

It's Nice That



Stephen Chambers' portraits of the legendary Court of Redonda hint at a Brexit subtext

Words by Jenny Brewer, Friday 12 May 2017

At this year's Venice Biennale, British artist Stephen Chambers is showing a series of 101 portraits depicting the characters of a legendary tale based on the West Indian island of Redonda. The tiny island has always been uninhabited,

yet in 1865 a merchant trader called Matthew Dowdy Shiell decided to claim it as his own and elect himself monarch.

His kingship was a fantasy, but one that has evolved into legend. Shiell's son, M.P. Shiell, was a science fiction writer and so ran away with the idea of his father's "monarchy", deciding the kingship would be passed down not through heritage but literary succession. He anointed poet John Gawsworth as his "successor", and Gawsworth in turn bestowed honours to his friends, creating "an imagined court of writers, poets, artists and ne'er-do-wells". Since then, positions of importance on Redonda have been handed down – writer A.S. Byatt is the Duchess of Morpho Eugenia, apparently – and even sold, by the more impoverished creatives, in London pubs.

Stephen was recently introduced to the legend by novelist Javier Marías, a former "king" of Redonda, who himself appointed the likes of Pedro Almodovar and W.G. Sebald to his "court". Inspired by the story, the artist made 101 oil paintings envisioning his own court of creative luminaries, creating what he describes as "a collision between fact and fiction". An eclectic bunch, each subject has its own distinct personality conveyed concisely in the simplest details and expressions.

Also part of the show are three large canvases titled *State of the Nation*, made before, during and after Britain's referendum vote. Showing a rider falling from his horse, the paintings "hint at the precarious state of the modern world", and bring out a Brexit-related subtext in the accompanying portraits – that a concept, such as Redonda's court or the EU, can link people outside of location or law.

Author Rod Mengham describes this, saying: "[Stephen's] 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' exhibition *The Court of Redonda* opens 13 May – 26 November 2017 as part of La Biennale di Venezia at Ca' Dandolo, Grand Canal, San Polo, Venice, Italy.







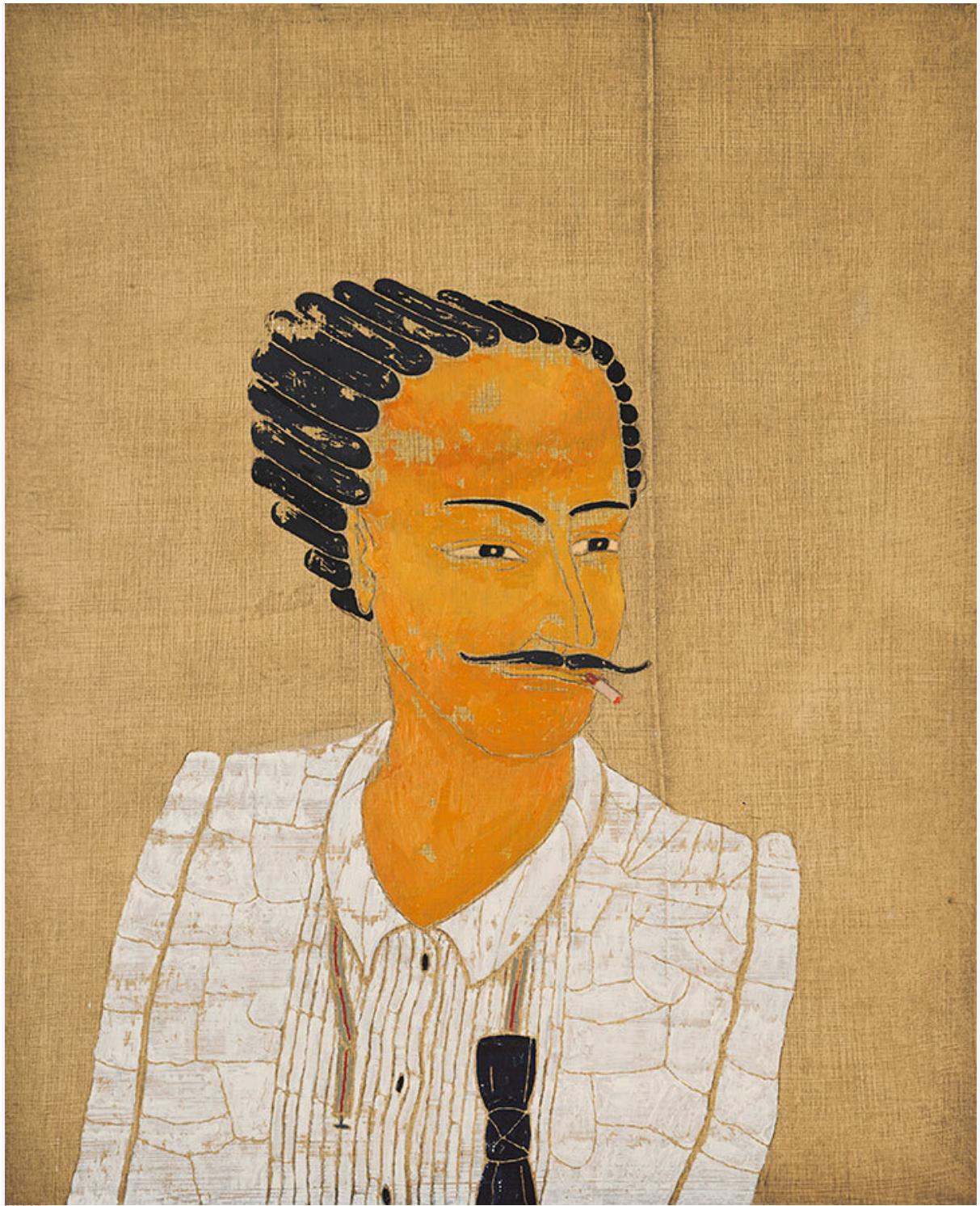
















www.thecourtofiredonda.com
www.stephenchambers.com