

UK

## Sean Edwards Spike Island *Bristol*

Sean Edwards' exhibition at Spike Island – his first major UK solo show in a public space – was named after the Maelfa shopping centre on the outskirts of Cardiff, close to where the young Abergavenny-based artist grew up, and where he undertook a residency in 2009. Like many other postwar building projects in Britain, neither Maelfa nor the neighbouring estate fulfilled its planners' hopes; the shopping centre was never fully finished, falling into decline even whilst in development. Borrowing from the writing of Robert Smithson, Edwards describes it as 'becoming a ruin' or 'a ruin in reverse'. Since its inception Maelfa has seemed somehow 'out of time'; proposals to demolish it have also been put on hold – it has always been in limbo.

Visible traces of the place recurred throughout the exhibition: a series of large-scale giclée prints pasted to the gallery wall captured grainy fragments of Maelfa's interior, detail degrading towards abstraction. In one corner, *Four Windows* (2010–11), a group of precariously propped wooden ovals, echoed the elliptical motif of Maelfa's shop unit windows; their visual simplicity belied the labour invested in their multi-layered construction. Edwards' practice of oblique referencing was extended in a large plywood structure, *The Reference* (2011): suspended from the ceiling, its meticulously filled and sanded curves referred to the roof of a former reference library (here inverted and scaled down 5:1). The artist skilfully inserted the architecture of one place into that of another; details from Maelfa's locality lured the viewer towards the awkward corners of Spike Island's notoriously challenging layout, its habitually underused or peripheral spaces activated through physical interventions or illuminating light. Central to the exhibition was a silent and slow-paced video in which the glide of a tracking camera navigates a line through the shopping centre's covered arcades, capturing the indeterminacy of its everyday life seen *through*, whilst also simultaneously reflected *back*, in the glass of shop-front windows (*Maelfa*, 2010). The slow flow of movement was disorientating, making it difficult to discern reflected shapes from

physical forms, or to locate the position of the camera in relation to what was being filmed.

It is tempting to view Edwards' treatment of this site in nostalgic terms, as a melancholy lamentation reflecting upon the failure of Utopian dreams, or a product of the artist's desire to reconnect with a place frequented in his youth. However, this privileges the contextual narratives surrounding Maelfa at the expense of other critical questions or concerns. The exhibition certainly extended Edwards' interest in ways of seeing (sculpturally), where an acute form of observation emerges through the practice of cutting or slicing through a space or structure, revealing what is beneath the surface by effectively sanding back the layers or by exposing a cross-section. Here, the track of the camera operates in a similar way to the sculptor taking a plane to wood, whereby skimming the surface of a place draws attention to unexpected grain and texture. *Winter Light Between* (2011) reflected a similarly sculptural imperative: two slide-projectors chart the passage of sunlight carving an illuminated shape across the curved surface of a wall.

Edwards' interest in the poetics of space is less concerned with the sensibility or quality of poetic representation, as in exploring how something physical can be constructed, de-constructed, re-constructed. Architectural theorist Jan Turnovský has noted that 'Poetics is related etymologically to the Greek term *poiein*, which means "to make". This is the root of the term poesis: fabrication, production.' He adds that, 'The maxim of the poetic is not to fix meaning but to offer a choice of possibilities – an indeterminate open-endedness.' 'Maelfa' confused singular interpretation by demanding to be read in multiple ways. Counter-intuitively, the *determinacy* of Edwards' reference to a place causes the work to fluctuate between the specific and generic, figurative and abstract, between formal and autobiographical concerns. To refer to the poetics of 'Maelfa' is thus not to describe its *style* (adjectivally, even pejoratively), but instead signals towards the critical nature of its open-endedness, the unresolved or unfixed relationship between its component parts.

Emma Cocker



Sean Edwards  
'Maelfa'  
2011  
Installation view