

Art

Severed ears and tear-drinking butterflies: enter the strange world of Cécile B Evans

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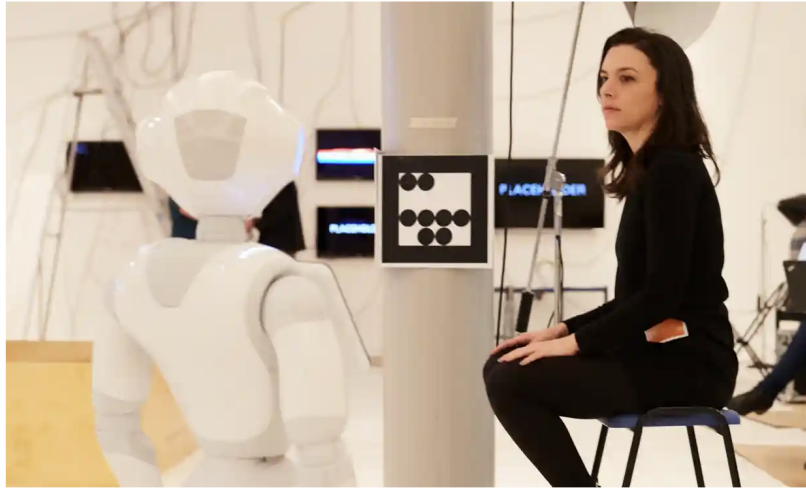
▲ Beware of the water ... What the Heart Wants Photograph: Cécile B Evans

She has reanimated Philip Seymour Hoffman, drenched gallery-goers and made teeth dance. Now the actor-turned-artist is throwing a big robot pool party

A few months ago, with the Berlin Biennale in full swing, Cécile B Evans got some worrying news about her installation, called *What the Heart Wants*. It wasn't that the audience didn't enjoy its dreamlike video, in which artificial intelligences agonise about their place in the world and bodiless ears moan about email. No, the problem was that they were coming away drenched.

"It was installed in a room that was flooded to about 35cm," Evans says, "with a T-shaped platform people would walk down. And they kept falling in the water. They would walk up to the edge and just - *boosh!* - right in. I became a little neurotic about it and actually looked up the exact depth of water you need for someone to drown in. It's not much."

Evans tries to steer clear of her tech-heavy installations when they're up and running. "Once the work is done, it's been such an insane and intense period that I just don't want to look at it." But this time, she had no choice but to lurk. "I looked for people who were wet up to their knees and I'd be like, 'I'm so sorry to bother you but what can we do? Why did you do it?' And most of them said, 'Oh, I just didn't think it was real!'"



▲ Evans with a Sprung a Leak robot. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

You can't really blame them. There's something about Evans's art that leaves you unsure what you're experiencing and why. You wouldn't expect to care what happens to everyday household objects, for example, but 2014's How Happy a Thing Can Be will make you do just that. Larger than life in all senses, an animated comb, screwdriver and pair of scissors have some sort of breakdown that drives them out of their comfortable home into a rubble-strewn wasteland, where they stagger drunkenly, hiccup and dance through their pain, as an unseen singer laments: "I gave you all the life I got. I gave you more than I could give." It's as saddening as it is surreal.

Then there's The Brightness, from 2013, in which not one but two Evanses chew the fat, interrupted by dance routines starring CGI teeth. One Evans is the artist herself, the other a "nurse scientist specialising in phantom limbs" who happens to share her name. Except it's not quite that simple: there *is* a real nurse scientist Cecile B Evans (without the accent on the e), but she's being played by an actor. Since Evans-the-artist and Evans-the-nurse-actor have a similar build and colouring, and are mostly filmed in extreme close-up, you're rarely sure which is which.



Watch an excerpt from How Happy a Thing Can Be

This week at Tate Liverpool, the 33-year-old artist unveils another hi-tech installation. Officially, Sprung a Leak is a "multi-dimensional work featuring two humanoid robots and a robot dog", but that's barely scratching the surface. "In its simplest form," says Evans, "it's an automated play about a collaboration between machines and humans against external forces that affect their wellbeing ... There's a coup, there's an incident at a pool party, and then everyone dies."

