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Date	May 31 st , 2025	Author	Stephanie Bunbury
Event	...in light of the visible – MCA Australia	Artist	Cerith Wyn Evans
Web address	https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/if-it-was-up-to-this-artist-all-his-creations-would-be-untitled-20250527-p5m2ia.html		



The Sydney Morning Herald

Visual art

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If it was up to this artist, all his creations would be Untitled

By Stephanie Bunbury

MAY 31, 2025

Very often, says Cerith Wyn Evans, exhibitions of his work – whether that work is a box of photographs or the huge, spiky webs of neon lights he is showing in Sydney – are shaped principally by the spaces where they are shown. At the Museum of Contemporary Art, he is particularly excited by the prospect of opening all the windows onto Circular Quay.

Light will pour in, along with the sounds of the harbour. “We are opening up the entire façade!” he enthuses. “And because it is right on the quay, there are thousands of tourists walking up and down, boats coming and going, really a hustle and bustle outside which is extremely vital – and very unlike a museum.”

[Wyn Evans](#), 67, has represented Wales at the Venice Biennale, exhibited all over the world and is represented by galleries in seven cities, but this is [his first solo show in Australia](#). His earliest works were in experimental film; he says he regarded them as essentially sculptures, but he has always played fast and loose with disciplinary categories.

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He also has a magpie's eye for influences and quotations. Having grown up speaking Welsh, he is particularly interested in forms of language reflecting specialist uses, from Morse code to dance notation, which frequently appear in his work. But he is seemingly curious about almost everything. In a single sentence, he touches on Chinese medicine, yoga, mathematics and optics. "What I'm attempting to do is run all of that through a scrambling mill," he says. "If we somehow feed them all through each other, we arrive at something that is a kind of form."

This exhibition, mostly drawn from his own collection, focuses on his big neon works made over the last 10 years. Wyn Evans isn't worried about the neon being drained by all that daylight. "It lessens the impact, which is what I'm looking for. We're not making a sci-fi movie with futuristic neons," he says. "It's about looking at light. To me, there is nothing more beautiful than seeing a neon in blazing white sunshine. It's so compromised it becomes almost tender: it becomes more poetic, becomes broken somehow as a force for consumerism or legibility."

I'm in want of a better word to overcome latent blockages, that broad dissatisfaction that I'm unable to express what I want to say.

The first neon signs, he says, were made as advertising. "But artists have been working with neon since the 1930s. Then, with pop art and conceptualism, a lot of artists tried to popularise their materials so they were not working with bronze or marble, expensive rare materials, in order to somehow attach that value to the sculpted object."

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Wyn Evans himself worked initially in film, he has said elsewhere, because it provided an escape route from that hierarchy of materials. In recent times, he has been making mobiles with broken car windows from wrecking yards: materials that cost nothing, but that allude both to the cracked *The Large Glass* by Marcel Duchamp – one of his artistic beacons – and to the daily disaster of the smashed mobile phone, a real-world reference. “We’re all dealing with these sorts of screens; we’re all confronting this the entire time.”



