

# 40th EVA International: Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art

Maria Walsh

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Limerick city, Ireland, various venues, 31 August – 29 October 2023

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Natsuko Uchino, *Dwellings*, 2023; Goshka Macuga, *The Fable of the Wolf, the Polar Bear, the Reindeer and the Cosmonaut*, 2018; Iza Tarasewicz, *Boom*, 2021, image courtesy of EVA International

The 40th iteration of EVA International is a significant moment in the exhibition's more than forty-five-year history. Founded in 1977 as an open submission of work by artists living in Ireland and 'adjudicated' by an international curator, EVA, or EV+A (Exhibition of Visual + Art) as it was then known, evolved from being an open annual, including 'Open' (local) and 'Invited' (international), to finally becoming a biennial in 2012. The 2023 edition coincides with EVA's archival project, 'Never Look Back', which revisits the exhibition's history. An iteration of this ongoing multi-platform project is presented at biennial venues in the form of stacks of

orange-toned posters of grids of photographs documenting the variety of exhibition spaces used over the years. EVA's 40th edition uses the university campus, a café, a school, a cathedral, a pub, a swanky office block, a hotel, as well as more traditional civic and art spaces such as The People's Museum and Limerick City Gallery of Art.

The international guest programme has been curated by Sebastian Cichocki, chief curator and head of research at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Entitled 'The Gleaners Society', it is a response to the biennial theme of citizenship, but orients it at some remove from its statist affinities. Gleaning, ie gathering the surplus crops left over from the harvest, was a common agricultural practice up to the eighteenth century until it was declared illegal by the British court in 1788. It was a way for poor or marginalised peoples to provide food for their families and was part of an agro-ecology where nothing went to waste, though this practice was still predicated on inequality. As opposed to Agnès Varda's infamous film *The Gleaners and I* (2000), in which, documenting residual practices of gleaning in both rural and urban contexts, she juxtaposes poetic lyricism and social injustice, Cichocki's 'gleaning society' has a more folksy ecological impetus. But similar to Varda, for Cichocki gleaning is also an artistic methodology that draws on existing resources and past ideas, including artworks and practices that have been previously presented at EVA. This is literally so with his inclusion of Janet Mullarney's two *Domestic Gods* sculptures from 1997 and 1998, carved female hybrids drawing on pagan and Christian iconography, which were presented at EVA in 1998, coincidentally the only other time I have visited the exhibition although I have kept abreast of it from a distance, given its significance in the Irish art scene from when I was an art student in Ireland in the 1980s.

As well as being a curatorial methodology, gleaning might also be said to be a spectatorial one: like any biennial, the exhibition is so vast that it cannot all be taken in on one visit. There are seventeen venues, over forty-five artists, and the programme includes a number of one-off performances as well as being bookended by two weekends of film screenings. The biennial also includes six Platform Commissions, a transmogrification of 'Open Eva' that was dissolved in 2012, selected by artist Emily Jacir and writer and curator Pádraic E Moore from an open call on the biennial theme of citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Adding to the dispersed accessibility of the programme, there is also a collaborative commission that will continue after the biennial at Thomond Primary School involving the school's gardening club with artist Deirdre O' Mahony and Hometree, a charity dedicated to preserving native Irish woodland. The plan is to plant a micro-forest and biodiversity haven on the school grounds. Billed as primarily for the benefit of pupils, parents and teachers rather than EVA visitors, this project might be seen as the wheat of a harvest whose seed corn is more easily accessed through the rather scrappy planting map, *Snaky River Forest* (2023), made by the pupils and on display at Ormston House. Like many of the works in 'The Gleaners Society', purpose is often more important than form, a sensibility that also

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<sup>1</sup> The six commissioned artists are Sarah Durcan, Phillip McCrilly, Sharon Phelan, Frank Sweeney, Clíodhna Timoney and Amna Walayat

resonates with EVA director Matt Packer's statement that the exhibition contains 'artworks that don't necessarily do anything *transformative* to our senses'.<sup>2</sup> They are, instead, propositions.

