the foundation of the Edwards + Johann collaboration is a commitment to a process rather than an outcome. As the works evolved from concept to actuality through rigorous discussion, questioning, prototyping and refinement, it became increasingly clear what the collaborative mode offers these two very different artists, each of whom came to it with a substantive body of individual practice behind them. Sharing a fascination with uncertainty and a natural bias towards the edges of the known, working together enabled them to push off each other to explore untried ground – both visually and conceptually – that they'd never reach alone. Without a predetermined direction of travel, Edwards + Johann work with a supple armoury of media that expands and evolves to meet their needs and treat their studio like a research laboratory. "We don't determine what the work will be beforehand; we are literally carving it out." Anything that helps them move past the familiar is welcomed: "we don't go into the studio every day to look for things we've already seen or know". It's a playful approach that often incorporates moments of humour, but also one that requires courage and commitment. Like climbers roped together on a precarious cliff-face, or the 'two immoderate dancers, mid-asteroid field' of Gregory O'Brien's poem, they support and propel each other forward as new possibilities open up before them.

2. Us

Against a backdrop of shifting clouds, a pale face materialises. Cropped clean of hair, neck or body, its skin has been coated in a thick white substance that creates a sense of anonymity while also emphasising the numerous fine lines that criss-cross its surface. Bald and exposed, its vulnerability is further underscored when the dark silhouette of a jagged rock face appears in the space directly beside it. After hovering uncomfortably close, the rock rotates. Will it knock the face out of orbit, or obliterate it completely? The eyes keep watch, anxious and shifting, but also seem to register something else just outside the frame. What, exactly, is impossible to gauge; both hope and trepidation seem to flicker behind those pensive eyes. Soon, though, the rock face disappears and the sky is replaced with a surging river. Birds sing, and a branch of Japanese cherry blossom appears and disappears. Meanwhile, in a second apparition behind us, and in a second disembodied face, those same eyes are pressed tightly shut.

In *Only Ghosts Glow in the Dark* (2017), two large monitors face each other across a darkened space. Installed at eye level, each delivers both image and audio, and when one side is silent, the other is not. From where we stand, between the screens, these sights and sounds meet and intertwine, and over a repeating loop of around eight minutes they build up an increasingly enigmatic narrative that persists in the memory. Commissioned for the 2017 exhibition *Events Growing from the Edge of Spaces*, which marked ten years of the Edwards + Johann collaboration, *Only Ghosts* was first unveiled at the Wallace Arts Centre's Pah Homestead and is now part of the Wallace Arts Trust Collection. Exhibited alongside a selection of photograph-based works made between 2013 and 2016, the video work was a nod to the practice that had led the artists to this point, and also, perhaps, an intriguing, open-ended pentimenti of their future interests. As *Events Growing from the Edge of Spaces* made clear, the evolution of their oeuvre has not followed the obedient linear logic so beloved by art historians, but rather has circled around and back upon itself in a series of widening arcs – a process artist Julia Morison, describing her own work, called 'a loop around a loop'. For Edwards + Johann, this allows a kind of prospecting, as they seek out new samples, but also reanalyse old ones; extracting an ever-expanding catalogue of associations and interpretations.

Halfway between the two different, but closely related, video narratives of *Only Ghosts*, Edwards + Johann opened up for us, their audience. You can't see both sequences at the same time, but each subtly infiltrates the other, creating a compounded, complicated experience that will never play out in exactly the same way. Images and sounds wash past and around us; we connect and also separate them. A fascination with liminal, or threshold, spaces has long been a feature of the Edwards + Johann collaboration, and the images they selected for *Only Ghosts* heightened this sense of 'in between-ness', seeming to shift between locations, seasons, and times of day. The sandy beach visible in the second video is washed with water, halfway between land and sea. The shifting clouds also suspend us in an indeterminate, intermediary place, somewhere between reality and imagination. In earlier works, the artists represented this idea as a cord or thread pulled or trailed between two figures, later it registers as gaps, seams, edges or ridgelines. In a less obvious way, the masks

and hoods worn by the artists in highly constructed works like *I'll be your mirror – one of us cannot be wrong* (2009) and *Knight in the Wilderness #1-7* (2013) register a visual pause between outer and inner selves, an acknowledgement of the body's ability to reflect both external and internal geographies. These aspects of self are neither fixed, nor clearly defined, and the artists are careful to incorporate a degree of ambiguity in the devices they employ in such tableaux to allow ample room for porosity and cross-contamination.