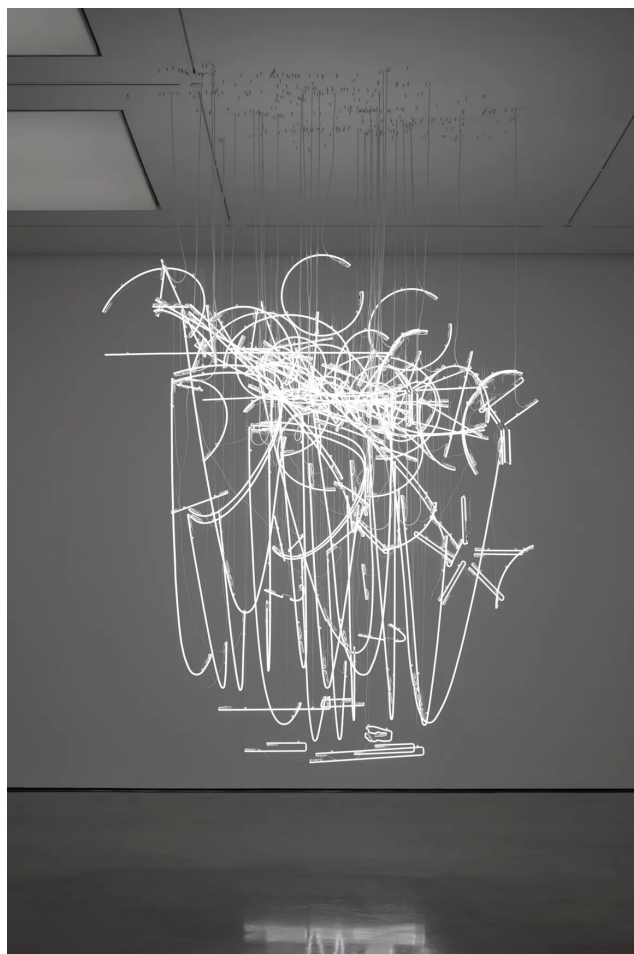
Cerith Wyn Evans' Borrowed Light Through Metz at the Centre Pompidou. LEWIS RONALD

There are plenty of scrambled signifiers everywhere in the exhibition, in fact, with Noh theatre as a dominant theme. Wyn Evans first went to Japan 37 years ago as a visiting professor at Kyushu University in the country's subtropical south, a tough area known for its mining and steel industries – Richard Serra, he says, has his works cast in its huge foundries – as well as palm trees and spectacularly fresh sushi. He loved it. “It became urgent to me that whatever I did on this trip to Japan, I got to secure my next trip. And it's been like this ever since. I spend two months a year there.”

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During that time, he might see three Noh performances a week. For an experimental artist, Noh's prescribed rhythms and gestures are surely an ostensibly incongruous passion? "It's not, actually," he says. "The aleatory aspects of Noh are vast. Nothing is rehearsed. There are no lighting cues. It's a bit like a marathon; there is an elasticity to it."

He glows as he recounts a visit to a Noh school where the master's 106-year-old mother not only made sweets but danced for the visitors. "She's extraordinary, about this tall" – very small – "bent over double, you have to fight off the tears, you know." It should be added that today, as usual, he is wearing Japanese traditional dress: a snow-white kimono and trousers. Old ladies in the supermarket often ask him about it, he says. "I say it's my workwear."



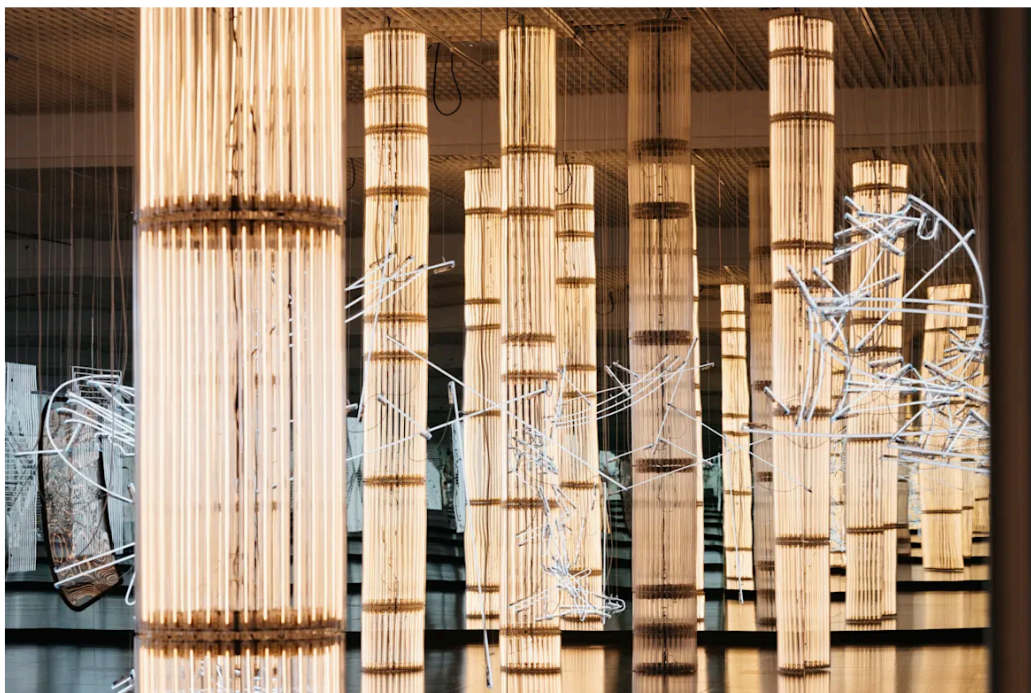
Cerith Wyn Evans' Neon Forms (after Noh I), 2015. WHITE CUBE (GEORGE DARRELL)

