

EVA ROTHSCHILD SOLID GEOMETRY

As she prepares to "agitate the architecture" of Tate Britain, Eva Rothschild describes the exhilaration of making her playful sculptures

INTERVIEW: Richard Cork

Like so many staircases in the East London buildings where artists work in such profusion, the rough-hewn steps leading up to Eva Rothschild's studio are dark and disconcerting. They are punctuated by fierce official announcements on the walls – "No Children Allowed at Any Time" insists one notice, "This Building Is Under 24 Hour Surveillance" warns another. By the time I reach her door, though, the whole atmosphere has changed dramatically. Gazing out from her balcony into the luminous spring sunshine, my eyes are seduced by the immense sculptural presence of two gasometers, asserting their industrial might on the very edge of Regent's Canal. The panoramic view stretches far beyond Hackney to encompass the full vastness of the metropolis, dominated by Norman Foster's Gherkin tower glinting in the light.

Despite the grim uncertainties generated by global recession, this city's stubborn energy is still palpable. And the sense of dynamism intensifies when I enter Rothschild's white-walled studio. With her close-cropped black hair, jeans and green gym shoes, she looks ready for action. Her top is spattered with splashes of white plaster and Jesmonite, testifying to a hands-on involvement with the work-in-progress visible on every surface. Two white pieces, like bleached rocks pierced by apertures, will soon be painted inside with bright colour. And Rothschild plans to balance them on slender black stands, thereby raising the works up to our eye-level and enabling us to peer into these open-ended structures.

Having encountered "completely toxic" materials at art school, where "there were no precautions and the technicians must have been poisoned", Rothschild is wary. "When painting, I use acrylic and wear masks all the time", she says. "I won't use fibreglass or epoxy resin – they're too poisonous. I'm always washing my hands, and I hate the feeling of clay and plaster so I wear gloves. I've been pregnant twice while working in the studio, so I have to be careful."

At the moment, though, Rothschild cannot



"I don't feel that art is good for you. It could be bad for you"

stop her brain focusing on a major commission. She has been invited to make an ambitious, large-scale installation for the Duveen Galleries running right through the centre of Tate Britain. As Martin Creed, Anya Gallaccio, Mona Hatoum, Michael Landy and Mark Wallinger have demonstrated in their work for the Duveens Commission in recent years, it can give artists the opportunity to make work with spectacular, widely discussed impact. Rothschild has promised Tate not to give away anything about the look of her installation before it opens on 29 June. "I had to roll up some preliminary drawings before you came here today," she admits with a secretive grin. "They first asked me to submit a proposal a year ago, and there have been lots of hoops to jump through since then, which is good. My initial proposal was rejected, but they asked me to re-submit. It's really daunting and very exciting. The installation will be totally site-specific, involving the whole of the Duveen Galleries."

Rothschild pauses, doubtless aware that no further details should be divulged at this stage. But she is willing to tell me that "I've spent a lot of time in the Duveens space, and realise how many people go there. Unlike Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, which is so huge it's like an outdoor site, the Duveens are more like a National Trust or an English Heritage space. I keep having dreams about my installation going wrong in terms of shape, junction and colour, or things not being ready in time. I won't be making it here in the studio: the process is different. I am quite an anxious person, but it's all quite motivating!"

Paradoxically, Rothschild shows no sign of nervousness, either in her body movements or the way she talks. Outwardly calm, controlled and highly articulate, she seems able to pour all her inner tensions straight into the work itself. "I'm hoping to create something that will agitate the architecture of the Duveen Galleries," she told Tate, "tangling with your perception of the space." So we can expect an edgy, unpredictable experience which catches us off-balance as we make our way through Rothschild's structures. She may even be hoping to recreate the excitement which sustains her during the work process. "When you start a piece, it's an undefined thing and the making of the work sustains you," she explains, before emphasising that her art thrives on an improvisatory approach which is anathema to artists with more conceptual methods. "You feel your way round something. The idea of waking up in the morning and being like Daniel Buren would be hell – I'd rather work in an office! A large part of my work is looking at what I've made." She picks up a little black stick-like sculpture and passes it over to me, so I can hold it in my hand and savour its vitality. "It's got to live and it's got to be", she says. "And I don't like to keep things that are finished in the studio. The moment of seeing the work only occurs outside: you can't see it properly in the studio."

