

# ArtReview



Siobhán Hapaska

Wael Shawky Art in Chiang Mai

# Siobhán Hapaska

How do works imbued with a complex mix of materiality, emotion, unease and resilience evolve over time? How much does the space in which they're created matter? *ArtReview* meets the London-based artist on a train to Eastbourne

by Helen Sumpter

Approaching Siobhán Hapaska's work *Intifada (shaking off)*, 2015–16, one's initial awareness of it is through the ears; a consistent roar like the gushing of a waterfall. Its installation at a seaside location, in Eastbourne's Towner Art Gallery (on England's South Coast), as part of the group show *Some Are Nights Others Stars* (2016), could be one reason for the association. When the work comes into view, it's apparent that it's not water but the combined rustling leaves of 11 young olive trees. It's the latest in a series of related installations by the artist using this particular species of tree. Each 18-year-old sapling has been uprooted, rotated to a horizontal position and suspended in the gallery by a crisscross of webbing bolted onto the walls and ceiling. Encasing the middle of each trunk is an electronic motor, the movement of which aggressively shakes the tree it's attached to. Beneath, a pile of soil, twigs and dead leaves slowly accumulates. Once the entrancement of the visual spectacle subsides, the sense of horror sinks in; living things torn out of their habitat, trussed up and subjected to a slow death by relentless violence, seven hours a day, six days a week. The work's title – the Arabic word *intifada* and its literal translation as 'shaking off' – describes the action but not its effect. At just over a month into the exhibition's two-month run, plenty of leaves, twigs and soil have fallen to the floor, but just as much is still clinging on. The resilience is as powerful as the violence. It's a complex emotional response that often results from the artist's work. In an artworld that still tends to favour an analytical over an emotional approach, it's precisely this focus on how a combination of forms and materials can make one feel as well as think that makes Hapaska's work stand out.

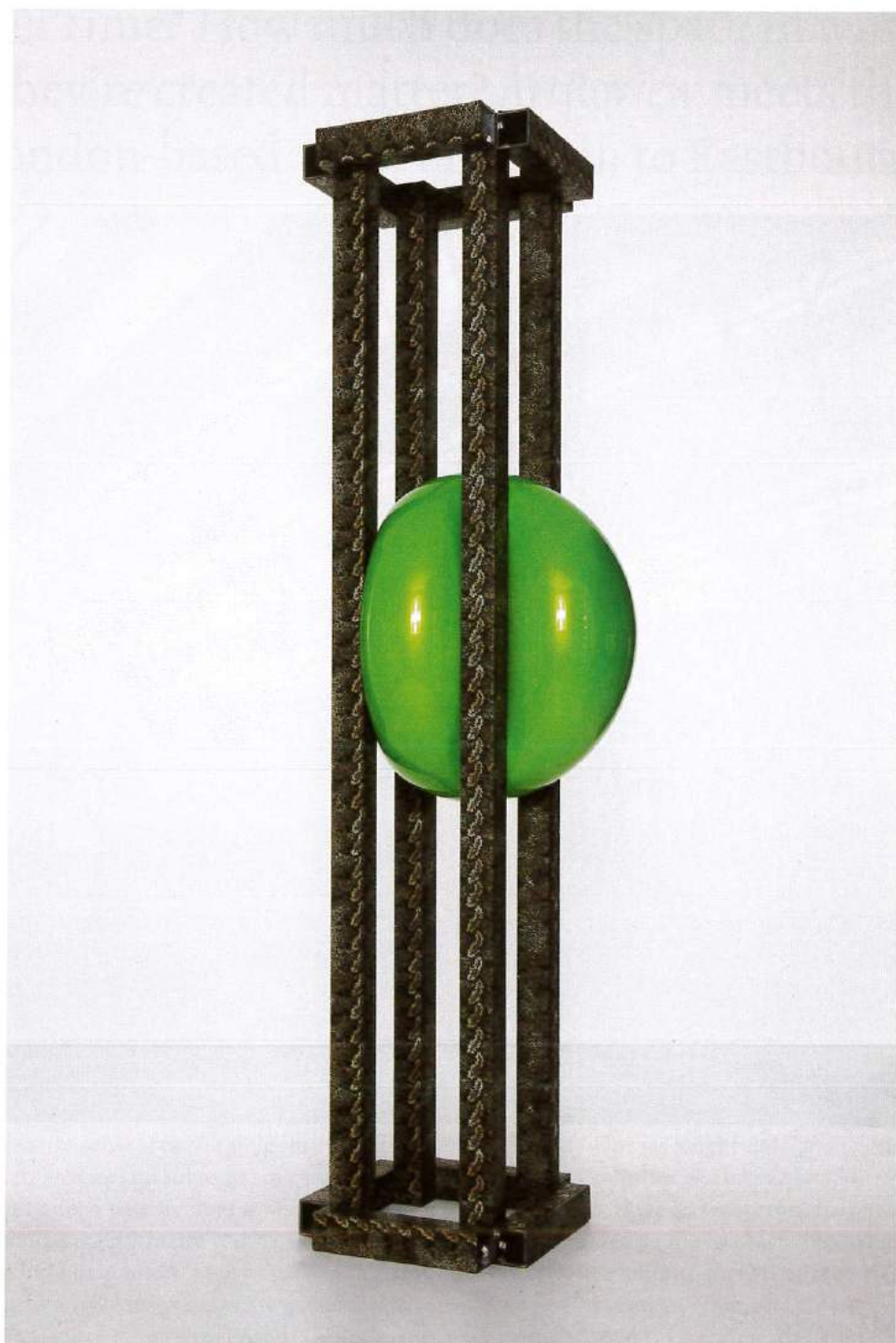
When I travel to Eastbourne with the artist, at the beginning of September, to see this piece, one of the subjects we talk about is her

