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Publication
Author

Financial Times
Harriet Lloyd-Smith



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'The Illuminating Gas' by Cerith Wyn Evans © Agostino Osio

Visual Arts

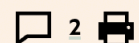
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Artist Cerith Wyn Evans: 'There are moments when you think, this is mad'

His complex works, now in a large show in Wales, challenge how we perceive the world



Jane Ure-Smith DECEMBER 7 2022



Water splashes across the screen, catching the light as it does so and drenching a coil of yellow metal. Cerith Wyn Evans has been experimenting with the moving image for 40 years and, with this joyous little offering, he pays tribute to the 17th-century Japanese tagasode ("whose sleeves?") artists, who painted kimonos without their wearers in order to focus on the patterns in the fabric.

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The film's roots are less esoteric. While watering the garden at his home in Norfolk, Wyn Evans was suddenly captivated by the sound of water hitting a metal measuring tape attached to a tree — and reached for his camera phone. “Hosepipe in one hand, camera in the other, I was just messing around,” he explains at the opening of his new exhibition at the Mostyn gallery in Llandudno, Wales. “There are moments when you think, this is mad: someone watering a ruler? But it’s kind of cool, too.”

Tucked away upstairs, “No realm of thought . . . variations after ‘Whose sleeves?’” (2022) turns a mundane slice of life into a piece of abstract art. It makes a delicious endpiece to a show that continues Wyn Evans’s longstanding exploration of light, sound, language and perception. In a variety of forms, his oeuvre invites us to question what we think we know about the world and the ways in which we perceive it. Our understanding of the world is always mediated by language, he reminds us. “You learn to see,” he says, with passion. “It’s drummed into you how depth feels.” His aim is always to shake up such “certainties”.

Wyn Evans began his career as a film-maker, working with Derek Jarman on *The Last of England* in the late 1980s. These days he’s best known for large-scale neon works such as those displayed in Tate Britain’s Duveen Galleries in 2017 and featured in a magnificent retrospective at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan in 2019-20. Sound remains a vital ingredient: in 2018, he won the Hepworth Prize for Sculpture with “Composition for 37 Flutes”, a floating sculpture of glass flutes powered by organ pumps to emit an otherworldly “music”.

At Mostyn, gallery director Alfredo Cramerotti has curated “a slice through Cerith’s practice, touching on different approaches and bodies of work”, he says. As the team put the finishing touches to a room filled with pulsating light “columns” and mobiles made from cracked car windscreens, we go next door to survey “Mostyn Drift” (2021), a vast neon drawing in space. The work’s leaping, hopping mass of lines can be distilled down to movements from Japanese Noh theatre in notational form. Suspended close to the floor under an intense blue sky visible through the roof, the piece looks ravishing — each neon tube bright white, with an inch or two of argon glowing blue, green or mauve at one end.

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Wyn Evans began his career as a film-maker, working with Derek Jarman on 'The Last of England' in the late 1980s © Ali Janka

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'Neon Forms (after Noh I)', now installed in the Mostyn gallery © Jason Roberts

Next day, the columns of light and cracked-windscreen mobiles are ready for viewing. With a nod to Marcel Duchamp's "The Large Glass" (1915-23), which broke in transit following its first exhibition, the mobiles rotate gently in response to the movement of people and currents of air in the gallery, unleashing myriad reflections and distortions. In Wyn Evans's work, aesthetics serves a purpose: arrested by these beguiling pieces, you pause and reassess what your eyes and ears are "telling" you.