Numbered venue no 5 on the biennial trail, Ormston House's Venetian-inspired storefront architecture lends itself to being an introductory display to the biennial as a whole. Many of the works that can be glimpsed through its elongated, street-facing windows are by artists who also have work in other venues, for example Rory Pilgrim's video *RAFTS* (2022), which connects with his earlier *The Undercurrent* (2019) on display at Limerick City Gallery, both of which explore mental health, well-being, climate crisis and community. Jeamin Cha's delicate sketches of what look like nerves and muscles accompany a video, *Nameless Syndrome* (2022), exploring female maladies that resist medical categorisation and watsu (hydrotherapy massage), while two of her other films, *Sound Garden* (2019) and *Almost One* (2018), feature in the film programme at Belltable Arts Centre, both films dealing differently with the psychological impacts of social structures. Photographic documentation of Teresa Murak's 'soil art' performances from the 1970s and 1980s can also be seen at St Mary's Cathedral, although there their display is overshadowed by Kian Benson Bailes's *Cailleach boy i* and *ii* (both 2023), large-scale, hastily stitched and glued fabric sculptures that resemble a cross between imaginary beetles and witches, *cailleach* being a Gaelic term for divine hag. At Ormston House, Murak's archival 'poor images' – Murak was a pioneer of what might now be termed eco-feminist performance – contrast dramatically with Léann Herlihy's large-scale window vinyl, drawn from an undocumented performance of the artist being tattooed. Looking uncannily like a Benetton fashion advertisement, a closer look reveals the topless 'model', cropped from the neck, as a trans-person, their stomach tattooed with the words 'the middle of nowhere', also the title of Herlihy's project (ongoing since 2022) into the queering of space, including the countryside. An enormous horizontal armature made from rough-hewn planks, *Journeylass crops* (2023) by Olga Micińska, in collaboration with Mathild Clerc-Verhoeven, straddles the gallery space.<sup>3</sup> Walking around this irregular, open structure, one discovers the carved wood organic 'growths' and folksy decorative paintings supported by its trusses. For Cichocki, the installation is 'simultaneously a sculpture, a display, an element of stage design for performance and workshops, and a useful structural element, ie a gate (following the exhibition it will be repurposed on a farm in Ireland)'.<sup>4</sup> Ormston House also hosts another placeholder for the Thomond Primary School project, Slavs and Tatars and Leah Feldman's carpet, *azbuka strikes back* (2023). Although there is minimal information in the wall texts, its

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<sup>2</sup> Matt Packer, Director's Introduction, *40th EVA International: Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art*, Matt Packer, ed, EVA, Limerick, 2023, pp 9–10, p 10

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, when Rory Pilgrim showed *RAFTS* at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2022, the video's metaphor of art and music being a kind of raft was underscored by Micińska's and Clerc-Verhoeven's *Held Together* (2022), an engraved wooden frame that encased the video within a nautical themed installation. Without this framing, *RAFTS* was somewhat cast adrift at Ormston House. See my review of the Serpentine exhibition in *Art Monthly*, no 456, May 2022  
[www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/radio-ballads-by-maria-walsh-may-2022](http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/radio-ballads-by-maria-walsh-may-2022)

<sup>4</sup> Exhibition wall text by Sebastian Cichocki



colourful pattern would seem to derive from Cyrillic script, given that ‘azbuka’ refers to the Cyrillic alphabet in Bulgarian, Macedonian, Russian, Serbian, Czech and Slovak languages. It is also used in Ukraine, and a vinyl of the spelling of the school’s name in Ukrainian is exhibited on the site’s windows.



Kian Benson Bailes, *Cailleach boy i* and *Cailleach boy ii*, both 2023, image courtesy of EVA International

Given Cichocki’s base in Warsaw and Poland’s proximity to Ukraine, it is no surprise that EVA includes many artists and filmmakers who are based or were born in those countries. As well as Micińska, Murak and Slavs and Tatars (one founder member is Polish), there is also work by Goshka Macuga (a monochrome tapestry), Iza Tarasewicz (decorative, repurposed metal sculptures), Antonia Nowacka (an opening night music performance), Eustachy Kossakowski (black and white photographs of scarecrows from 1966), Sana Shamuradova Tanska (paintings based on land catastrophes), Kateryna Aliynyk (paintings of roots and war remains), Freefilmmers (a Mariupol film collective), and My-Musical Collective and Pidsoma Shelter (a collaborative video of an experimental musical performance).

