

# Life & Times

## Exhibition:

extramural — new walls in Venice

### Eva Rothschild The Shrinking Universe

*Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale,  
11 May 2019 to 24 November 2019*

Somebody has put a wall in the way. It's very beautiful, polished cement with mismatching geometric red patterns, but it's stopping me in my path, and I have to go around it. The artist intended it so. I've been wandering for a couple of hours around the artfully curated show for *May You Live in Interesting Times* and maybe a wall at this point is justified.

The artist is Eva Rothschild and she is as equally interested in how you see her art as the art itself. The Irish artist is not just putting a pretty painting on the wall and leaving it to us, she is putting herself in our shoes and working out how we interact with her sculptures, encouraging us to behave in certain ways, hence the wall. You are forced to enter and consider the work; she doesn't want 'snow-blind' Biennialists glaring from the entrance then swooping past. She describes her works almost as family members and, for 'the Shrinking Universe', her show for the Irish Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, she has arranged five of them in 'conversation'. She wants them to get along, but they might interrupt each other or disagree.

Returning to the wall, it's not complete, it's missing a section through which there is a cascade of black tins and cans, spreading out behind the bricks towards the other sculptures. It's as though the wall has been breached and the city has seeped out beyond

***Drift*, 2019. Concrete, steel, synthetic polymer paint. Dimensions variable. © Robert Glowacki.**



***Amphi*, 2019. Resin, fibreglass, wood, spray paint. Dimensions variable. © Robert Glowacki.**

it, like an oil slick.

Until recently we had almost forgotten about walls, taking them down all over the world. And now, in 2019, we are rebuilding them again in the US and maybe even in Ireland. This piece is called *Drift* (see below), and it leaves you thinking of barriers and control, permanence and decline, rise and fall.

The political art that I have previously experienced can be very effective when you first see it, but it doesn't always age well. I never thought a minimalist sculpture could be so political, but it is, in a more subtle and powerful way that stays with you and I believe will last.

### TERRITORIAL

Rothschild was born and brought up in Dún Laoghaire, outside Dublin, studied in Belfast, and now lives in London. Her work responds to the built environment and she talks of 'Hazard Architecture', the street furniture that has been popping up in our

'anxious cities' to keep us not only safe, but also controlled. These are often cast in concrete and the primary colours she uses can be seen to reference the territorial markings, such as the kerb paintings: red, white, and blue for Unionist areas, green, white, and orange for Nationalist.

In stark contrast to *Drift*, on the back wall sits *Amphi* (see above), made up of large, rough blocks of what appear to be polystyrene spray painted in pastel colours. They are seemingly thrown up. You are encouraged to climb onto them, and in the process become part of the art. Are these the broken barricades from the latest protest, or the remains of a lost civilisation in pastel '80s colours?

### THE HOMOGENISATION OF CULTURE

At the centre of the room sits *Princess*, a collection of glossy black cylinders, with a cardboard edge on two soft bases of hand-printed fabric, one in green and black, the other in red and black. Arising from the heart of the composition is a tubular sculpture of glossy black triangles with brightly coloured insides, rising to the ceiling. This is classic Rothschild. One reviewer has described them as 'bad boyfriend' works,<sup>1</sup> all glossy black, in slim angular metal, woven leather, latex, and gaffer tape.

In 2009 she filled the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain with 1.8 tonnes of aluminium box tubing that leapt around the space with

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## Books

a lightness of touch. And here too the air within the sculpture belies the weight and volume of the individual pieces. The work feels like a prima donna, strutting her stuff, demanding attention.

And what of the 'Shrinking Universe' title? Does this reference the effect of the internet and the homogenisation of culture that it is causing? Rothschild takes a quite different, marginal scientific view that the universe is shrinking and not expanding. The exhibition is very beautiful and stylish, but, at the same time, disconcerting and unsettling. Like all great art it stays with you long after you have left the room.

### BEST OF THE REST

The 58th Venice Biennale runs until 24 November. There are two central exhibitions (€25 entry to the Giardini and Arsenale sites) and 90 international pavilions. Here are my favourites:

**France:** Laure Prouvost showcases a beautiful undersea world in Murano glass that reflects identity.

**Ghana:** architect David Adjaye designed a group show, including John Akomfrah and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

**Lithuania:** an indoor beach with opera singers (only on Saturday) and recordings at other times.

**Zimbabwe:** a provoking group show reflecting on identity in a post-colonial world.

**Arsenale and Giardini:** both central exhibitions are curated by Hayward Gallery Director Ralph Rugoff and are elegant, challenging, and fun. He understands what visitors want from a gallery show and delivers an outstanding show for visitors of all ages.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X705341>

### REFERENCE

1. Judah H. Interview. 'I used to be afraid of colour!' Eva Rothschild, Ireland's dockside voice in Venice. *Guardian* 2019; 9 May: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/09/venice-biennale-ireland-eva-rothschild-sculptures> (accessed 19 Jul 2019).

### Chicken Unga Fever: Stories from the Medical Frontline

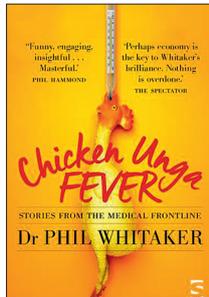
Phil Whitaker

*Salt*, 2018, PB, 224pp, £9.99, 978-1784631543

### The Human Kind: a Doctor's Stories from the Heart of Medicine

Peter Dorward

*Green Tree (Bloomsbury imprint)*, 2018, HB, 352pp, £15.29, 978-1472943903



### BREADTH AND DEPTH: TWO DOCTORS ON DOCTORING

Both written by practising GPs, both with deceptively similar subtitles, and both covering many of the same issues, these two books turn out to be very different in style, tone, and intent. Phil Whitaker has been writing his column 'Health Matters' for the *New Statesman* since 2013, and his book is a collection of some 60 of these pieces, ranging widely across diagnostic puzzles, ethical dilemmas, health policy, and the myriad challenges, delights, and frustrations of general practice. He has mastered the constraint of a limited word count, making each piece a model of concision and clarity, usually ending with a lesson learned and shared with the reader — who I assume is imagined to be a typical *New Statesman* subscriber (whatever that may be). GPs will enjoy it, but will not feel challenged.

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By contrast, Peter Dorward's book, aimed at both the medical and the general reader, plunges deeply into matters philosophical, psychological, and political. It is intensely personal too, from his musings about 'How to be Good' as one chapter is headed, through meditations on selfhood and free

will, to his analysis of the meaning of pain prompted by his own climbing accident. He explores opiate addiction, somatoform or 'functional' disorder, mental illness, terminal care, and other matters, all in their social context and illustrated with harrowing and heart-rending case studies, interleaved with anecdotes from throughout his medical career and personal life.

I imagine that those medical students and young doctors lucky enough to come under the author's tutelage will learn many important lessons, and provoked into animated argument. In short, it is a marvellous book, and deserves to become a classic of its genre.

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