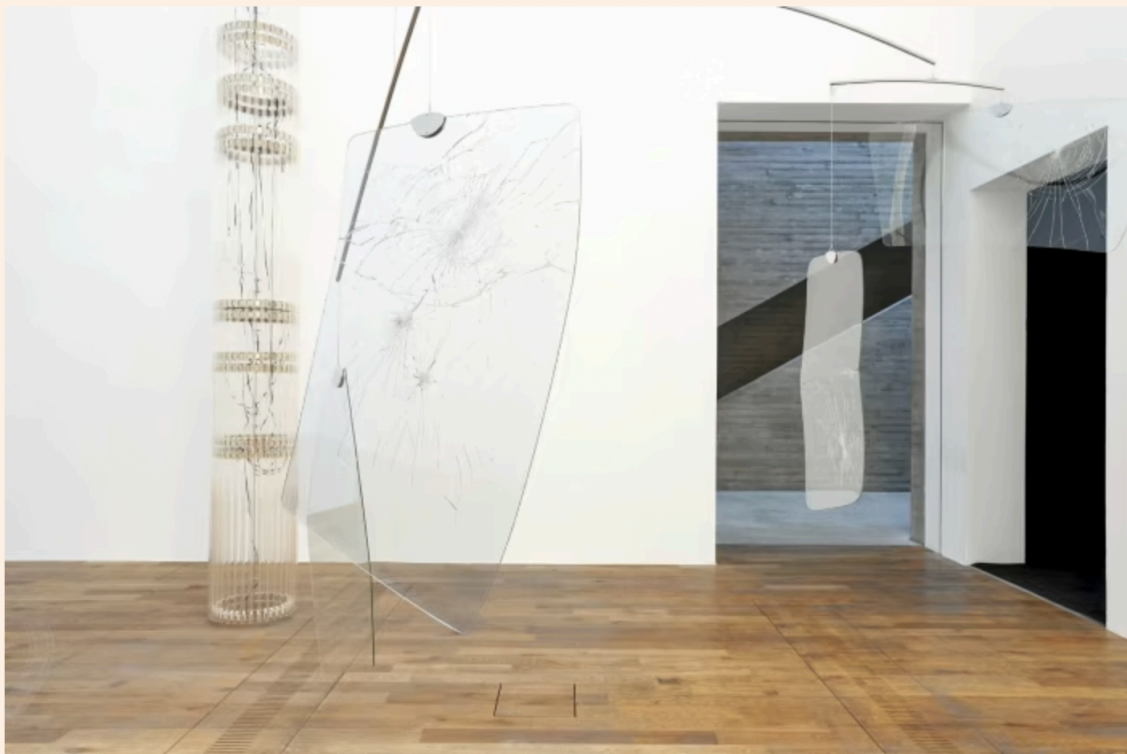
A native Welsh speaker, Wyn Evans was born in Llanelli, Wales, in 1958. He was a boy soprano in the chapel choir. His mother played the organ; his father was a photographer and painter. By the age of 11 he had persuaded his local library to subscribe to *Flash Art* (in Italian) and *Heute Kunst* (in German). "I couldn't speak either German or Italian but, by the age of 14, I knew rather a lot about contemporary art," he says. On a school trip to Bristol, while other kids went to the zoo, he caught an early Richard Long exhibition at the Arnolfini gallery.

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Wyn Evans uses everyday materials in unexpected ways © Rob Battersby

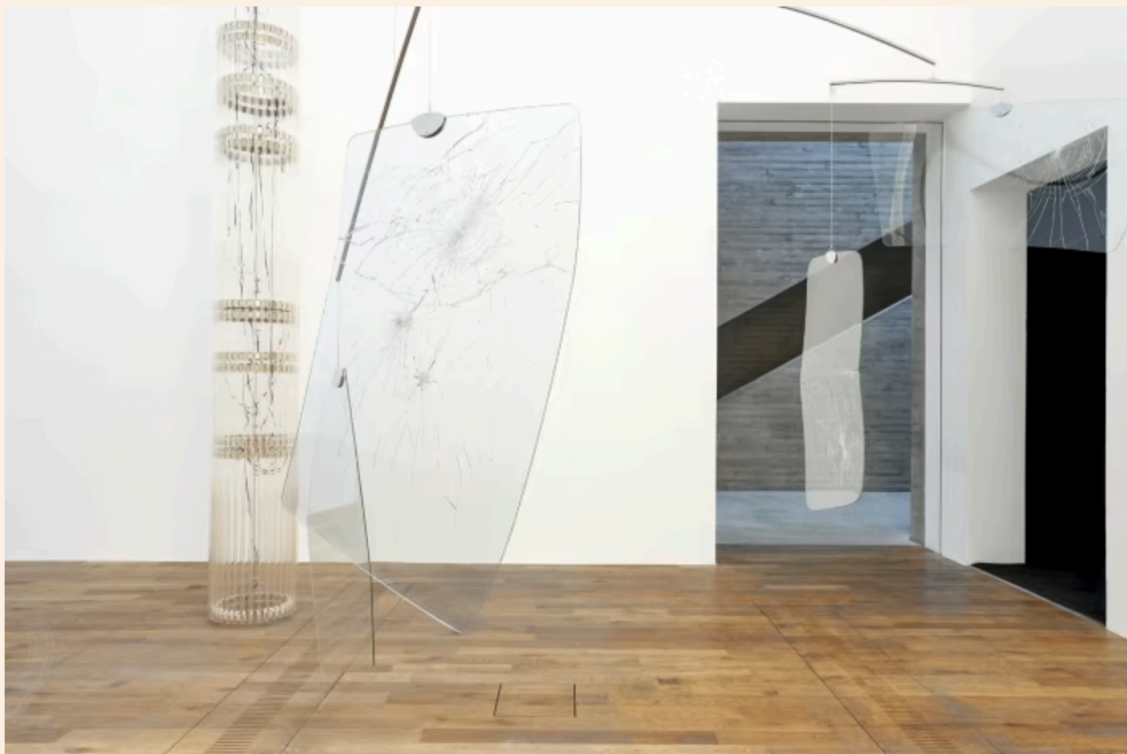
At the exhibition welcome, Wyn Evans spoke of his days as a student at Saint Martin's School of Art. In the late 1960s, Long and Gilbert & George had pioneered a new wave of conceptual art at the college, yet by the time Wyn Evans arrived in 1977, aspiring conceptualists remained little understood. He was thrown out after his first year for not doing any work, but cheekily fought back, saying, "Not making work is my work!" He was readmitted and began to make experimental films, the first one riffing on the idea that beneath a phrenologist's model of a head, there might be a body concealed under the table.