current lack of a suitable London workspace. After renting the same southwest London studio for over 20 years, an 85sqm disused former Gas Board storage shed, which she renovated herself, she was recently forced to leave, as the site is being sold for redevelopment. It's an all-too-frequent experience for London's artists in recent years. Even though, as a temporary measure, she has negotiated the use of a much smaller space on the same site, into which all her studio contents have been crammed, it's a situation that has not only left her feeling like "a pharaoh buried alive, entombed in my own history", but one that will have a wider impact on her work.

Since the mid-1990s Hapaska has been predominantly making sculptures and installations, many of them largescale, and always constructs and installs as much as possible of her work herself. "I love the physical process," she says. "It dictates what I make, because I'm restricted by what my height and size allow me to do, but it's also a way of getting to know the work. It's a bit like travelling before the invention of aircraft; there was more time to contemplate the journey." For these reasons her studio has been integral to her career, the physical traces of which built up there over the years. She mentions that her sculpture *Here* (1995), an interactive 4-by-2m moulded fibreglass bed structure, created for her first major solo exhibition, at the ICA in London the same year, couldn't have been made anywhere else. "The outline of where the fibreglass was spraypainted was still there on the floor when I moved out," she says. In this work visitors are invited to lay on top of the bed's sheepskin blankets, strap themselves in and listen to babbling water while breathing through an oxygen mask. In doing so the individual's sensory focus is not on the object but is channelled back onto the awareness of their own presence. Slickness



*Intifada (shaking off)*, 2015–16, olive trees, aluminium,  
electronic motors, electrical cable, dimensions variable  
(installation view, Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne). Photo: Alison Bettles



*Repressed Apple*, 2015, aluminium, artificial snakeskin, fibreglass,  
two-pack acrylic paint, lacquer, 250 × 65 × 77 cm



and hardness combined with the soft and seductive: it's a work that at first appears inert but is accompanied by a provocation to engage that is anything but. Along with the olive trees, Hapaska often also uses real and artificial skin and fur as her materials, often from hunted and marginal animals, including deer, coyote and wolf; the animal, like the arboreal, evoking strength as well as violence, separation and loss.

Exhibited internationally, including at Venice in 2001, where she represented Ireland, and held in collections such as the Hirshhorn in Washington, Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Tate in London, Hapaska's meticulously constructed tactile sculptures and installations verge on being fetishistic without ever going there, but always create unease as much as they seduce. *Repressed Apple* (2015), for example, in which a bright green shiny ball bulges out from between the four fake-snakeskin-covered aluminium columns of a 3m-tall cage, is texturally and structurally sensual, while at the same time suggesting a captured and constricted object, lung or lifeform, having the life squeezed out of it. The artist's use of the organic combined with the synthetic is often picked up on by critics – objects and materials she has worked with include moss, wheat, aluminium, Jesmonite, magnets, coconuts, polyester, tumbleweed, leather, perlite, LED lights and acupuncture needles. But it's not this contrast that most interests the artist – as she points out, "All materials are natural unless they have come from outer space" – but the contrast between

certainty and absurdity and always coming back to the emotional responses that the work can elicit. "It's not what it is, it's how it makes you feel," she reaffirms.