The latter, entitled *My-musical (We-Musical)* (2022), at the University of Limerick’s Bourn Vincent Gallery, used a performative methodology in which various scenarios were acted out: community activities such as cooking borscht to song, for example, or learning self-defence in parodic slow-motion. The video is an outcome of a residency of artists and Ukrainian refugees in a centre in Lviv formally called soma.majsternia, a printing house turned choreography centre that they transformed into a refugee shelter and emergency kitchen initiative. As a grassroots



action, this is a hugely admirable project, but as a viewing experience I found it unengaging. The performative acts did not seem to address or need an outside witness and instead put the viewer in the position of fly-on-wall observer, although they did make me think about the value of artistic or expressive activities in tending to the psychological needs of displaced persons: they are as necessary as food and shelter. My disengagement may also have been an effect of having already given my attention to two of the three Freefilmmers's short documentaries on display monitors in the university library, one of which, *Revitalization of Space* (2018) by Sashko Protyah and Oksana Kazmina was made before the Russian invasion, the other, *My Favorite Job* (2022), also by Protyah, made during. The 'job' in the latter refers to being one of the volunteer drivers who ferry Ukrainian refugees across the military-patrolled border checks, focusing in particular on one named Ania. The voiceover and edgy camerawork incorporates the viewer/witness up close and personal around Ania's kitchen table as she takes calls from people wishing to make the journey who need reports on vehicles and border checks. Another volunteer regales the risks of being shot, with a gallows humour necessary to survival. Intermittent monochromatic footage of vehicles being checked by armed soldiers, rendered in a kind of videogame-like aesthetic, eerily convey the imminent threat. In the earlier film, the filmmaker interviews people about abandoned industrial spaces they find meaningful: one, an industrial water tower, is a site that was conducive to Ukraine's electronic music scene in the 1980s, while another is an ex-Soviet summer camp, its buildings and fittings now rusted and dilapidated, but a young mother, children in tow, finds peace there as she reflects on history and memory away from the mainstream capture of open spaces.

That such abandoned 'ruins' give people the kinds of feelings associated with nature provided a welcome contrast to works in the biennial which promote the agrarian as a lost way of life that can be redeemed by artists who withdraw from the art world. *The First Mark* (2008), by Peter Nadin with Natsuko Uchino and Aimee Toledano, lyrically documents Nadin's withdrawal from the artworld into farming and animal husbandry, although he was still making paintings with bees as collaborators and, he claimed, beneficiaries of the process. Lala Meredith-Vula's *Haystacks* (1989–ongoing), black and white photographs of vernacular haystacks in Kosovo and Albania, epitomise the idealisation of agrarian pasts that sometimes seeps through the biennial. While an interesting archive of local, idiosyncratic forms of hay-baling, which used to be widespread across Europe before the advent of John Deere machines made hay-baling uniform and mechanised, the more than forty photographs evoke rural idylls rather than impoverished conditions of production and hard labour. In contrast, Jumana Manna's film *Foragers* (2022), shown in a one-off screening at the Belltable, focuses on the adaptation of ecological ways of living under occupied territory. Filmed in the Galilee, Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, the film explores the effects on Palestinians of Israeli law that forbids them from foraging for plants such as *akkoub* and *za'atar* used in traditional cooking. The combination in *Foragers* of documentary and performative re-enactments effectively conveys how Palestinians have adapted to this imposition – ignoring it and risking fines or even jail – in order to continue: 'grassroots

custodianship practices *in spite of* the policy of nation-state'.<sup>5</sup> Most telling is a scene when a *za'atar* forager, stopped by patrollers, is not only given a fine but ordered to leave his pickings on the ground. He later goes back at night to retrieve them, the whole escapade highlighting the absurdity of a law designed to destroy both the living traditions of those it wishes to control as well as an agrarian management of plants removed from profit.

