THE OBSERVER



Art Festival

Thursday 13 August 2026

Edinburgh Art Festival highlights: Wendy McMurdo's vanishing acts and Eva Rothschild at her best

The UK's largest visual arts festival is a loose and unpredictable collection of events – this year held together by eminent female artists making riveting work in every medium



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In Edinburgh now, light sifts through the window of Gwen John's best-loved painting of that Paris attic where her wicker chair sits waiting for ever. Henry Raeburn's famous Rev Walker glides next to a fellow skater flying high above the ice in Wendy McMurdo's brilliant shot of the rink.

A rope of twisted hoodies rises to the ceiling (or does it descend?) in Eva Rothschild's ingenious sculpture *Houdini*. The American artist John Baldessari appears against dark velvet, like a Holbein, in Catherine Opie's show of portrait photographs and autumn begins to settle over Orkney in Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's marvellous painting, refined almost to abstraction, in the living landscape of the Royal Botanic Gardens.

Women lead this year's Edinburgh Art Festival (EAF) in every medium. A trio of mid-career sculptors fill the big contemporary galleries. Rothschild, at Fruitmarket, is all spry wit and inquiry, constantly asking what would happen if she put this old football with that broken china, these lovers' padlocks with that ring of steel (the answer, in this case, is something like a beautiful wreath of laurel).

Rothschild has a tower of brightly coloured mattresses balanced in a ziggurat above a stone, a wonderful retort to *The Princess and the Pea* since nobody, let alone the supposedly oversensitive girl, could ever reach the top. Her column of footballs is endless, like a Brâncuși, yet deflated. An illegible mass of rubber lines, weaving in and out of a grid, is wittily titled *Shorthand*.

Best of all is the tangle of curving rebar rods, dangling like a huge net from a hook by the entrance. Threaded among them are brightly painted cast cylinders – a characteristic marriage of industrial materials and old-fashioned craft. Follow the cylinders and you soon start to see a fishing net teeming with shining salmon. This is Rothschild's best exhibition yet.

Anne Hardy, at Talbot Rice, has used the entirety of the Georgian galleries of Edinburgh University to create a pre- and post-apocalyptic landscape. Neon lights come and go in the irregular patterns that give the show its open-hearted title, *Feelings*. Hooded figures kneel on the ground in attitudes of supplication. Distortion crackles and hums.

Here and there Hardy has a condensed sonnet of a work: two sticks gently laid together on the ground, entitled *Lovers*; two feet – one rusting, the other shackled in irons – on top of a broken column, invoking more than one historic past. But the effort to create a single unified atmosphere eventually falters, with too many nameless objects dispersed around this large and unconvincing dystopia.

At Collective Gallery on Calton Hill, Edinburgh spreading below you as far as Arthur's Seat to the east and away down to the sea, the eminent Scottish artist Katie Paterson has somehow conjured both in an enthralling installation titled *Afterlife*. Sweeps of seashore, immaculately created out of pale sanded wood, undulate across the gallery. Here and there, tiny amulets call the eye like starfish in rockpools. Two kissing birds' beaks, an ear of Olmec maize, a boggle-eyed demon or the entire solar system encapsulated in a miniature bronze ring – these talismans are made to be held in the hand, like prayers, or to carry in a pocket through life for survival.

Almost 200, representing every civilisation, from Mesopotamian to Viking, pre-Columbian, Indian and ancient Greek, have been recreated by Paterson in newly endangered materials. A little piece of old coral, the rock strata beneath a melting glacier, carbon particles from industrial manufacturing, producing a dense, black amulet of Nephthys, Egyptian goddess of the night: each has its own additional significance. This is not just a display of objects, as they might be shown in a museum, but a whole new form of prayer in which every riveting object now acquires a double meaning.

McMurdo works by subtraction. Her photographs at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery show figures without their props: the skater without the partner who holds her aloft, the child before an invisible computer, hands poised over the keyboard McMurdo has digitally removed.

These images are especially poignant when the scene looks quite normal: children in the local museum, lying before vitrines of stuffed creatures, minus their iPads. McMurdo uses technology in reverse, as well, to a child dressed as a ghost hovering eerily on a New Town doorstep at Halloween. Most touching of all are the schoolchildren got up as robots in tinfoil and painted boxes: the innocent age before an AI world.

In festival terminology, these exhibitions are all known as partner shows. And where would EAF be without them? It is still hard to discern what this loose confederation of ephemeral events – block parties in Craigmillar, queer images in graveyards – and partner exhibitions is for, still less for whom: citizens or passing visitors? This year's main museum exhibitions include three transferring from down south – John and Opie at Modern One and Two, *The Edwardians: Age of Elegance* transferring from the King's Gallery in London to Holyrood.

But this year has one last heroine: Jean Watson (1877-1974), who helped buy so much Scottish art for Edinburgh. Part of the magnificent collection acquired through her generosity is currently on show at the City Art Centre: JD Fergusson, Joan Eardley, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Alison Watt, and – full disclosure, to my joy and grief – a large painting by my own father, James Cumming; the miniature landscapes of his mind and eye all united in a Hebridean tabletop.

Photograph by Keith Hunter