Hapaska's cultural background is rich and complex. Born in Belfast in Northern Ireland in 1963 to an Irish mother and Parsi father (her surname is an amalgam of those of her parents – Harrison and Kapadia), the artist was brought up in the city at the height of the sectarian troubles, before coming to London to study art at Middlesex Polytechnic and then Goldsmiths. Graduating from Goldsmiths in 1992, a few years later than Damien Hirst and the other Young British

Artists (YBAs) who helped give the college its reputation, Hapaska was part of the expanding London art scene of the 1990s, but her work, multilayered and more nuanced, avoided being associated with the brasher values of the art and artists that fronted it.

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Similarly Hapaska's sculptures and installations may draw on a number of references – historical, personal, political – but always manages to elude being pinned down to a fixed explanation or meaning. In her use of olive trees, there is an acknowledgement by the artist of the socioeconomic value of the olive and its oil, its importance in cooking and healing, and the symbolic significance of political incidents of trees being ripped out and sold or deliberately damaged because of their worth, none of which is what the works are about. "The value lies in not knowing the meaning," she says. "I increasingly feel that the most powerful thing about art is its resistance

*Love*, 2016, concrete cloth, fibreglass, two-pack acrylic paint and lacquer, oak, 4 elements, 141 × 233 × 102 cm



to meaning anything. But it's also about holding it at a point where there are just enough crumbs to attract the pigeons but not too few to allow them to fly away." I'm struck by Hapaska's poetic use of metaphor and wonder whether she writes creatively. She doesn't but accompanies her reply with an unexpected anecdote about how her mother was once an introduction away from potentially becoming the wife of Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney – a lightness of humour that also inflects her work.

Sculptures usually begin with the idea or feeling rather than the material. It's been the opposite process for the artist, however, in a recent group of works made with canvas impregnated with concrete, a fabric that is malleable until set hard with water. It is used by both the military and relief agencies to create rapid shelters in times of conflict or natural disaster. Going into the studio with a roll of the material and no fixed idea, Hapaska twisted lengths of the cloth and combined it with fibreglass and wood to make sculptures that include *Love* (2016). In this work a pair of draped concrete shapes, suggestive of figures, are riveted together by a fibreglass form. Around the centre of this form runs a fluorescent red strip. There is both a push and a pull, a folding and a fighting, a tension and a connectedness to the sculpture that perfectly encapsulates the feeling of what being in a mature relationship, either in terms of duration or the ages of the couple, can be like. The function of the glowing line at the heart of this work is, in Hapaska's words, to "generate just enough brilliance between itself", a contradictory turn of phrase between

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describing one or two objects that seems entirely appropriate. Grey and hunched and looking somewhat weary and patched up, these notional individuals could equally be candidates for one of the shelters for which the concrete cloth was intended.

The artist has plans to make more of these works for a solo exhibition at Dublin's Kerlin Gallery in December. She also has work included in a forthcoming three-person show opening at London's Bloomberg Space at the end of September, which leads the conversation back to the difficulty of acquiring a new studio in which to continue making. "To find another large, affordable building now would probably mean moving out of London," she acknowledges, which she doesn't want to have to do. "It would feel like giving in to leave on those terms," she says. With a partner based in Rotterdam, where space is cheaper, moving her studio there and splitting her time between the two cities would, for her, be a more viable option. I keep thinking back to the ability of Hapaska's work to insert itself into the consciousness on so many levels, and that in any climate of uncertainty, work that can engage the eyes, the emotions and the intellect is more vital than ever. ar

*Work by Siobhán Hapaska is included in Some Are Nights Others Stars, at Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne, through 25 September. Hapaska will also be showing work in The Mobility of Facts, at Bloomberg Space, London, from 30 September to 17 December. Her solo exhibition at Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, runs from 17 December through 4 February*

*Here, 1995, fibreglass, opalescent paint, acrylic lacquer, lambswool, harness, piped water, oxygen, 100 x 400 x 186 cm*



The artist in her former London studio, 2016.  
Photo: Huub Wijnen. Courtesy the artist

*all images but above* Courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery, Dublin