

UK



The Hepworth Wakefield
2011
Designed by
David Chipperfield

Eva Rothschild The Hepworth Wakefield

An empty gallery is a bit like a blank canvas: an artist confronts a set of white walls at the outset of each installation, and we imagine them, like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), with their metaphorical brush 'trembling in a painful but exciting ecstasy in the air'. The pressure only mounts on those rare occasions when their exhibition is the first in that given space. With 'Hot Touch', Eva Rothschild has delighted in the ambivalent nature of inauguration, rampaging through The Hepworth Wakefield with a series of sculptures that ricochet across the building's first floor. A striped, multi-coloured line snakes up toward the ceiling; a tassled hoop hovers magically in mid-air; a square of black resin spills onto the floor; and a scrambled cloud of bandages perches on a steel stand. Collectively, the works perform a reconnaissance, testing out the sculptural possibilities of the space. Individually, each is rich with allusions that lend the objects a knowingness (or *connaissance*) about their status as a precedent for future works that will be installed in their wake.

As Brian O'Doherty noted, the contemporary gallery combines 'the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom [and] the mystique of the experimental laboratory', in the production of 'a unique chamber of esthetics'. David Chipperfield, the architect of the recently opened Turner Contemporary in Margate, also designed The Hepworth Wakefield, which opened its doors in May. His series of interlocking concrete cubes (known locally as 'The Sheds'), make for unlikely galleries, with their jaunty angles and slanted ceilings that deliberately resist the white cube, but that do so in a way that complements rather than compromises the display of art. This architectural feat is dramatized well by Rothschild, who has described her practice as 'magic minimalism'. *Why Don't You?* (2011) is a spindly form some four metres tall that leans against one wall with its forked top reaching up into the skylight like an exotic plant. In *Stairways* (2011), six scalene triangles hang from the ceiling, held aloft by casts of the Buddha's hand, with finger and thumb touching. The

powder-coated aluminium is reminiscent of *Cold Corners*, Rothschild's 2009 Duveen Gallery Commission for Tate Britain, in which an explosive structure of lines zigzagged across the neo-classical galleries, playfully nodding to Marcel Duchamp's mile of string that enmeshed the 1942 'First Papers of Surrealism' exhibition in New York. Rothschild's geometry reifies the relationship that triangulates between art object, visitor and space in a gesture much needed in a new gallery. (The show tours to Kunstverein Hannover later this year, then to Kunsthau Baselland in spring 2012.)

The works displayed here are all recent and many have been made in response to the practice of Barbara Hepworth, whose sculptures, drawings and tools are spread across six galleries of permanent collection displays, which situate her in relation to both the local region and to her international contemporaries. *Horn of Plenty* (2011), for example, is a black ovoid shell pocked with large holes that reveal an undulating golden surface within. The form is deliberately evocative of a Hepworth plaster such as *Oval Sculpture* (No.2) (1943). Rothschild's use of gilding

Eva Rothschild
'Hot Touch'
2011
Installation view



relates both to the psychological significance of interior space (Jungian theory had been popularized by Herbert Read's *Education Through Art*, 1943) and to the prominence of the egg-like form in the history of sculpture, beginning with Constantin Brancusi's seminal experiments of the 1920s. Such shapes gained popularity with members of the St Ives group and sparked a fierce row between Hepworth and Naum Gabo after (as she wrote in a letter to E.H. Ramsden in 1946: 'he accused me of stealing the OVAL!'). These snatches of history are coolly distilled by Rothschild into simple organic shapes.

The artist's engagement with materials also points to a different parallel: Eva Hesse. Anne Wagner has written of the affinity between an installation view of Rothschild's 2007 solo exhibition at the South London Gallery and of Hesse's work of the mid-1960s; both show minimal(ist) sculptural forms that seem to defy gravity, arranged around the room like assorted apparatus. In Wakefield too, objects variously tower, hang, twist and sit, inviting the visitor's interaction. *Natural Beauty* (2009), for example, looks like a black lacquered climbing frame entwined with rope, while *El Fenix* (2011) is a resin carpet fringed with tassels that echo Hesse's use of industrial debris from her Bowery studio. Positioned so that it reclines against one wall, the sculpture pays homage to *Area* (1968), and the radical moment when sculpture was liberated from its pedestal. Like Duchamp's *Prière de toucher* (Please Touch, 1947), Rothschild's works are collected under a teasing title, 'Hot Touch', reminding the visitor of the museum's injunctions against handling. Instead, she explains, the work requires a kind of 'hard looking'. Borrowing from the visual language of Modernism, Rothschild's sculptures speak to all the future artists who will confront the first-floor exhibition galleries of The Hepworth Wakefield and acknowledge, like Lily Briscoe, that 'the risk must be run; the mark must be made'.

Eleanor Nairne