

STEPHEN CHAMBERS

THE COURT OF REDONDA

The Heong Gallery
Downing College
Cambridge CB2 1DQ



24 February – 20 May 2018



Stephen Chambers, *The Court of Redonda* (detail), 2017, oil on panel, each: 48 x 39 cm © Stephen Chambers, photography by SCS. Images courtesy The Heong Gallery at Downing College, Cambridge.

'Chambers' work is strikingly relevant because he takes the familiar and puts it on a bigger scale. The personal and the universal are stories closely weaved and inextricably bound...'
Lucy Binnersley, *The London Magazine*

The Heong Gallery at Downing College, University of Cambridge, is delighted to announce the UK presentation of *The Court of Redonda* – a major solo exhibition by Stephen Chambers RA, following its highly acclaimed unveiling as a Collateral Event of the 2017 Venice Biennale.

The Court of Redonda is a vast collective portrait of an imaginary court of maverick and singular individuals. The installation of 101 paintings articulates the role played by artists in envisaging a world not how it is, but how it could be. Featuring subjects drawn from

different epochs and cultures and hung with reference to historic portrait collections, the court imagines a utopian society that celebrates the creative and idiosyncratic.

The Court of Redonda is inspired by a literary legend that has developed around a tiny, uninhabited island in the Caribbean Sea. Redonda was claimed in 1865 by a merchant trader who established an honorary monarchy that has been passed down to the present through a literary lineage. Collisions in fact and fiction about the island are described by the novelist Javier Marías, who was until recently a King of Redonda. Sparked by a 'mental collaboration' with Marías, who appointed many notable writers and artists to his imaginary court, Chambers has created a collective of individuals, where creativity is honoured over hereditary privilege.

Curated by Emma Hill, *The Court of Redonda* was made over a two-year period that coincided with Britain's referendum about leaving the European Union and touches upon themes of identity, heredity and nationalism.

As Rod Mengham describes it: *'The art of Stephen Chambers makes visible the patterns of meaning that activate the individual imagination from within and without; his patterns refer us to the stories uniting us as a group, even when they are stories of division and rivalry: stories about islands, and their relationship to bigger land masses....'*

Stephen Chambers was elected to the Royal Academy of Art, in London, in 2005 and was awarded an Honorary Fellowship from Downing College at the University of Cambridge, in 2016. *The Court of Redonda* was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2017 and followed solo exhibitions at the Royal Academy, London (2012) and the Pera Museum, Istanbul (2014).

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with essays by Emma Hill, Dr. Rod Mengham and Kathleen Soriano.

Says curator Emma Hill: *'The Court of Redonda is woven from a story about an uninhabitable place, which writers and artists have envisioned. It is a work about the collective human spirit. The expression of the necessity and freedom of creative imagination, for art's ability to reflect to us the moment we are living in and for an individual artist's statement to carry the weight of this, is at the heart of images Chambers presents us with in the faces of his imaginary courtiers.'*

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

About Stephen Chambers:

Stephen Chambers (b.1960, UK), who was elected a Royal Academician in 2005, graduated with a Masters from Chelsea College of Art, London in 1983. He has won many scholarships and awards, including a Rome scholarship, the Mark Rothko Memorial Trust Travelling Award, and from 1998-9 he was the Kettle's Yard/Downing College Cambridge Fellow. He was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by Downing College, University of Cambridge, in 2016. He has exhibited widely, with more than 40 solo presentations, including the Royal Academy of Arts, London and the Pera Museum, Istanbul.

His work is held in many international collections including Arts Council England; Deutsche Bank, London; Downing College, Cambridge; Government Art Collection, London; Metropolitan Museum, New York; Pera Museum, Istanbul; Victoria and Albert Museum, London. He has collaborated with Ashley Page and Orlando Gough on three contemporary dance productions for The Royal Ballet, London, and with poets – including Jacques Jouet – on a series of artists' books.

