

The 57th Venice Biennale is now open. *Martin Coomer* profiles the three artists representing the UK, highlights where to see their work closer to home, and looks back over the past 10 years of the UK in Venice



BRITAIN IN VENICE

THE BRITISH PAVILION: PHYLLIDA BARLOW

Phyllida Barlow has been one of Britain's best sculptors for decades. That Britain – or the custodians of its museums and major art prizes, at least – has been relatively slow to cotton on to this fact is possibly because the artist spent much of her career under the radar as a teacher. Now in her seventies, Barlow is credited with influencing a younger generation who studied under her at the Slade School of Fine Art, including Rachel Whiteread and Angela de la Cruz. Following an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in 2010, though, Barlow's own work has begun to receive its due. 'Dock', her Tate Britain Duveen Commission in 2014, revealed the scope of her talent, while, in 2016, Barlow was one of four artists shortlisted for the inaugural Hepworth Prize for Sculpture, a biennial £30,000 award recognising a British sculptor's body of work.

Which isn't to suggest that Barlow has become stuffy or grand with belated success. While necessity (including a lack of space or finance) once demanded that she use relatively inexpensive materials such as offcuts of wood, chicken wire, cardboard, foam and cloth to make her work, often disposing of or recycling them after she had completed each piece, her joyfully thrifty aesthetic has been retained and, indeed, expanded upon as the work has grown in scale. Endearingly ramshackle affairs,

Barlow's sculptures and installations don't stand demurely in a gallery space. They rise into teetering towers, or are suspended or upended so that you can see underneath them, sometimes blocking your path and occasionally appearing to throw the entire architecture of the space off balance. 'Dock', which from certain angles resembled a precarious arrangement of shipping containers, from others an improbable rollercoaster, was both the playful antithesis of the austere, neoclassical Duveen Galleries and an object lesson in how a large-scale sculpture might reveal aspects of itself slowly as the viewer walked around, under and through it.

Like the Duveen Galleries, the British Pavilion in Venice's Giardini is a 19th-century neoclassical building asking to be transformed by Barlow's 'gendered' (as she puts) anti-monumentality, in a work titled *folly*, a British Council commission. For those who aren't Venice-bound, Barlow's major sculpture *untitled: upturnedhouse, 2* (2012) has been brought together with other works in 'ARTIST ROOMS: Phyllida Barlow' at Turner Contemporary, Margate, to 24 September. turnercontemporary.org, free to all.

● The catalogue for Phyllida Barlow's *folly* has been made possible with Art Fund support. britishcouncil.org/venicebiennale



Left and top: Phyllida Barlow, *folly*, installation view, British Pavilion, Venice, 2017; above: Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: upturnedhouse, 2*, 2012

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Right: James Richards, *Migratory motor complex*, six-channel audio installation, 2017. Part of 'Music for the gift', commissioned by Wales in Venice for the 57th Venice Biennale; facing page: James Richards, *Rosebud*, installation view, Frozen Lakes, Artists Space, New York, 2013



MIGRATORY MOTOR COMPLEX. © JAMES RICHARDS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RODGO, LONDON. PHOTO BY JAMIE WOODLEY. ROSEBUD. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RODGO, LONDON.

REPRESENTING WALES: JAMES RICHARDS

A 2014 Turner Prize nominee and winner of the 2012 Film London Jarman Award, James Richards brings a poet's sensitivity to disparate source material. Since graduating from Chelsea College of Art & Design in 2006, the Cardiff-born, Berlin-based artist has developed a singularly sensual way of splicing together existing moving images, often plundering YouTube and using snippets of film, sometimes discovered on VHS tapes sourced from charity shops, with his own self-shot footage. He is perhaps best known for his film *Rosebud* (which was shown as part of the 2013 Venice Biennale exhibition 'The Encyclopaedic Palace') – a meditation on desire, looking and voyeurism based on censored images (including Robert Mapplethorpe photographs) found in books in a Tokyo library. More recently, Richards has featured in 'British Art Show 8' (which toured UK cities between October 2015 and January 2017, and also included Rachel Maclean), where he

presented the film *Raking Light* (2014). Taking its name from the conservation method of shining a strong light directly across the surface of a painting to highlight details or irregularities, the film, again, drew attention to the act of looking while seeming specifically to refer to the artist's self-reflexive process. Music, similarly spliced, is another key facet of his work. In 2015 he created a new sound work that functioned as an immersive environment for the lone hang of Francis Bacon's *Study for a Portrait* (1953) as part of the Whitechapel Gallery's V-A-C series in the same year. And, in his 2016 solo exhibition 'Requests and Antisongs' at the ICA in London, overlapping samples and other musical parts drawn from various genres were repeated and reworked into different forms across films that included excerpts from newscasts, medical documentaries and erotica.

Other hallmarks of Richards' art include an acute sense of how we might navigate and find meaning

amid the flow of contemporary communication and chaos of mass media. Unlike that of Rachel Maclean, the overall effect of his work tends to be meditative rather than manic. His is an art of hints and suggestions, in which a deferral of meaning and a preference for the elliptical over the linear encourages the viewer to draw their own conclusions.

All of which should make for a captivating experience when his commission 'Music for the gift' is visited in Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, a former convent situated midway between the main Biennale Giardini and Arsenale sites, one of the more atmospheric of the Biennale venues. 'Music for the gift' shows at Chapter Cardiff, June 2018 to September 2018 and Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, January 2019 to February 2019, both with Art Fund support. chapter.org; collectivegallery.net

● 57th Venice Biennale, Giardini and Arsenale, Venice, to 26 November. labiennale.org

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