

Female curators throw new light on women's work

Eva Hesse's vibrant sculptures are complemented by works from Tacita Dean and the Wilson sisters



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Of the many shows that make this a golden year for contemporary art at the Edinburgh festival, one stands out as momentous: 50 sculptures, some never shown in public before, by American artist Eva Hesse (Studiowork, Fruitmarket Gallery, until 25 October).

When the *New York Times* famously announced that Hesse was "at the outset of a brilliant career" in 1970, its prediction was shockingly mistaken. Not because she had already established herself as a great sculptor by the age of 34, but because she had recently died of cancer.

This anecdote is bitter proof for those who still insist upon Hesse as the Sylvia Plath of art: a sufferer from the Nazis, her mother a suicide, her marriage ending in desertion just before the tumour was discovered. But the life is entirely divisible from the art, as these marvellous creations testify. Every little thing here, from the "painting" made of washers to the ribboning scroll of mesh that holds itself nonchalantly aloft, is vivacious, dynamic, surprising, droll – by all accounts, like the artist herself.

What looks like a sleeve of corrugated bone holds a glowing light within it, an inviting, red-gold interior into which one might imagine crawling, all achieved with nothing but latex-dipped cheesecloth and light. A wick spirals out of a wax pot, trying to escape yet forever umbilically connected.

Two black balloons dangle from the wall, a deflated sphere and a pendulous sausage dog knocking about, an odd couple tied together. The effect is touching and inexplicably humorous though it has something to do with opposites, little and large, Laurel and Hardy, and the relationship between

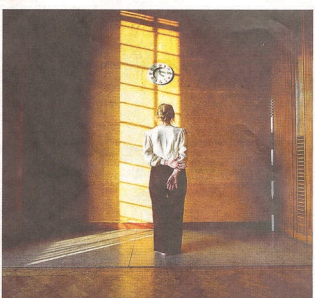
them; lightsome, they are cast in heavy bronze.

Many of these works, untouched since her death, come straight from Hesse's studio. A length of cheesecloth folded over and dipped in latex dangles from the ceiling like some magnificent shroud, running all the way from parchment to honey in colour and texture. A flotilla of iridescent vessels, apparently aged by time and tide, is formed in cheap tissue. Hesse's works have turned silver and gold with the years. What hasn't changed is the sense of her hands manipulating the materials: the maker's mark in the work.

To speak of these sub-objects (as they are described in the superb catalogue) as vessels is to miss out all sorts of other nuances of shape. And that's the joy of it – Hesse hits just beyond verbalisation. It is part of her gift to evade analogy and association and make things so eccentric and awkward they look like nothing else, or nothing else before them. For sculptors have been trying to emulate Hesse ever since.

That this show originates in Scotland is a coup for Fiona Bradley's Fruitmarket Gallery, and women have a tremendous presence in Edinburgh this year. Briony Fer curates Hesse, Patricia Fisher presents new work by Jane and Louise Wilson at Talbot Rice, and Australian curator Juliana Engberg has a multi-venue show collectively known as *The Enlightenment* (Dean Gallery and other venues, until 27 September).

The title might be irrelevant were it not that some of the works, notably Joseph Kosuth's philosophical inscriptions in glowing white neon, all synaptic spark and cross-connection, do shed light on ideas. Look out for *Joshua Mosley's* imaginary screen encounter between Rousseau and Pascal, two animated clay figures walking through a digitised forest, arguing faith over reason. If that sounds like a comic premise, sure enough, the film ends with a punchline so winning it would be invidious



Johanna ter Steege in the Wilsons' *Unfolding the Aryan Papers*. BFI London/Dave Morgan

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to reveal, except that it involves a dog piquantly nicknamed Dread.

But the heart of *The Enlightenment* is *Presentation Sisters*, Tacita Dean's enthralling film of nuns in a Cork convent, their way of life so archaic and still that an electric bell fairly startles you into modern times. Tea leaves spooned into the pot, scones baked, towels smoothed, geraniums pruned, over and again to the gentle music of their voices. Living lives of devoted labour, the sisters are as industrious as bees and their grace is evident throughout, from their quiet but worldly humour to the arthritic hands of the oldest nun patiently dealing with the infuriating resistance of clinging film.

Dean watches this private world without intrusion or comment, but she keeps faith through the slow, rhythmic pace of her film. Shot on 16mm, light passes through the celluloid as shifflingly as the sunshine through the long, polished corridors of the convent, a way of life illuminated even as it passes away.

Something of the same commemorative spirit is behind *Jane and Louise Wilson's* best work to date (Talbot Rice Gallery, until 26 September), a video installation endlessly mirrored on either side, fittingly for a narrative without resolution.

Two timescales are united in a single woman, the beautiful Dutch actress Johanna ter Steege, hired by Stanley Kubrick to play the main role in *The Aryan Papers*. The movie told the story of a Polish Jew who took on the identity of a Catholic to save her family – or it would have if Kubrick had not cancelled the project, denying ter Steege the role of a lifetime.

By interleaving Kubrick's stills and rushes with their own footage of ter Steege in the present miming her younger self, the Wilsons have effectively given her back the role by creating an imaginary film. It is a most complex and subtle layering, quite apart from its acute observation of Kubrick's obsessive methods, and a fine meditation on whether we can ever truly re-enter our former selves.

I wish there were space to say more about *John McCracken's* show at Inverleith House (until 11 October), but its shining simplicity will suffice. The veteran American sculptor has been working on the same idea since the 60s: oblongs and planks of gleaming lacquer over fibreglass that effectively find forms for colour. Inky black columns, yellow pillars, scarlet planes – light moves across them at different speeds, inflecting their hue. A recent work here gets a whole range of blues from cerulean to cobalt into its surface just by being more blockishly rectangular. You get what you get, as McCracken says, and it is clear, uplifting and radiant.

Eva Hesse: Studiowork transfers to Camden Arts Centre, London NW3, 11 December-17 March