

No Ground is stable

There are many verbs for seeing: glance, look, stare, gaze, which suggest how much time you might give yourself to look at something. Other verbs deepen or internalise the experience: contemplate, meditate, reflect. The result may be pleasurable understanding, peaceful enrichment...or, baffled bewilderment, a word first used in the seventeenth century (although its roots are even older) meaning 'to *thoroughly* lead astray, to *lure* into the *wilds*.ⁱ

Visit Edwards + Johann's website.ⁱⁱ You may be bewildered by their opening image.

It's a photograph of an eerily lit space – nothing so certain as a room – untethered, surreal. There are no walls; you can't be sure if the floor lurches towards you or tilts at the sky at the back of the image. A chair lies upturned to the right of the frame not far from a bare table, and a pair of wooden doors with at least two locks seem to support dark struts veering towards the clouds. And what of the masked, costumed and be-gloved figures on the edge of the image? One, despite its carnivalesque mask, is more recognisably female, the other, with its slightly absurd horse's head is ambiguous, although its posture is almost seductive – like a reclining nude.

This meticulously constructed image lures you slantwise into a wild, iconoclastic space by a combination of mystery and uneasy comedy. In a recent interview, Victoria Edwards and Ina Johann who practise as a single artistic entity said, 'Our work is a suggestive, open space for the viewer to become an active participant in the construction of meaning in the work. If you experience the image, unpeel it, slowly you are writing the story.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Edwards + Johann are part of a tradition of artistic partnerships that proliferated in the 1970s and 80s, mainly in Europe: think of Gilbert & George, EVA and ADELE, Anna and Bernhard Blume and Fischli/Weiss. Just as Gilbert & George have colonised the ampersand, EVA and ADELE demand capitals, Fischli/Weiss favour the forward slash, so Edwards+Johann insist on the plus sign because it stands for more than the union of two individual artists. Plus equals enrichment – plus is what proliferates in the mysterious spaces suggested in Edwards+Johann's work. They call this a 'third' space, a 'hybrid space' in which each artist experiences a 'push and pull' as their collaboration unfolds. The process within this space is its most enduring, most animating feature.

‘We don’t put an intellectual premise out and then work towards it. But we do have a framework of investigations/research we engage with. The studio is our testing ground; the living breathing energy of instability and potential, especially in the early stages of a body of work. We re-investigate stories, myths, legends, and tales from the edge; we map new territories. We question what we think we know, and why. We shake up predictability in order to regain the innocence and acknowledgment of not knowing. It is after we’ve selected and worked with the materials; after we’ve carved the work into form, that we discover what something has become.’^{iv}

I was struck again by Edwards+Johann’s natural deference to the pronoun ‘we’. When they discuss their work, I hear the third space within their conversations. One artist might express an idea, which is followed by a silence as the other listens, considers, and develops it, often responding with a question. They don’t always look at each other but they listen intently and each artist’s awareness of the other’s presence is what makes their artistic collaboration so dynamic. There is no competition between them, there is simply curiosity. They do not make statements or tell you what to think. Together, they challenge notions of duality, of hierarchies, of ideas of beauty, and playfully unravel seemingly established systems in daily life so that your initial bewilderment becomes an experience of enrichment.

Performance and play are essential components of their art although they hasten to add that they are not performers. Dressing up is an extension of their third space. Some of the ‘characters’ they assume are more or less human/female/familiar: they wear elaborate, albeit disconcerting costumes that remind you of fairy tale fragments or something vaguely mediaeval. Despite their allusiveness, these characters are fluid and ambiguous: they hover on the edges of your consciousness just as they emerge from the edges of images like spectres from dark forests. They have an eerie stillness as if they’re watching you. But you can’t see their faces which are often hidden – their strength and power comes from their beckoning bodies. Other characters are even more stylised and precarious – they’re dressed in white, their heads may be horses or gargoyles; they jump and fall, leap in and out of surreal worlds made up of colour or lines as in a Mondrian painting.^v Costume, of course, blurs or conceals individuality; it can suggest archetypes, and offers both artist and viewer the capacious possibilities of memory and imagination. When working together Edwards+Johann are always alert to the potential their space offers for play, and, to tease: Why is a face concealed? Why are hands hidden? Why are gloves important? How do we navigate the seeming chaos of the world? They delight in creating

sequences of events where every right way can also be a wrong way and every wrong way is also a right way.