Not that Rothschild is fanatically committed to outdoor settings for her sculpture. "I'm not into plaza art", she says sardonically, "but it

continued on p134

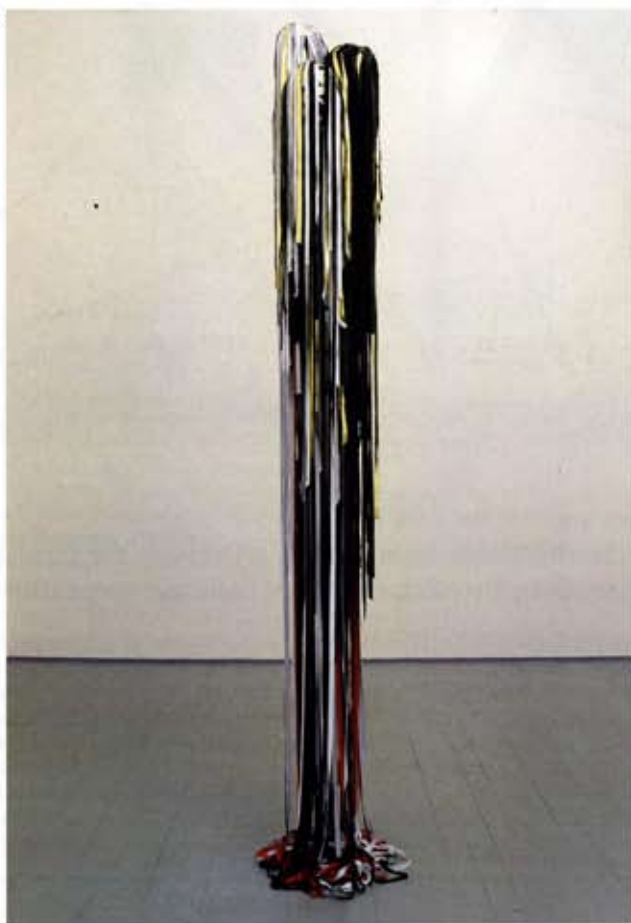
1



2



3



4

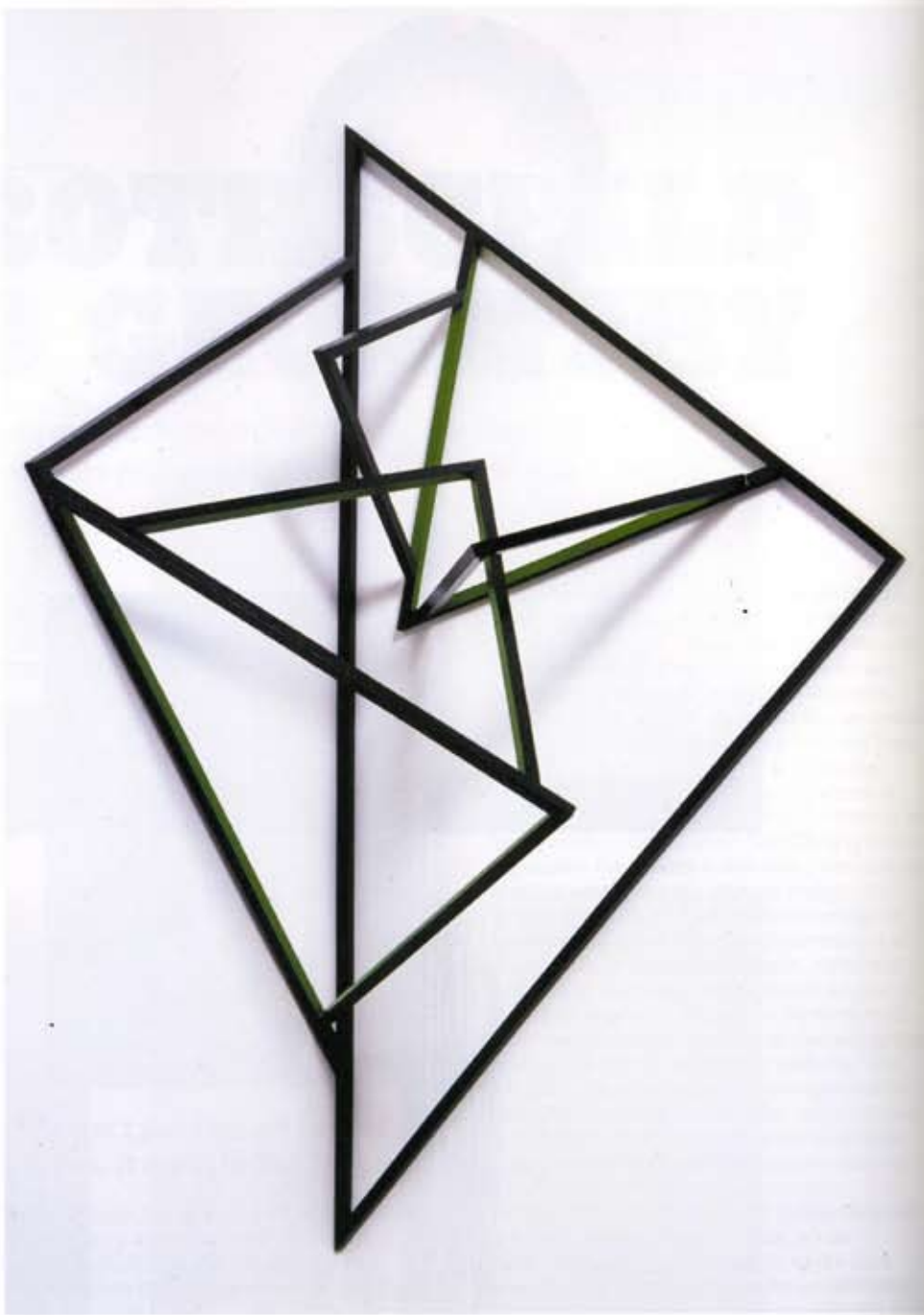


- 1 Rubbering**
 (2009), Jesmonite,
 plaster bandage,
 foam, aluminum
 wire acrylic paint,
 diameter 78cm
- 2 Higher Love**
 (2007), leather,
 aluminum, steel
 armature,
 380 x 143 x 109cm
- 3 Meltdown**
 (2009), leather,
 steel pins, fabric,
 duct tape,
 280 x 54cm
- 4 Open Ends**
 (2009), Jesmonite,
 paper-mâché, wire,
 spray paint painted
 steel stand,
 208 x 71 x 71cm

1



2



A Sculptural Magician

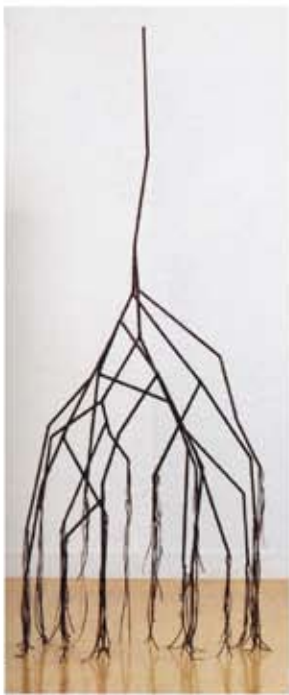
Katharine Stout, curator of Eva Rothschild's forthcoming Tate Britain project, reflects on the formal innovations and illusory tricks in her work, from a hovering branch to a teetering stack of balls and serpentine ropes

"Eva is interested in basic geometric shapes and works with these essential forms repeatedly, in different ways. She's not interested in the forms being figurative but at times they have a hint of something. *Burning Tyre* [1999] is a key early piece that uses substances that exist in the world, like the incense sticks, which are, of course, associated with new age and eastern spiritualism. A more recent work, *Women of the World* [2008] also has a sense of borrowing from another culture, with the beading and

the totemic structure, though formally it could also relate to Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Again this piece hints at the figurative, and has a one-to-one bodily presence. Eva talks about the balls as heads – they are clearly not representational, but there is just enough suggestion there to make you think of heads, just as she refers to the woven leather ropes in *The Narrow Way* [2007] as snakes.