While, to paraphrase Shela Sheikh,<sup>6</sup> planting seeds alone will not put out the fires of war, local seed-saving practices can broaden ecological receptiveness. Seoidín O' Sullivan's display *Crex crex, crex crex, crex...* (2023), at Limerick City Gallery, acts, as many of the biennial exhibits do, as a holding space for an ongoing research project, Corncrake LIFE, instigated by Ormston House and led by Caimin Walshe. Although the arrangement of straw bales covered with a cloth printed with postage stamps from different countries featuring corncrakes was a little uninspiring, the project, explained in an attractive and easy to read leaflet that can be taken away, is very inspiring. Visitors to EVA are invited to collect, then post in, seeds of various wildflowers such as cow parsley, to Corncrake LIFE. These will be used to rewild a natural habitat for corncrakes, which are becoming extinct in Ireland. All posted contributions meeting the required 500g weight will receive a corncrake dollar, a bronze coin featuring the said bird, one of which was framed in the exhibition. Notably, the expanded remit of this project harnesses the cooperation of farmers and landowners as well as activists, such collaboration being essential to ecological conservation.

Navine G Dossos's permanent revamp of The Grove, Limerick's only, and longstanding, vegetarian café, also harnesses the local. Uniform rows of wild fruits and edible plants local to Limerick were gaily painted along the walls, while the six tables have been topped with glass under which were presented colourful graphic drawings of, and information on, various local wild plants such as nettles, dandelions, wild garlic, etc. This is a good example of what I would call the 'soft pedagogy' of 'The Gleaners Society': information might seep into one's consciousness like a process of osmosis, here, while eating lunch. Although café visitors are already likely to be involved in food cultures, the bright colours and simplified text might also encourage children to find out more about their local environment and encourage people to revalue 'weeds'. That said, in Ireland's new burgeoning food culture, this kind of food is being sourced by high-end restaurants where the moneyed pay for 'tastings' of organic food spruced with wild sorrel and edible flowers. Given Ireland's troubled history with food and land use, to forage for food is considered a sign of poverty.

Environmental stewardship also applies to architecture. Clodagh Emoe's work *Reflections on a City Lot* (2023), specially commissioned for EVA, is a large-scale billboard that straddles the 'empty' space between two walls of a razed house at the gable end of a site known as the Fireplace due to the revelation during demolition of existing derelict buildings in the 1990s of

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<sup>5</sup> Shela Sheikh, ' "Planting Seeds/The Fires of War": The Geopolitics of Seed Saving in Jumana Manna's *Wild Relatives*', *Third Text*, vol 32, nos 2–3, pp 200–229, 2018, p 227

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid*



Navine G Dossos, *The Grove*, 2023, image courtesy of EVA International

a stone party wall containing a fireplace and stone corbels of archaeological and architectural interest. The billboard's Rorschach blot image stems from a ragwort on the site. Drawing attention to the overlooked, it is a minoritarian monument to the silent history of the site and the weeds that have taken over, produced as it was through ecological printmaking transfers of plant dyes onto paper over the course of several days. It would be wonderful to think that such a sensitive site-specific form of public art could remain beyond the life of the biennial also.

Unlike the open group show format of many of the venues, four of the Platform Commissions are exhibited in singular spaces in the state-of-the art office and meeting room complex, Gardens International.<sup>7</sup> Amna Walayat's self-portraits, in the style of Indo-Persian Miniature painting, allegorically address state citizenship, racism and the travails of cultural femininity. Cliodhna Timoney uses sculptural 'neo-formalist' language in an installation inspired by the showband scene in 1950s–1980s rural Ireland. Sarah Durcan's film *The Invisibles* (2023) ruminates on Irish poet and mythologist, Ella Young, who was part of the Gaelic and Celtic literary revival movement in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Through archival material – letters, books and a sizzling sound-recording of Young recalling how a mountain

<sup>7</sup> Sharon Phelan's *Citizens United: A speech act* (2023), billed as a sound composition and performance incorporating synthetic voices and ideas of communicative capitalism, was a one-off live performance on the opening night. Phillip McCrilly's performance event, *wet heat, sweats without scent* (2023), two massage sessions conducted by an actress and trained masseuse, took place on 13th and 14th October at No 1 Pery Square Hotel and Spa in Limerick city.