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The titles of his work point towards this source of inspiration, among others, but the works themselves don't spell it out; if someone looks up Noh on the internet and ends up watching a snippet of this ancient, precise and poetic blend of theatre and dance, that would be "absolutely great". If not, fine.

"I don't think Cerith is a didactic artist in the slightest," says curator Lara Strongman. "I don't think he's thinking this is my meaning and here you are. I think he's the opposite of that, that he argues for slippage, for mutability, for the different possibilities coming in from different people, much as the work manifests the idea of fragments of things taken from here and there."

Everything slants Japanese, however, in the exhibition's design. Stepping stones like those found in traditional gardens lead the viewer, providing different angles and points of view on the works. "You have to position yourself here, then there, to take another step," says Strongman. "It's a way of really grounding yourself, this sense of thinking about your own passage through time and space as you walk."



Installation view of Borrowed Light Through Metz. LEWIS RONALD

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Following the path, the works loom in your way. “So you have to stop and think about them. You get a real sense of your own bodily presence; you can see through the works to other works and your view is changing the whole time. You’re aware of yourself in a way we often aren’t, because we’re mediating our lives through a tiny screen.” The materials may be obviously industrial but, she says, “it’s the most analogue exhibition I’ve ever worked on. It’s a show that asks you to spend some human time with it.”

Words, whether it be a wall full of Marcel Proust’s work rendered in Japanese or one of his elaborately flourished titles, are ostensibly central to this work. Wyn Evans particularly loves a homonym; one show he did in Britain was called *Cite/Sight/Site*. “They sound the same, but you can prise them open to find a myriad of associations and construct this little model where you create these interstitial spaces between” – he fishes for two sufficiently disparate elements – “a quote from Elizabeth Bishop and the plan of the Alhambra.”

He says he thinks of language and communication as distinct materials, on a par with light, air and time, even suggesting as a title for this piece “For want of a better word” to represent the way he chews over them. “I’m forever, in a sense, converting thoughts into language, but I’m in want of a better word to overcome latent blockages, that broad dissatisfaction that I’m unable to express what I want to say.”

It is thus not entirely surprising when he says he would prefer not to have any titles at all. “Whatever doesn’t embarrass me kind of gets through but, if it were up to me, I would call everything Untitled.” He feels no obligation to explain himself. “They can buy you that red herring space in order to come in with something from underneath,” he says. “But there is a certain resistance in the work also. I don’t lose sleep over people not understanding it. Children are perfectly happy running around, just enjoying the awe of it. And I try not to be judgmental or to take it personally if people don’t like it. Why should I play by someone else’s rules? I’m not a politician, after all. I’m an artist.”

***Cerith Wyn Evans in light of the visible* is at the Museum of Contemporary Art from June 6 to October 19.**