Medium Wave [2004] is the first "corner piece" that Eva made, and it is basically formed of a sequence of

triangles that unfold into each other. The interlinking structures are an investigation of very different shapes to *Women of the World* – this time angular, spiky and geometric – but again it plays with sequences of forms. There is a green line on a couple of the triangles and Eva is very precise about when she uses colour. Often it's used to bring in a visual interest but also to slightly disrupt a continuous line or sequence. That sense of disruption and making something more complex is a key element of her



1 **Women of the World** (2008), glass beads, plaster bandage, polystyrene, acrylic paint, 188 x 26cm

2 **Medium Wave** (2004), painted wood, 117 x 77 x 43cm

3 **Knock Knock** (2005), leather, steel support, 140 x 289 x 130cm

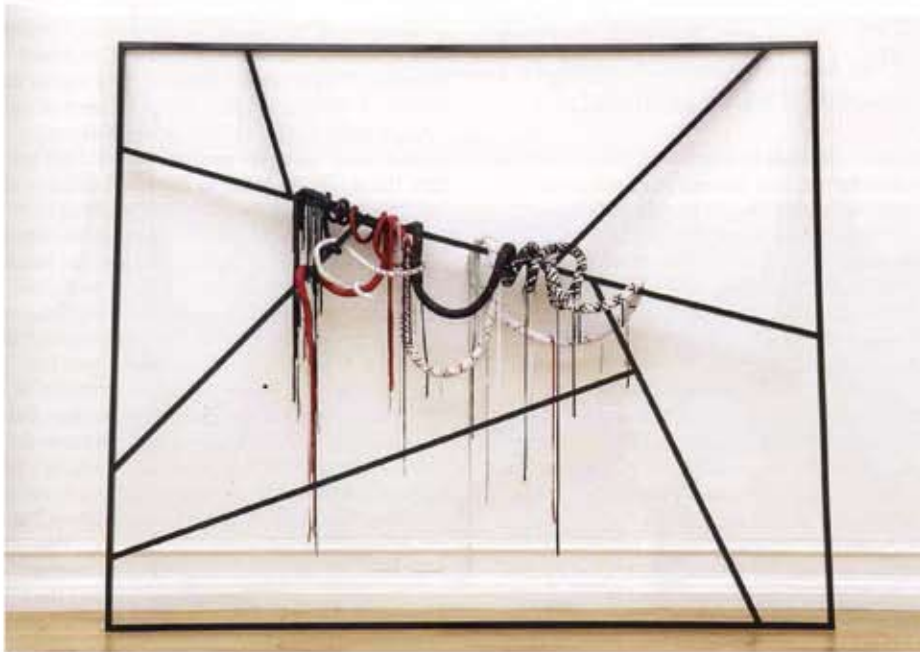
4 **Mr. Messy** (2007), armature wire, plastic, painted steel, 181 x 56 x 52cm

5 **Jokes** (2007), painted oak, painted steel, 258 x 68 x 74cm

6 **The Narrow Way** (2007), soft wood, leather, fabric, armature, 304 x 370 x 62cm

