

No Direction Home

It makes for an odd and vaguely preposterous encounter, this swaggering band of knights lined up as a glossy frieze in a room overlooking the slow grey grind of the Christchurch rebuild. Imposing, but enigmatic; archaic, yet also somehow futuristic; their intentions and allegiances are undisclosed. Some address us squarely, others offer a heraldic profile or an elegantly angled shoulder, but all loom out anonymously from their nebulous surrounds, swathed and hooded in fabrics that alternately absorb and throw back the light. Black on black, their shadowy vestments are richly layered material amalgams, recalling the textural cornucopia once assembled by Dutch still-life artists to demonstrate their painting skill. Here and there, the darkness is pierced by flashes of vivid colour – fiery orange ruffles, billowing magenta plumes, crisscrossed red threads – occasional grace notes that lend delicacy and extravagance to this otherwise sinister regiment.

The Knight in the Wilderness series – together with the questing Probe sculptures and, in the adjoining room, The Accidental Rebels (images of rocks suspended against, or falling through, brilliant colour fields) – are the work of Edwards + Johann, a Christchurch-based collaboration deploying mystery and playfulness in equal measure. Drawing on the experimental, absurdist precedents set by collaborations such as Anna und Bernhard Blume (Germany) and Fischli & Weiss (Switzerland), Victoria Edwards and Ina Johann have worked together since 2007, developing an imaginative practice that has encompassed and combined a range of media, including drawing, photography, installation, video and performance. Both trained originally as printmakers (Edwards in New Zealand, Johann in Germany) and bring a strong sense of design and control to their partnership, which they have described as “a kind of delicate duelling”.¹ Works evolve gradually and unpredictably through an experimental and explorative process that can resemble a series of tactical manoeuvres: “It’s a pushing and pulling,” says Edwards, “not just a pooling of resources.”

Like science, art weaves together the known and the unknown, and the idea of the gallery as a testing space underpins Edwards + Johann’s approach. Seven eccentric Probes colonise the gallery spaces like roving envoys, as though their curious sampling of the world around them will help us rediscover what we think we know. Their chaotic, sometimes calligraphic forms incorporate an unexpected variety of materials, including wool, sea coral, wire, metal mesh and tiny figurines, each saturated with a single glistening tone from the colour spectrum, like a swab exposed to some luminous foreign universe. The metal stems that sprout up from the floor in graceful curves are subtle reminders of the very particular context in which these works were made. They are organ pipes salvaged from a church destroyed in the earthquakes, the letters etched into their sides denoting their pitch and tethering them to their original purpose and history. In an environment where the rules of engagement are constantly shifting, and where stability of any kind has been

irrevocably compromised, these strangely beautiful markers seem to sound out a call for endurance and adaptation. Despite the stillness of the objects within, the gallery spaces reverberate with dramatic tension; a soundscape of muted chimes and wind-like resonances alternately fills and empties the air and the darkness is charged with possibility. There's a sense of objects and people temporarily held in place by time, space and circumstance; the suggestion that we've arrived in the moment just before the action – whatever it may be – begins. This carefully orchestrated theatricality, in which elements take up their positions like pieces on a chessboard or actors on a stage, is a hallmark of Edwards + Johann's practice, which has often incorporated role-play and masquerade. They are well aware of the transformative nature of costume, and often exploit it to playful ends. The initial gravitas of the seven faceless knights soon dissipates, for example, as the dignity of their attire is undermined by closer scrutiny. Theirs is no battle-hardened armour, but rather a series of repurposed (at times absurdly) props and work-arounds. Appearances, as always, can be deceiving. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of their collaboration, Edwards + Johann are intrigued by the concept of the doppelgänger– the apparition or double of a living person – which has allowed them to explore the fluidity of identity and the space between the self and other. In this context, like the multiple lives of a video game warrior, the sequence of knights can be seen not only as individual portraits, but as a series of potential alter egos: other lives to be experienced, other paths to be taken.

The territory that most interests Edwards + Johann is what they call “the third space”, that fertile aperture between certainties; the realm of slippage and translation. This idea assumes physical form in *The Accidental Rebels*, where rocks – those stoic symbols of solidity and gravitational inevitability – take on bold new lives, hurtling through vividly coloured voids like meteors with terrifying velocity and no visible means of support. Ordinary forms transformed by context, their scale is unclear – they are as monumental as asteroids, as inconsequential as pebbles. Where did they come from and where will they land? Everything depends on the angle of our perception.

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