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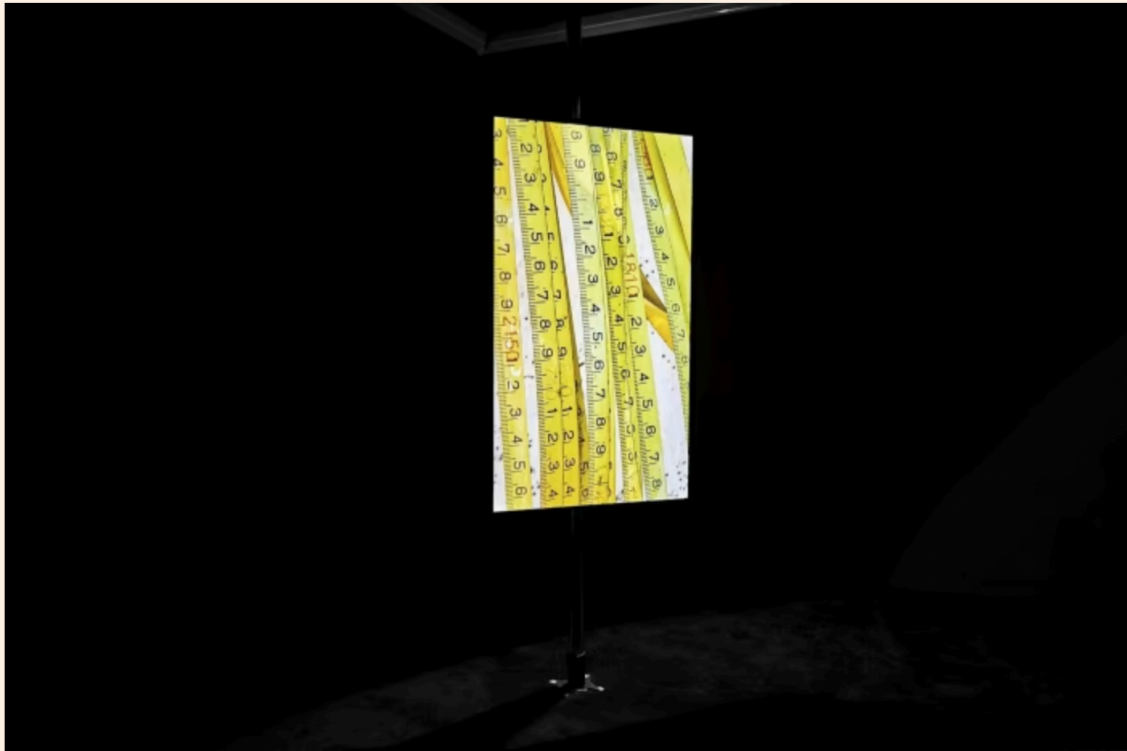
Wyn Evans's explanations of his work (and his conversation) range easily across philosophy, literature, art history and experimental music, without a hint of pretension. Digression, full of humour and surreal allusion, is part of the format: our discussion of neon prompts a reflection on the American poet Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*: one of them laments the weakness of neon signs in winter sunlight. Later he wonders: if you can be apolitical can you be a-spatial? He jumps from this to literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's favourite meditation, imagining that you have no head. "Maybe being a-spatial is a bit like you have no head," he says.

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'No realm of thought ... variations after "Whose sleeves"' © Rob Battersby

It was only on the train back to London that I noticed the exhibition's puzzling title:) (. If I hadn't seen the show, and heard the artist speak, I would have found it mystifying. But in the ellipsis, I saw Wyn Evans's sense of his work as a single career-long conceptual "artwork", steadily inching forward, but always ready to head somewhere new. In the outward-looking, back-to-back parentheses, I saw the artist's refusal to be neatly interpreted. He struggles with titles, he admits. "You are nailed to a cross and there will always be someone who goes, 'What did you mean by ...?'"

Interpretation, meaning, translation: language is a perennial problem. ("Music has always felt more natural than language," he says.) His explorations of the evocative potential of light and sound might be seen as a quest to take us back to a pre-linguistic realm, before the world knocked our senses into line.

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Such explorations lead him into obscure corners of knowledge. Does it worry him if his learned references to complex geometry or theories of Noh theatre might go over our heads? It did once, he suggests, but he's attempting "to loosen up", even if he's not yet entirely ready to let the work speak for itself. And the simple pleasures of his art in situ clearly matter as much to him as the erudition behind it. I say that I love the argon. "That's so good, isn't it?" he responds. "I'm really proud of that. And if somebody else can see that I'm thrilled."

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