7 **Pentagon** (2006), lacquered beech wood, perspex, 271 x 147 x 126cm

8 **Burning Tyre** (2004), tyre, incense, diameter 58cm

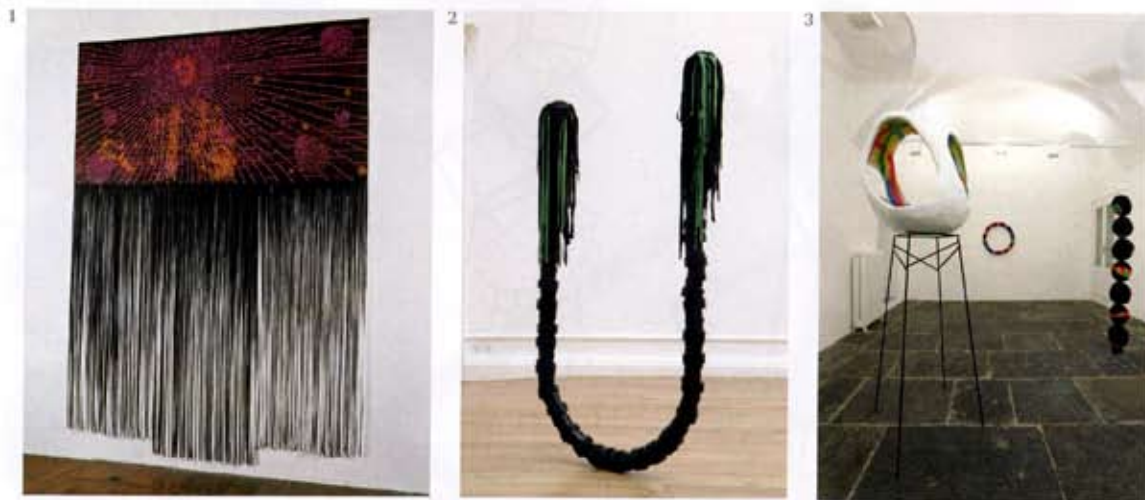


work and leads to a strong interest in a sense of optical illusion. It's not the kind of illusion that is familiar in contemporary art in the form of video installation or digital manipulation, it's about putting materials together which have a perceptual trickery about them, like a magician's trick. There is nothing more than what you see in the sculpture, she's very clear about this. She never uses hidden wires or supports to hold up or suspend a form – whatever method is used is always integral to the piece. That's certainly the case with *Knock Knock* [2005]. In a way it looks like it's floating, but at the same time there are disguised stands, and if you look closely you can see that. *Knock Knock* elegantly takes possession of the space it occupies, but it does this very lightly.

"It's about putting materials together which have a perceptual trickery about them"

Jokes [2007] is a cascading stack of cube outlines, supported by a four-legged stand, which looks unstable, but it's not. The title obviously shows a light-hearted approach to tackling this quintessential 20th-century sculptural motif. A lot of her work offers a nod to the sculptural innovations of the 1960s, both American minimalism and British New Generation sculpture, and by using the title *Jokes*, it suggests an irreverent take on presenting a cubed form on a stand. But again it has an

optical fascination – you can't quite work out how it's all balancing. *Mr Messy* [2007] is on the same kind of stand, and the form is like the *Mr Men* character *Mr Messy*. This spatial scribble is made of tubes of chunky beads – a continuous line which is actually a sequential series of parts. Again, she is trying to disrupt something, and the piece's title reinforces this. *Pentagon* [2006] uses shiny black Perspex to form intersecting triangular forms with pentagonal shapes in the middle. The play of light on the surface disrupts your sense of the structural integrity of the work – you can't work out how the forms fit together. You could say that the triangular forms pay tribute to Richard Serra's works, but Eva's piece doesn't have a monumental weightiness, it has a compelling playfulness about it."



1 **Absolute Power** (2001), woven paper posters, 300 x 230cm 2 **Cactus** (2007), steel armature, Jesmonite, fabric, leather, paint, 225 x 113 x 23cm
 3 Installation view at Francesca Kaufmann, Milan, 2009 4 Installation view at South London Gallery, 2007
 5 **Supernature** (2008), leather, foram, aluminium wire, wood, perspex, 280 x 600 x 500cm

depends on the location. I love the big Richard Serra piece at Liverpool Street Station: it's in a tiny space, and yet it works so well. Some collectors have fantastic places for my pieces, but I turn down a request whenever I think it'll look all wrong. I like the idea of work being in a gallery: you go through a door and see the art properly, separate from the world. How few moments do you ever have with one thing?" Rothschild is quick to make clear that she has no patience with "the old image of the artist living in an ivory tower – that's completely outmoded. Artists now have to be flexible and pragmatic. But I like the idea of art being a bit apart. That interests me, although I would stop short of saying that art is magical."

