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A Q&A with... Sean Edwards, artist representing Wales at the 2019 Venice Biennale

Sean Edwards is presenting new work in Venice that draws on his experiences of growing up on a council estate in 1980s Cardiff and includes sculpture, film, prints, quilts and a radio play produced in partnership with National Theatre Wales. David Trigg finds out more.

exhibitions International Venice Biennale 2019 wales
Wales in Venice

The ornate surroundings of a former baroque church in Venice will this summer host a new body of work by Cardiff-based artist [Sean Edwards](#), who has been chosen to represent Wales in the 58th Venice Biennale.

Edwards, who is represented by [Tanya Leighton Gallery](#) in Berlin, is a former recipient of the Arts Council of Wales [Creative Wales Awards](#), and won the Gold Medal for Fine Art at the [Welsh National Eisteddfod](#) in 2014.

He is known for his sculptural approach to the everyday, often beginning with elements that seem unrelated but are linked by autobiographical and cultural connections. These could range from a 1970s shopping centre in Cardiff, a Welsh quilting group, Bruce Springsteen's 1982 album *Nebraska*, tabloid newspapers and sundry found materials.

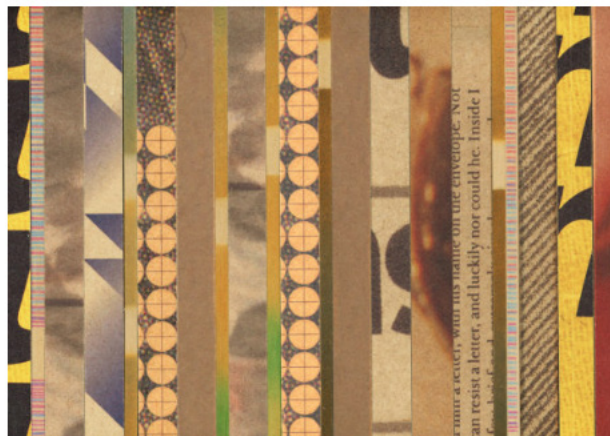
Curated by Marie-Anne McQuay (head of programme at [Bluecoat](#), Liverpool) for lead organisation [Tŷ Pawb](#), Edwards's exhibition for Venice is his most ambitious and high profile to date. It will include sculpture, film, prints, quilts and a radio play, *Refrain*, which has been produced in partnership with [National Theatre Wales](#).

Installed at the church of [Santa Maria Ausiliatrice](#) in Castello, the show is the ninth presentation by Wales in Venice, which has enjoyed a presence at the Biennale since 2003.

Edwards's new suite of works explores what he calls a condition of 'not expecting much' and draws on his experiences in 1980s Cardiff, growing up on a council estate in Llanedeyrn on the outskirts of the city. Through his poetic inquiry into place, politics and class, he evokes a way of living that is familiar to many – that of making do and getting by with little.

a-n, May 2019

Tanya Leighton



The exhibition takes your personal experience of growing up in social housing as its starting point. How has this period of your life informed the new work

I wanted to think about what it means to grow up working class when you have little sense of expectations. The show weaves together themes of family, class, loss and displacement, and while there's an element of autobiography, relating to my own experience of the Llanedeyrn council estate, it hopefully tells a much wider story about the state of British politics today and what it means for the millions of people still living in these circumstances. How that plays out in the show is quite abstract, but the sculptural objects, textiles, film and prints are all imbued with a visual language that I hope talks of these experiences.

Your work is installed in the baroque surroundings of a deconsecrated Venetian church, which seems somewhat incongruous given your subject matter. What was the thinking behind the venue?

The space is the same venue that Wales in Venice have used for the last four years, so it was partly about continuing that history. But for me the venue and my work sit perfectly together. I was raised Catholic and my mother was brought up in a Catholic children's home. The church building itself used to be a convent and it now houses a school. So there's this peculiar branching of the institutions of the church and of education that's very much a part of my work, even if not overtly.

Your work seems to speak to a very specific British context. Are you concerned about how it will translate to an international stage?

I don't know how you can't not bring a context to something like this. There's a number of different Welsh and British cultural references in the work, some of which may not be completely readable internationally. But I'm not interested in removing context in order to speak globally as I think the kind of concerns I'm dealing with now are actually global ones. One of the things I wanted to do from the offset was to not play to the the spectacle of the biennale, to retain a sense of intimacy and small detail. A phrase pinned to my studio wall says 'disappointing rather than spectacular', which is something that I've strived for in the work.

Are you approaching this show differently to a regular exhibition?

Yes. This show has very much been a collaborative effort. Of course, all exhibitions involve a level of collaboration in working with the organisation, the curators and the technicians, but this one in particular, delivering something on this scale in less than a year, is very different. It has relied hugely on the goodwill and support of lots of people. There are some works in the show for which I've worked with craftspeople, and I've been collaborating with National Theatre Wales on a radio play, so it's a very different way of working for me.

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Tanya Leighton



Your radio play, *Refrain*, is performed by your mother and will be transmitted to Venice from her Cardiff council home. What inspired this piece?

I was thinking about different ways of telling stories and also about how to put myself out of my comfort zone by working with language – something I've generally tended to stay away from until now. The script uses found text as well as my own writing and is probably where the autobiographical most plays out in the show. As I said earlier, I was raised Catholic, and I was thinking about the Mass and the point of transubstantiation – the part where the bread and the wine are believed to become the body and blood of Christ. So there's the idea of a physical change that occurs at that moment through a kind of performance. That's what I wanted to attempt with this play; it's a way of being able to alter the experience of the installation for a brief moment each day. The live broadcast starts at 2pm and my mother will be performing daily from Cardiff for the entire run of the biennale.

It must be a great honour to represent your country?

Yes, of course, but it's terrifying as well! I was an art student when Wales did their first presentation in Venice with Simon Pope, Cerith Wyn Evans, Bethan Huws and Paul Seawright. I've watched it through the years and it's amazing to be a part of that legacy. But I know that despite 'representing' Wales, I'm not speaking for everyone; I'm just presenting a certain voice from Wales, one that I hope connects with wider concerns.

How does Cymru yn Fenis/Wales in Venice benefit the Welsh art scene?

It's hugely important for the Welsh art scene. It helps young artists realise that you can be based off-centre, away from the perceived centre of the UK, and still make work on an international level. The Invigilator Plus programme is also a really invaluable aspect of Wales in Venice. Participants spend time in Venice invigilating the show during the biennale. So many of the young artists working in Wales today have been through the programme and talk positively about how it provided hands-on experience in an international context, put them in touch with peers from other countries, and how they benefitted from personal development opportunities. I'm really pleased that Louise Hobson, a great curator based in Wales who participated in the programme, is now working alongside Marie-Anne as assistant curator on this project.

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