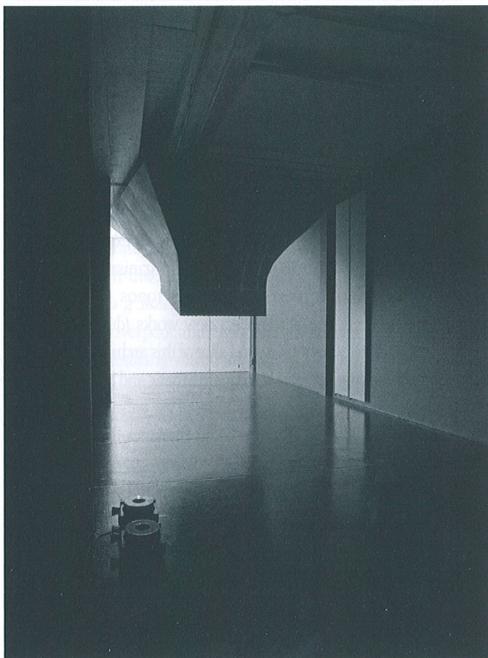

Sean Edwards: Maelfa

Spike Island Bristol 22 January to 10 April

'Town and country must be married,' wrote Ebenezer Howard in his 1902 treatise *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, 'and out of this joyous union will spring new hope, a new life, a new civilisation.' The utopian ideals of Howard and other architectural visionaries such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright have left an indelible mark on 20th-century urban planning. Yet, repeatedly, their promises of clean, modern and functional living environments transmuted into the sour reality of crumbling tower blocks, poor living conditions and intractable social problems. Sean Edwards, who grew up on a Cardiff council estate, knows well the disappointments and frustrations associated with failed municipal developments. For this exhibition he presents a series of works revolving around the Maelfa, a dilapidated shopping centre in Llanedeyrn, close to his childhood home. Opened in 1974, the Maelfa was intended to function as a thriving community hub, providing shops and amenities for the residents of the nearby high-rise flats. However, as with so many municipal buildings of its era, the centre was compromised by poor build quality, ungenerous proportions and other cost-cutting measures that contributed towards its inevitable decline. Though designated for demolition, the current economic climate has put redevelopment on hold, leaving the Maelfa hovering precariously in a state of semi-abandonment.

The Maelfa's bleakness is reflected in many of Edwards's drawings and works on paper, though it is felt most keenly in the four enormous giclée prints pasted directly onto Spike Island's capacious walls. Selected from hundreds of photographs taken during the artist's 2009 residency at the Maelfa, these grainy black and white images – which appear to have been degraded by a photocopier –



present overlooked fragments and details. In *Tiles*, 2011, a corner of a doorway is just visible, while in *Note*, 2011, we see a portion of an ageing hand-written sign; elsewhere, high above us in *Daylight*, 2011, sunlight pours through a graffiti-daubed window. Whereas these works seem rather cold and detached, others introduce us to the autobiographical elements of Edwards's project. Take, for example, the photographic work *Tea at my Father's House (Paris One to Thirteen)*, 2011, which documents a second-hand furniture shop passed regularly by Edwards while visiting his father who still lives nearby. Running like a filmstrip along the length of one wall, this line of close-cropped images, taken as the bright afternoon sun struck the shop's window, disorient our gaze with their multiple reflections and off-kilter framing. Idiosyncratic arrangements of furniture and mismatched carpet mingle with reflections of the Maelfa's distinctive linoleum flooring, which, with its raised disc pattern, appears as a leitmotif throughout the exhibition. This patterned flooring belongs to the artist's earliest recollections and one senses a desire here to make concrete the diaphanous memories of his formative years.

A similar impulse ostensibly lies behind the sculptures *Four Windows*, 2010-11, and *The Reference*, 2011. The former comprises four oval MDF bands propped against the gallery wall, while in the latter a large plywood structure hangs incongruously from the ceiling. Hovering at the intersection of architecture and memory, these works are derived from structural details at the Maelfa, referencing respectively the unconventional windows in one of its shop units and the inverted roof of the former reference library where Edwards spent much of his adolescence.

The Maelfa's indeterminate status is evoked by the exhibition's centrepiece, an eponymous high-definition video shot on location in the covered arcade. Leading us on an oneiric journey through the Maelfa's gloomy interior, this large-scale projection reveals a mixture of empty and occupied units; a grocery, pharmacy and butcher's are all glimpsed along with an abandoned bakery and other ramshackle spaces that appear to have been vacant for years. Myriad reflections pervade the piece, creating a complex layered texture that, despite

appearing digitally manipulated, was carefully composed in real time. Gliding from left to right, the camera slowly tracks across the building's decaying surfaces, which bear the indexical marks of its relatively short history. Though Edwards nods to the smooth tracking shots of Max Ophüls, the subtle yet perceptible falter of his camera reminds us of his more modest budget and, by extension, that of the Maelfa itself. Nevertheless, this slightly home-made quality imbues the work with an idiosyncratic charm, reminding us of the artist's intimate relationship with the site. What could easily – and quite validly – have become a scathing critique is instead a very personal and touching study of decaying aspirations; a poignant meditation on the poetics of failure. ■

DAVID TRIGG is a writer and critic based in Bristol.

Lucy Clout: Physicalism, or near enough

Limoncello London 27 January to 5 March

It's Lucy Clout's teeth that seem to act as the cornerstones to her exhibition, 'Physicalism, or near enough', at Limoncello, though heads, shoulders, knees and toes also, arguably, make an appearance. The artist's sculptural work seems to encourage the viewer to anthropomorphise architecture and sculpture: to see or imagine the body in unlikely shapes and materials. It is the first work in the show that puts the viewer on this (fairly unsteady) interpretative path. A photograph of the artist is presented on a piece of card. In the image, she has hooked her fingers around the corners of her mouth and is using them to pull back the skin of her cheeks and bare her teeth. Underneath the image are three different samples of decorative fabric trimming, which seem to correspond to the picture. The top strip, some pale pink wavy elastic, picks up on the pink of the artist's gums, the second, with pearl-like decorations, connects to the teeth, and the third, golden trimming, might be the mustard jumper that she is wearing in the photo. Both elements in this work seem connected to notions of framing and display – the mouth and gums are a frame or dressing for the displayed teeth, while the trimmings are forms of framing or decoration for fabrics, and framing as a leitmotif is connected in this exhibition with line (which would hint at the subject of drawing). For embellishing the feet, there are four sets of Fimo sculptures, made to look like knots of shoelaces stapled to the wall – small scribbles of line – draped around the space, in childish fluorescent colours.

A rather shoddily made wooden sculpture, creating the barest frame of a box-like structure, runs in an L-shape around a corner in the gallery's interior. Constructed from thin strips of pine, this forms part of a work entitled *Bracket*, 2011, and what this structure seems to 'bracket' off are five pine trees of various sizes, trussed up in packages as though they are ready to be sold as Christmas trees. There is something reasonably human about the scale of the pine trees; bagged up and slimmed down, leaning wearily against the walls and one another. They are waiting, perhaps, for some weights: the baubles, trimmings and decorations that will bend their limb-like branches with joy. But they will be waiting a long time until next Christmas – they will be dry twigs by then, and only good for timber. Indeed, as a kind of compensation the wooden frame has some scant decoration: a few licks of violet paint and then two pairs of yellow hoop earrings on each end –

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