

James Richards Reveals Wales Exhibition At 57th Venice Biennale



A new body of work including sound and video installations and photographic work by James Richards represents Wales at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice is an official collateral event at the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, a church and former convent located just off Via Garibaldi. It is situated midway between the main Biennale Giardini and Arsenale sites taking place 13 May – 26 November 2017. The exhibition has been commissioned by the Arts Council of Wales and curated by Chapter, Cardiff.

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Richards’ presentation for Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice is inspired by the space of the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice and the artist’s ongoing exploration of the emotive power of appropriated material. It includes ‘Music for the gift’ (2017), a new, six-channel electro-acoustic music installation. The work is an exploration of the capacity of sound to render artificial acoustic spaces and then locate sonic and melodic events within these. The work shifts around the viewer setting up and then shattering these imaginary settings. Woven throughout the piece are re-occurring vocal and musical motifs that have been developed

in collaboration with Kirsten Evans and Samuel Williams, students at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. The work has then been ‘tuned to the room’, with Richards reacting to the acoustic contingencies and associative qualities of the building as he constructs a poetic audio-collage. Moving across a wide range of genres and musical languages, the artist incorporates field recording, sound effects and his own voice, alongside electronically generated and recorded material. The resultant work is a cinematic and multi-sensory experience – an arrangement of vivid emotional cues to be navigated subjectively.

‘What Weakens The Flesh Is The Flesh Itself’ (2017) is a video made with Steve Reinke, an artist and writer with whom Richards has collaborated since 2009. The starting point for the work is a series of photographs and collages found amongst the private archive of Albrecht Becker – a production designer, photographer and actor imprisoned by the Nazis for being homosexual – held at The Schwules Museum*, Berlin. Amongst the portraits of friends, work-related images and photographs were taken whilst serving in the World War II, is a collection of self-portraits that reveal an obsessive commitment to his personal body modification and to his own image: duplicated, quadruplicated, repeated and reworked within. The artists have drawn on hundreds of these self-portraits and combined them with medical footage, educational film and text to construct a piece that interrogates what it means to build a body of work of the body, and for the body to become a work itself.

'Rushes Minotaur' (2017) is an installation of inkjet prints that draws on two distinct images: a close-up of crumbling skin from a medical book and the tarpaulin-shielded façade of a shop. Cut together and then rescanned, these simple visual cues and combinations of found photocopied images are disrupted and reinstated through a scanning process that stretches and stacks them into different combinations; subject matter appears to fall away, refracted and recalibrated; the image itself is fragile – on the verge of being lost or damaged or re-appropriated elsewhere.

Present throughout the exhibition is a publication of deceptive economy that contains an expansive text by the writer Chris McCormack. The narrative moves between the intimate and the scientific and reflects upon the breaking of the male voice. The subject has been a point of dialogue between the two collaborators for a number of years and was commissioned after Richards spent time in the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, where McCormack's words began to chime. Moving fluently between first and third person the text meets Richards' exhibition at an oblique angle, like his images that oscillate between unfettered documentary and a more neurotic interior territory.

Top Image: James Richards, Music for the gift, 2017, production still. Archive image courtesy The Schwules Museum