For most of her student years – first as a polemical printmaker at the University of Ulster in the early 1990s, and then at Goldsmiths College in London – Rothschild shied away from sculpture. She made "woven pieces and works on paper" during her Goldsmiths period, and "I thought that anyone who said 'I am a sculptor' sounded so weighty, pretentious, unfeasible and grandiose." But when she tried to explore the possibilities of painting, her body reacted negatively. "I got RSI [repetitive strain injury]. My hands were really bad. It turned me towards sculpture." Once she made *Burning Tyre* in 1999, a powerful work reflecting an awareness of protest culture, Rothschild's attitude towards being a sculptor really began to change.

The tyre was stuffed with incense, a surprising element which can surely be traced back to the Catholic religion she grew up with. "My husband is English, and England has been very good to me. But I am Irish. The idea of believing in something,

"When one of my pieces goes well, it is like a giddiness, even a vertigo. It's like exhilaration"

and the notion that an object can carry power, is very interesting, and present in all religions." Even so, Rothschild is quick to disassociate herself from the idea that art should be "a force for morality. I don't feel that art is good for you. It could be bad for you. We don't go to museums to be improved – that's preachy." As "a responsible citizen", she went along to the climate change demonstration during the G20 week. But "there were far too many police. I went down Threadneedle Street at one stage, and it felt overwhelmingly bad. Thank God I wasn't at the Royal Exchange! The police were putting on riot gear and, to be honest, the whole protest unfortunately lacked a real focus."

Will she ever return to live in Ireland? "I think about going back there every week", she admits. "I had a very secure childhood in a happy family, and our house was near the sea in Dún Laoghaire near Dublin. But for a small country like Ireland the future will be very difficult. The economy is a disaster now – it's like tumbleweed blowing through the streets. I do miss the sea, though. It gives you a sense of focus, and when you go outdoors it's like a compass. That's why I love being near the Regent's Canal here in Hackney. London is a great place to grow up in, too. I found this studio almost three years ago, after discovering a sign saying 'Units To Rent'. It's so much better than my previous ramshackle studio with a leaking roof. Having a good place does affect your work. I'm very lucky to be able to afford this studio. It can be really tough for artists who don't make a living from their work, going out to horrible, unheated places in the evenings and trying to survive in the cold."

Looking at Rothschild's recent work, I realise that it reflects her understanding of profound instability in the world. One piece she shows me on her computer screen is called *Women of the World* (2009). Seven ball forms are balanced precariously on top of each other, and I tell her that the sculpture looks as if it could collapse at any instant. She smiles. "I'm happy about that. It's an improbable physicality, almost like being on a tightrope. It could fall apart, like the leaning tower of Pisa. We've become so used to digital trickery that it's great to see something like a seal balancing a ball on its nose." Is she interested in watching animals? "No, but snakes – yes! I'm fascinated by the muscularity and precision in their movements. I absolutely hate spiders, but snakes are graceful and may not even move for hours. They're also very primitive." Seizing a pen, Rothschild suddenly draws a stick figure next to one diagonal line on a pink-coloured sheet. "This is a person and this is a snake", she explains, adding: "Two life-forms looking at each other."

Her energy now is even more intense than before, and I can imagine how determined she becomes to transfer it to the sculpture. What is her greatest hope as an artist? She responds to my question with swiftness and certitude. "At the moment, I hope that my work is exciting to be in and around. It must involve you in a dynamic experience. When one of my pieces goes well, it is like a giddiness, even a vertigo. It's like exhilaration in the physicality of something. I also hope it'll be accessible. You can't control meaning – you have to free up the artwork. When something really gets me, it's a dizzying feeling, like being right on the edge of the Grand Canyon. But whatever chaos is in the work, it's because I've put it there."

Exhibitions: Duvens Commission 2009, supported by Sotheby's, Tate Britain, London, 29 Jun–29 Nov; www.tate.org.uk; Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, 6 Jul–22 Aug; www.modernart.net

4



5



Cork, Richard, *Eva Rothschild: Solid Geometry*, Art World, June/July 2009, Issue 11, pp. 130-135