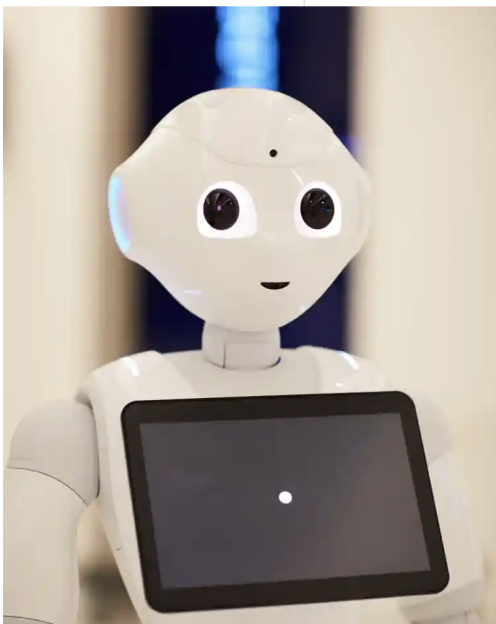
As well as the three robots, programmed with help from the University of Liverpool, the piece will feature 27 video screens, three digitised pole dancers, a beauty blogger with hands but no arms, and a fountain. Evans herself provides all the voices. She nearly gave the fountain a speaking part before deciding that was “too ridiculous”.

The wall of her east London studio is covered in sticky notes, the script is being constantly reordered, and the programming still isn't finished. “There's a lot of spreadsheets,” she sighs, “a lot of admin. The whole play is 15 minutes long and it's on a cycle. At the moment, we're trying to get it so that one of the robots presses a button and restarts everything.”

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If this sounds confusing, that's par for the course. Evans describes her working technique as “assemblage”, which the [Tate](#) defines as “art that is made by assembling disparate elements which are often scavenged by the artist”. Three earlier projects - [Agnes](#), [Hyperlinks](#) or [It Didn't Happen](#) and [What the Heart Wants](#) - featured, in no particular order, the digital head of the late actor [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#), the true story of a Facebook user stalked by his dead girlfriend, Icarus, the virtual pop star [Yowane Haku](#), a spambot, a Vietnam vet who thinks he's suicidal (but isn't), the woman he picks up who doesn't seem suicidal (but is), agoraphobic singer [Jemma Pixie Hixon](#) and tear-drinking butterflies. The settings, meanwhile, range from a Kent beach to a shark-infested shopping mall and a disused jacuzzi room.

Pleasingly, Evans's own live-work space turns out to be in a former dog-biscuit factory. Half-Belgian, half-American, she grew up in Florida and lived in France and Germany before finally washing up in London. How does she describe her work? “So,” she says, taking a deep breath, “it's not so much about a particular medium. It's more that I'm interested in how feelings are valued today and yesterday and possibly in the future - and how that impacts being human. There's an obvious interest in technology, but I think that comes just from the time we live in.” She's particularly fascinated by [transhumanists](#), who believe not just that science will one day conquer death, but that this could happen in their own lifetimes.



▲ A robot from the Tate Liverpool show. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

If Evans has a lot to say, it may be because she's making up for lost time. “I didn't train as an artist,” she says. “I trained as an actress. From a very young age, my interest was in the representation of feelings and how they circulate. But as an actor I found *myself* very limiting. I got really bored with myself.” Fortunately, she says, “Failure is a great springboard.”

How did she make the switch? She went to art school, of course - for a whole day, before deciding she didn't like it. “So I moved to Berlin where there was a whole community of artists making amazing work. And for two years, I didn't show work. I just listened to people and went to see shows and read a lot of books. I got back in touch with what I thought was important, and cut out performance entirely to develop other skills like collage. Those dumb collages I made in those first two years - that's still how I work, just not in that exact form.”



[Watch the trailer for Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen](#)

At times, it's been hand-to-mouth. "Oh my God, I've worked so many jobs. When I was an actress, I worked in department stores. I was a makeup artist for five years in the basement of Barneys in New York. And I've been a cocktail waitress. When I decided I wanted to be an artist, I quickly started doing lectures and teaching, even before I knew what I was doing. I thought, 'OK, public speaking is a skill I have. I hate it, but it will pay me something, so I'm gonna get up and just do it.'

"I also assisted the widow of a famous Danish painter in a castle in Burgundy. I would go and live with her and basically be her companion for three or four weeks and archive his work. But now I can say I'm just an artist. That's all I do." Is she looking forward to her Tate show? "Oh yeah," she says. "There will be a certain amount of confusion, which is fine. There's a synopsis on the wall in case you can't be bothered to follow it."

- [Sprung a Leak](#) is at Tate Liverpool from 21 October to 19 March.