Clodagh Emoe, *Reflections on a City Lot*, 2023, image courtesy of EVA International

nodded a welcome to her on her arrival in California, the film obliquely tracks her migration to the US in 1925. In its allusions to Young's literary imaginings and the starkly lit, staged tableaux by two female performers enacting a saga from her *Celtic Wonder Tales* from 1910, the film uncannily resonates with the folksiness of some of Cichocki's selections.

Frank Sweeney's *Few Can See* (2023) is in dramatic contrast to the Anglo-Irish classicism of Young's milieu. Screened on a cathode ray monitor in a clichéd, but true-to-life, installation (developed with artist Michelle Malone) of a 1970s brownish-beige, floral-patterned, sitting-room, the speculative documentary uses both re-enactment and archival footage to explore the self-censorship executed by Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE), the Irish Republic's television network, during the 1970s and 1980s. Section 31 of the 1960 Broadcasting Act was invoked to censor coverage of any groups that might be thought to be affiliated with paramilitary organisations during the Northern Ireland conflict in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>8</sup> *Few Can See* attempts to reconstruct material absent from state archives due to this censorship, filming televisual-style enactments of interviews using actors, based on oral history interviews with people who were involved with or were impacted by Section 31. It interweaves interviews with three radical

<sup>8</sup> This was different from the ban issued by the British government from October 1988 to September 1994 of broadcasts of the voices of representatives from Sinn Féin and other Irish republican and loyalist groups on television and radio in the UK – their voices were dubbed; reference to this is also appears in Sweeney's video

action groups who were not allowed air time as they were (conveniently) considered as having paramilitary affiliations: Concerned Parents Against Drugs, who were labelled vigilantes due to taking the law into their own hands to deal with Dublin's heroin epidemic in the 1980s; Gays Against Imperialism, a group who, amongst other activist activity in other counties, participated in the H-Block street protests in Dublin in 1981; and trade unions during the Gateaux Bakery workers strike in 1990, also in Dublin. The latter's main trade union spokesman was banned from the airwaves, his membership of the Sinn Féin political party being used as an excuse to disqualify him. While the film's nonlinear weave of historical timelines is sometimes confusing – information comes too hard and fast to take in – its conveyance of the covert nature of this statecraft is riveting, it being further signalled by intermittent breaks of on-screen text: 'we regret this interruption, the programme will continue as soon as possible'.



Frank Sweeney, *Few Can See*, 2023, installation view, installation design by Michelle Malone, image courtesy of EVA International

*Few Can See* was also screened at the Belltable, followed by an impromptu Q&A with Lelia Doonan who worked at RTE in the 1960s as a producer and director before resigning at the end of the decade in protest at their policies. The feisty exchange between Sweeney and Doonan transformed what was initially a love-in of friends and collaborators into a lively discussion, and the audience's desire to find out more and make connections to censorship today was palpable. It was over all too soon, but remains a highlight of the biennial for a teenager of the era who was brought up on a diet of such befuddled broadcasts.

This 40th EVA International, unlike much artworld and other institutional discourse on eco and global catastrophes, charmed and invigorated rather than leaving one feeling disempowered and reactionary. Rather than making grand claims, ‘The Gleaners Society’, and the Platform Commissions, intimated more grassroots ways of being a citizen of a world in-common, in which borders between nature and culture are porous. Cichocki’s appropriation in his curatorial essay of a fragment of a conceptual text piece by Robert Barry, *Untitled, s.a.* (the work is shown in full at Limerick City Gallery), exemplifies, for me, an ecology of artistic production in which ‘art’ might act as a place holder and/or perform a kind of ‘soft pedagogy’. The fragment reads:

It’s active. It works upon other things. It gives access to other things. It’s at a periphery but may come into the center, sometime.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Barry, cited in Cichocki, ‘The Gleaners Society’, *40th EVA International: Ireland’s Biennial of Contemporary Art*, op cit, p 20