Unlike the tautly theatrical, highly performative quality that characterised earlier videos, such as *Fishing in a Bathtub: Tormenting Luxury* (2007/2008) – filmed at the WWII defence battery at Godley Head, on Banks Peninsula and around the North Canterbury coastline – the ambient sparseness of *Only Ghosts* encourages us to fill this opened-up space with our own thoughts, creating a mutable story that can't be told the same way twice. Late in the first sequence, the looming white face is briefly doubled, adding a third pair of eyes to the two sets that already face off across the room. For a moment, the faces hang together; twin moons with a common orbit. Soon afterward, the original face blurs and disappears. It's a hint, perhaps, that Edwards + Johann are trying to get to those least tangible parts of our psyche, the emotional residues that cling doggedly to our edges as we act out our daily performance of normality.

3. That

In September 2017, Edwards + Johann presented **from the EDGE of SPACES**, a staging of recent and new works at Chambers Art Gallery, a space adjacent to their workspace in a complex that houses several local practitioners in a rebuilding city where studio spaces are still noticeably scarce. Hung around the walls were several large works that further complicated the rock motif explored in *Accidental Rebels* with delicate, finely drawn areas the artists described in the accompanying catalogue as “an obsessive caress”. Tracing the minute variations of each rock's surface, the white lines recalled the expressive weathering of the face in *Only Ghosts* and suggested the ongoing impact of unspecified external forces. On the floor at the back of the space, visitors encountered something entirely different. *Probing... after a rainy day* (2017) had been made especially for the exhibition – in fact, it was still in the process of creation. Taking the rocks they'd placed at the centre of their photographic works, Edwards + Johann combined them with an array of found and fabricated materials, opening up new relationships and associations. The propulsion of these materials into 'real' three-dimensional space might have diminished their mystery – after all, while in the photographs they could have been any size, here we could measure them against our own bodies, categorising them definitively amongst the givens of our environment. Strangely though, rather than compromising their ambiguity, this change seemed to externalise it. It was easy to find yourself transformed, resized. If they were still large, then we were now monstrous. The inherent confidence of these objects seemed to rebuff our own.

With a combination of expanding builder's foam and an activated crystal solution, the artists created a strange new landscape, a tundra elicited as much by chance as by design. Hand-

coloured with vintage American photographic dyes (previously used to intensify the areas of rocks in the photographic works) the crystals changed as they grew; spreading, climbing, and finally drying out. Just when it seemed they had reached their final state, they were at their most fragile; newly susceptible to the smallest vibrations, flaking with the steps of those who walked across the gallery's wooden floor to see them. The deliberate investigations of previous projects had given way to a far less directed process. Instead of staging a tableau, or setting up an exploratory experiment, this felt risky, light-handed: as though the artists were merely creating the conditions in which a yet-to-be-known something might grow. As a material, the expanding foam was volatile and unpredictable, requiring an intense process of testing and experimentation. Edwards + Johann embedded other shapes within it, handmade accommodations that allowed water to pool. These small ceramic vessels were added while the foam was still hardening, and overnight they often tilted and tipped sideways, their final, precarious positions a compelling illustration of invisible, overwhelming forces. While many of the objects in it were organic and fluid, there was nothing tranquil about this space. Schlagmetal-grey, the extruded forms were cold and resistant, inexplicable life forms from another reality. Whatever Edwards + Johann were cultivating here, it was not a place of sanctuary, a realisation intensified by a square of artificial grass that seemed to repel any notion of comfort.

It's no coincidence, of course, that these works, which have so much to say about shifting ground and uncertainty, come from the hands and minds of artists who have responded to the multi-dimensional challenges posed by post-quake life in Christchurch. Well versed in the effects of environmental change, Edwards + Johann have used their situation as the catalyst for broader speculations about precariousness and adaptation. Included in **from the EDGE of SPACES** were nine new works from an ongoing series, *Life between buildings*. Again, rocks were transformed into miniature dioramas, but this time those vistas were peopled by small vintage figurines, all faced with insurmountable natural forces. The occupational quality of the figures – builders, plasterers, golfers – emphasised their repurposing from other contexts. In some other existence, they clearly had a definite role, but now we (if not they) are aware that everything has changed around them. Abruptly shaved off the earth's surface, they're travelling in space, locked in their own worlds. They're absurd, comedic, pathetic, but also oddly heroic; flung out into a limitless void, they're getting on with it as best they can: "stand, break or fall – it's the dance we do".

All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, have been taken from conversations with the writer, 2017.