About Emma Hill:

Emma Hill (b.1962) studied English Language and Literature at St. Hilda's College Oxford. She was awarded the Eleanor Rooke Prize for English in 1981 and graduated with a BA Hons, Oxon in 1984. Since 1990 she has worked as a freelance curator and writer and has published over 20 artists' books under the EMH Arts imprint. She founded the Eagle Gallery, London in 1991 to promote the work of emerging artists, and has curated exhibitions for Aldeburgh Music, Almeida Opera, Gloucester Cathedral and Manhattan Lofts Co., amongst others. She has written catalogue texts for institutions including Guinness Hopstore, Dublin; Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; and Minorities Gallery, Colchester. She is a contributor to magazines including *Art Review*, *Interiors*, *Print Quarterly*, *RA Magazine* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

About the Court of Redonda:

'The legend is and should remain a pleasing and eccentric fairy tale; a piece of literary mythology to be taken with salt, romantic sighs, appropriate perplexity, some amusement, but with great seriousness. It is, after all, a fantasy ...' – Jon Wynne-Tyson discussing Redonda in 1981.

Redonda is a tiny, uninhabited island officially belonging to Antigua in the Eastern West Indies. It was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493, who claimed it for the Spanish crown and named the island Santa Maria la Redonda. In 1865, a Montserrat merchant trader named Matthew Dowdy Shiell claimed personal dominion over the 'Kingdom of Redonda', at the time a British possession. His son, Matthew Phipps Shiell (1865-1947), was crowned Felipe I on his 15th birthday.

Shiell the younger later moved to England and, finding recognition as a science fiction writer, popularised the legend of his kingship to the point of its veracity. Before his death in 1947, Shiell determined that rather than the Kingship be hereditary, it must be passed through literary lineage – to another published author. The poet John Gawsworth then assumed the title of Juan I. Gawsworth, in a semi-permanent state of bankruptcy, would bestow Redondan knighthoods in London pubs to whoever would pay for them. According to records, there have been four undisputed kings, and three disputed. Javier Marías, who has never used the title, is in the latter category.

About Javier Marías:

Javier Marías (b.1951) is a Spanish novelist, translator and columnist. Marías's novel, *Todas las almas* (All Souls), included a portrayal of the poet John Gawsworth, the third King of Redonda. Although the fate of this monarchy after the death of Gawsworth is contested, the portrayal by Marías so affected the then 'reigning' king, Jon Wynne-Tyson, that he abdicated and made Marías king in 1997, a title he held until 2012. This course of events was chronicled in his 'false novel', *Dark Back of Time*, which was inspired by the reception of *Todas las almas* by many people who, falsely according to Marías, believed they were the

source of characters in the book. Since becoming King of Redonda, Marías has begun a publishing imprint named Reino de Redonda (Kingdom of Redonda). He has conferred many titles on fellow writers, including William Boyd (Duke of Brazzaville); A.S. Byatt (Duchess of Morpho Eugenia); Francis Ford Coppola (Duke of Megalópolis); W.G. Sebald (Duke of Vértigo) and Jonathan Coe (Duke of Prunes). Marías has also created The Reino de Redonda Literary Prize, to be judged by the dukes and duchesses. In addition to the prize money, the winner receives a duchy. Past recipients have included Alice Munro (Duchess of Ontario); Umberto Eco (Duke of La Isla del Día de Antes); Ian McEwan (Duke of Perros Negros) and Ray Bradbury (Duke of Diente de León).

About The Heong Gallery:

The Heong Gallery at Downing College opened in February 2016 as a new gallery for exhibitions of modern and contemporary art. The Gallery was designed by Caruso St John Architects (winners of RIBA Stirling Prize 2016) and so named in gratitude for the generous benefaction of Alwyn Heong. It won a RIBA East Award in 2017. Previous exhibitions: *Generation Painting 1955-65: British Art from the Collection of Sir Alan Bowness* (2016); *Ai Weiwei: Cubes and Trees* (2016); *Portraits of Place: Works from Kettle's Yard & Richard Long* (2016-17); *When the Heavens Meet the Earth: Selected Works from Robert Devereux's Sina Jina Collection* (2017); *The Best of All Possible Worlds: Quentin Blake and The Folio Society* (2017); and *Dame Elisabeth Frink: Larger than Life* (2017-18).

EXHIBITION INFORMATION:

Address: The Heong Gallery, Downing College, Cambridge CB2 1DQ

Telephone: 01223 746300

Admission: Free

Website: www.heonggallery.com

Email: gallery@dow.cam.ac.uk

Opening hours:

Wednesdays 12pm – 8pm * Fridays 12pm – 5pm * Saturdays 10am – 6pm * Sundays 12pm – 5pm



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