

Art

Painted into a corner ... British art responds to the folly of Brexit



So this is it: March. Month of mad hares and parted ways. Maybe, after all, 29 March will come and go and Britain will still be in the EU by parliamentary vote and, who knows, a delay could produce a second referendum. But as things stand, this is officially the last month of Britain belonging to the community of European nations. And a sad exhibition at one London gallery muses on the miserable stupidity of it all.

Should I Stay Or Should I Go? at [Patrick Heide Contemporary Art](#) is not a homage to the Clash song but an urgent personal question for Europeans living in Britain. And for some Britons, too. Gallerist Heide admits it's one he asks himself. Like many artists and art professionals in London, he is from continental Europe - in his case Frankfurt - and his exhibition reflects the wretched sense that everything is going to be different, that Britain is shrinking. [Susan Stockwell](#)'s green woollen map of Britain shows this most succinctly. Scotland looks proper and correct, yet Brexit-voting England and Wales are collapsing in a shapeless mess. Brexit is not strengthening national identity in this acidic knit but melting this sceptred isle.

When Polish artist Michal Iwanowski, who lives in Cardiff, came across the words “Go home Polish” daubed in his neighbourhood, he took a photograph and brooded. After the EU referendum he decided to take the advice and set out on a walk from Cardiff to Poland, photographing and noting what he saw from the green fields he tramped across to the barbed wire fences he observed at Calais.

It is all quite low-key, perhaps because for now the battle seems lost. Britain is leaving Europe. It’s a moment when despair is understandable. Only a lunatic could be upbeat about the prospects for a happy outcome right now. [Michael Landy](#) laments this rancid reality in a group of small red and white paintings. One of them shows a Brexit fantasy of rustic Britain lit by a new dawn. Next to it a man is pissing to show the artist’s true feelings. Another image shows a swimmer not waving, but drowning. These gnomish foretellings of national disaster capture the sheer idiocy of our predicament.

Moronic inferno it may be, but Brexit has made us aware we’re living in history. No doubt about it, March 2019 will be in the history books along with the outbreaks of civil war in 1642 and world conflict in July 1914. History paintings can preserve and monumentalise such mighty and heroic hours. Another London gallery, Ransom Art, is currently showing a crazed satirical history painting by John Springs called [Mustn’t Grumble](#), that portrays the political establishment as a bunch of grotesques out of Gillray or Hogarth on a flag-bedecked Brexit train to nowhere. To be honest, I can’t even tell which side the artist is on, but it certainly appeals to my sense of alienation from the political system that got us here.

Yet as we hurtle towards the edge and prepare to fall off the map of Europe, these protests - or wretched ruminations on the folly of it all - are mere blips in what remains, at this moment, a British art world comprehensively plugged into Europe. You would be forgiven for thinking the web that connects the British and continental art worlds is too complex and entangled ever to be really broken. Yet immigration from the EU is falling, and artists are among the most joyously migrant of communities.



Maybe the moment this unhomely March truly resembles is the “phoney war” period at the beginning of the second world war, when no one really knew how events would develop. It is an unreal feeling. We’re about to sever our connection with our continent - brutally at worst, pointlessly at best - yet it feels unreal because the flow of modern life seems unstoppable.

British artist Joe Sweeney captures the imminent tragedy of this infamous month in a public artwork that goes live today. +44 ... Leave a Message for Europe allows us all to do just that. [You can add messages on the work's website here](#). Say goodbye or say au revoir. Say what you feel. Perhaps you're happy. Perhaps you want no deal. My message is England Kaput.

● Should I Stay Or Should I Go? is at [Patrick Heide Contemporary Art](#), London, until 13 April.