

## Edwards+Johann: Artists in Residence at Perth Museum and Art Gallery 2010

### Essay by Ajay Close, Perth/Scotland, June 2010

**Mid-morning in the library at Perth Museum and Art Gallery**, an august space filled with dark wood and monochrome portraits of past curators. Two women walk in, wearing what at first glance seems to be highland dress. Kilts, an Argyll jacket, dancing slippers laced to the knee. A split-second later you notice the white pan-stick faces, the lei of red-and-green crepe paper rosettes finished off with a bog-cotton pom-pom, and the embroidered tea cosy Ina is wearing on her head.

Welcome to the world of Edwards + Johann.

Victoria Edwards and Ina Johann are New Zealand-based artists whose work includes elements of drawing, painting, collage, photography, video, installation and performance. In short, they'll use pretty much anything to hand, including their own bodies. Perth is the latest in a series of residencies where time spent exploring local landforms, history and culture is distilled into two "characters" who then feature in their art works.

This sneak preview of their costumes is to thank museum and gallery staff for hosting their three-week residency. The artists are quick to stress that they're not currently "in character" and that it's too early to say what the work they'll exhibit at Perth's LightNight festival in November will be like. Nevertheless, the outfits they've assembled from local charity shops and the museum stores raise suspicions of a giggly exercise in postmodern kitsch. The sort of knee-jerk subversion of tartanry Scotland has seen many times before.

But a look at their past collaborations suggests they may come up with something much more rich and strange.

**The setting is a Second World War gun emplacement** beneath a soon-to-be-evening sky. A woman in blood-red satin walks the top of the encircling wall. Below her, the tines of a pitchfork trailed on a cord graze the concrete with a teeth-gritting scrape. A figure appears all in white, with a white pan-stick face, and swings one of the red woman's shoes on another length of cord. Grains of rice are swept across the ground before the brush is pushed away, the handle swinging through the air to fall with an echoing clang. The video slows, jerks. The figures appear, disappear. At times all we see are shadows, or shadow-like objects, shapes that refuse coherent meaning. (A dead cat? A floppy hat?) At times we are more aware of the harsh, insistent, repetitive sounds than of what we are seeing. Throughout, the mood remains haunting, dreamlike, obscurely sinister. Familiar, but in an unplaceable way.

This is Everything is Permitted, chapter two of Fishing in a Bathtub: Tormenting Luxury, a "four chapter video-in-installation" made by Edwards + Johann in 2007-8. Though the pair are tirelessly innovative, the piece illustrates certain trademarks of their work. Enigma; a painterly sense of colour and composition; arrestingly-costumed characters; and an improvisational "make-do-and-mend" quality in the materials they use and what they do with them.

**In person Ina Johann and Victoria Edwards are friendly**, funny and down to earth, with an engaging habit of finishing each other's sentences. But they rarely answer a question about their work, unless it's with another question. Their general conversation contains enough throwaway references to Plato, Durer, Kabuki theatre and Grayson Perry to suggest that the pieces they make will possess a high level of sophistication. Academics praise them for making art about making art, and draw connections with everyone from Goethe to Gilbert and George, but the artists are not about to undermine the mysterious power of what they do by discussing it in theoretical terms.

“We don’t feel it’s our role to name it,” Edwards says. “If we could pin it down we wouldn’t be doing it.”

Johann is German, which makes her an outsider in New Zealand. Edwards is a native Kiwi but says she feels like an outsider anyway. Both have a longstanding interest in how individuals relate to the land they inhabit. They began to collaborate four years ago, having got to know each other as teaching colleagues at an arts college in Christchurch. It didn’t feel natural to make a painting together, but dressing up as characters enabled them to play with visual ideas. Though they continue to work as solo artists, collaboration takes them into territory neither could have entered alone. “Being in character creates another space, another kind of engagement,” Edwards says.

These characters are never named: that would fix them, when they need to remain fluid. They are a form of acting, but without a script. The artists describe them as spatial, like three-dimensional drawings, but even when distorting their appearance with face paint, prostheses and bizarre headgear, they remain unignorablely human. If all this sounds maddeningly imprecise, that’s because, until the moment Edwards + Johann stumble across what it is they’re after, it doesn’t exist.

“When we started we’d just find ourselves walking around in costume,” Edwards recalls. “We didn’t have what we were looking for. We’re better at finding the zone now. It’s quite a subtle shift. You’re much more in sync. We don’t talk, and we don’t have eye-contact, but you can almost anticipate what the other person is going to do. The space in between you becomes a much more activated space.”

They’ll work in this way for 90 minutes or so, but it’s only in the last 10-15 minutes of a session that something clicks. “It takes some time to actually remove yourself as a person, to see yourself in the space in another way,” Johann says. “It’s not just about dressing up. There needs to be a certain urgency and a playfulness that we can work with.”

The key word here is “playfulness”. The art world attaches various labels to what they do. “Process art”, “layering”, “bricolage”. But the most telling description is “ludic play”.

What the artists do with the video and photographic record of this play is highly controlled. Despite the random feel of the materials they use, the bread baskets and old gloves and knotted strips of fabric, there’s no taint of amateurishness in the finished product. But the playing itself is spontaneous and free-form, connecting with the earliest experiences of childhood. That’s part of the familiarity, and fascination, of the art they produce: it conjures a world of unlimited possibility that was once known to us all, before our imaginations absorbed the grid of ready-made stories.

So what sort of art will they make out of Perth and its environs? They’ve now concluded the research-and-collection stage when they travel around talking to people, immersing themselves in a place, and filming the resulting play. The art will take shape when they start work in the studio on their return to New Zealand. One of the pieces will be projected onto an outdoor water screen, another will be shown on a monitor indoors, and the characters will make an appearance: that’s pretty much all they know. But, however clownish their take on highland dress, they insist that the art they make about Perth – like all their art – will be fundamentally respectful.

What they do is not just about putting mad costumes on, Edwards says. “It’s not slapstick.” Johann is less categorical: “We might go there.” Edwards thinks about this. “Nothing’s taboo,” she agrees, and laughs. “It’s a bit of a worry. It might be fun, though.”