‘It is true that we laugh a lot whilst working. Sometimes it’s nervous laughter though, an acknowledgment that failure and crisis are always close at hand. The edge can be a dangerous space but it’s also a space of potential. It’s like a dance; we might be standing tall or breaking; we direct our attention inward and together to feel into that precarious balance between strength and fragility. For us, this territory allows us to examine basic human desires: to connect, to work, to play, to deal with crisis in order to grow.’

This process of push and pull, discovery, sequence and ambiguity shows itself in an early video entitled *Oh Do Let Me Help You Undo It*, a reference to Alice’s offer to undo the knot in the Dormouse’s tail, and itself part of a bigger installation at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Christchurch in 2009, slyly entitled *A Splinter In the Eye Is the Best Looking Glass*. A pair of yellow-gloved hands and one black-gloved hand later joined by its partner play with a piece of red string against a white background. The hands tease, tug or tempt; the string sags, floats or dances. Hands are the ultimate symbol of making – hands hold brushes, pens, tools – they weave dreams out of string, the dreamlike nature of possibility suggested by their shadows on the white wall. In the intimacy of this work the scale of the hands changes; they become characters slipping and sliding in and out of the frame’s edges – sometimes as large as bodies, sometimes as elusive as fragments.

While the gloved hands and red string play, two voices whisper in a plait of English and German polyphony: ‘Action...’, ‘Die Kunst... (art)’, ‘Potential’..., ‘könnte sich bilden...’ (could take shape)...‘Oscillating between the space and the arrangement...’, die Kunst besteht nie in Regeln’... (Art can never be confined by rules).

As the film progresses the hands cut the string but it magically multiplies, changes shape, changes colour. The voices fade into white silence. The final image is of hands joined, embracing a tangle of strings (or threads).

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The overarching title of the exhibition *Events Growing from the Edge of Spaces* is a summary of a decade’s collaboration, made up of a rigorous selection from three major bodies of work developed between 2012-2016.

The larger, most recent work series: *On the Seam of Things – Constellations*, *Constellations – Drawing Strength*, and *An Embezzlement of Sort* are essentially photography, although layered with drawing and collage. Thus, these works show a paring

back to Edwards+Johann essentials – edges, rocks, space, drawing, line, colour, the figure, costume, found material and enigma.

Consider the possibilities of seam: ‘a line where two pieces of material touch each other’; ‘a line where two pieces of material are drawn and sewn together in a garment’; ‘a long indentation or scar’; ‘an underground layer of a mineral such as coal or gold’; ‘a supply of something valuable.’^{vi} As practitioners who layer their photographs with colour washes, dye and drawings of deep indentation, even drawing on the back of the glass for added spatial tension they create seams of underground layers which hint at something deep, valuable, unfathomable.

‘Things’ in this show are ostensibly rocks, sticks and stuff. Stuff is a word with a capacious and ancient etymology. Its Middle English definition means material for making clothes. In old French, *estoffe* (stuff) has expanded to include material and furniture. But the root of both of these words comes from the Greek *stufein* which means a ‘drawing together.’ This quality of synthesis, of drawing together, underpins the art of Edwards+Johann, whether it’s richness of costume, or objects removed from their usual function, or strange matter found in alleys or attics. Nothing has an obvious connection to another but coexists in questing tension against fields of brilliant colour: yellow, red, green, cobalt, turquoise, orange, magenta.

The rocks in these photographs are stylised descendants of those in Edwards+Johann’s *Rebels, Knights and Other Tomorrows* exhibition of 2014 at the Christchurch Art Gallery Outer Spaces Programme; a response to the instability of their *turangawaewae*. Edwards+Johann suffered the depredation of both the major earthquakes – their Christchurch studio was destroyed by liquefaction. Territory that had seemed secure shook, slipped, broke loose. As artists, they were forced into new ways of standing, of navigating, of making.

These rocks emerge from the periphery of their frames like iconic landforms. We are not sure if they are released and free or searching for some thing. We are not sure if they are meteors or mounds – Edwards+Johann tease our sense of scale and certainty. ‘We can’t say, ‘these are rocks’, but only that they might be.’ Sometimes they are paired – in a blue diptych they veer away from each other, but in others they nudge towards each other as if seeking connection or finding strength. They are scored with tiny marks. They make you think of unexplored continents – you think you can see virgin hills, valleys, rivers, misty tracks.

In every image, curious sticks – like pick-up sticks – shimmer against clear flat colour fields. They scatter and teeter, they alight haphazardly on the surface of the rocks. They have their own apparently artless beauty, although there is nothing apparent in this work – every mark or movement is the product of meticulous consideration.

Edwards+Johann have called these sticks ‘connecting rods’ and they are a stylised development of the string in their early video work. ‘The rods are directional, they allude or point to things – they are ‘fact-finders.’ In the Christchurch Art Gallery the rods were ‘probes’ (an appropriate word considering the fragility of the city’s ground) made from organ pipes salvaged from the earthquake and topped by a conglomerate of found objects. They roamed through the Gallery either individually or like families and suggested how, in times of upheaval, we must ‘rediscover what once we knew.’

In this exhibition the probes, now rods, are both investigative and connective. They link form with form; form with figure. They glitter within each image; they do not roam as they did in Christchurch and some have grown, have navigated their way out of their frame and now lean expectantly beside it. You want to touch them.

Garbed figures inhabit several images. Sometimes they seem captured by their bizarre attire; at others they’re burdened by containers for catching things. Embezzle is a synonym for stealing, and indeed there is something secretive about these solitary explorers with their baskets and nozzles and gloves and pouches traversing the world to make meaning of it. The figures emerge from black space. Blackness, say Edwards+Johann is a place of potential. ‘It’s easy to think of black space as if it’s nothing, a hole, a void but we carve things out of that dark space – create a tension where things happen.’ ‘We were looking at historical paintings, etchings and dry points, ...how Rembrandt, Dürer and Caravaggio carved enigmatic figures out of darkness...’

The figures in these images though layered with art-historical familiarity, however, lack the certainty of their famous forebears. They are otherworldly and strange; they work on you psychologically, but they also ask you to pause. Why, for example, are such every day objects so portentous?

‘Juxtapositions of all kinds including our use of the body, object and space are embedded in our practice and processes. We position elements from different worlds alongside each other in odd and provocative contradistinctions offering viewers the ability to look at something...to look in the wider sense...give attention. In that looking there is no ‘thinking’, just alertness...a felt moment, an experience...that is also the space of ‘not

knowing' – an alert openness, deeper than conceptual knowing. It is in that profoundly peaceful personal space that the viewer can reside ...even for a small moment.'

Hands matter. Many photographs pay homage to the hand. In three, the hand is enormous. It is painted not gloved; it reaches down into the frame. One hand caresses strange matter while the other seems caressed by the stuff itself. Touching is feeling, exploring, connecting, and these restless, enigmatic images emphasise the potential of creativity. In these works too, the hand is a character. 'We were curious about the performative aspect of the hand,' said Edwards. 'We wanted to show the hand as a symbol of endeavour, but we also wanted to suggest its vulnerability. A hand without a glove gets dirty. We always use our hands – drawing on paper provides another space for thinking compared with the more performative process with a camera.'

On the Seam of Things – Sure to Spill is a suite of five photographs that pays homage to Edwards+Johann's artistic process. They are hinged together much as a panel of religious images hang in Renaissance altarpieces although rather than Renaissance gold, the frames and the background before which the images rise and bend and touch is the lustrous dark out of which Edwards+Johann carve their art. The first, third and fifth photographs celebrate the artist's hand and the alchemical effect of working with ambiguous material. These hands are bigger than the cloaked, hooded and blind figures in the second and fourth photographs but every image is linked by a glittering charge which, like the dancing string in *Oh Do Let Me Help You Undo It*, and the rods of the *Constellations* work acts as a connection except that here this gauzy spillage implies imaginative generation more than navigational probing.

The overall effect of the photographs as you walk from room to room is of restless, refinement and subtle beauty. 'What am I looking at?' you ask yourself. You are seduced by the plait of colour, light and darkness that informs each image, but also by its ongoing mystery and sense of otherness. If you stand away from an image you are destabilised because the space in which hands, bodies and rods rear and scatter is intentionally unreal and abstract suggesting nothing less than infinity. Yet, the closer you come towards the image, the more you see signs of mark-making, map-making and discovery.

Thinking about Edwards+Johann's work always makes me feel lifted. No ground is stable; shifts, fractures: movement makes new spaces to be navigated by memory, imagination and courage. They say their art tests the spaces they inhabit in order to find

new ways of being, working, playing. Within these spaces everything is in free fall. It's also buoyant with possibility and wonder.

ⁱ <http://www.etymonline.com> retrieved Feb 22

ⁱⁱ edwardsjohann.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview Catharina van Bohemen, Jan 30 2017

^{iv} ibid

^v *Postcards Projects: Congression – the Act of Coming Together, 2015* Edwardsjohann.com

^{vi} *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p 1676