



In bed with Ravilious

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By Pamela Buxton

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Becky Beasley steps inside Eric Ravilious' 'The Bedstead'



Eric Ravilious, *The Bedstead*, 1939 (inverted). The watercolour was the starting point for Becky Beasley's OUS installation, 2017, at the Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne. Credit: Nigel Green

When an artist cites their two mentors as *Twin Peaks* and architectural theorist Mark Cousins, it's a fair bet you're in for a stimulating time. So it is with Becky Beasley, whose commission OUS has opened at the Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne.

Beasley works at the interface of photography and sculpture and has been a regular at Cousins' lectures at the Architectural Association over the years. She was invited to create an installation – her first spatial piece – in response to the work of painter and designer Eric Ravilious (1903-1942). The resulting six-room work sits alongside a new exhibition on Ravilious and his friendship group of artists and designers.

Given access to Ravilious' archive at the Towner, Beasley chose to respond to *The Bedstead*, a watercolour depicting a room in a guesthouse in Le Havre where Ravilious stayed in 1939 before the outbreak of World War II. She already had an interest in the depiction of interiors and was drawn to this particular painting by the blank panel above the bed, as well as the colours and patterns of the interior.

Her installation is an intriguing deconstruction of the painting that takes Beasley meandering off in many directions. She describes herself as a 'burrower' who digs deep into a subject, delving down on a journey into the work. As she burrows, she follows her instincts through all manner of digressions and associations before finding her way back to the surface.

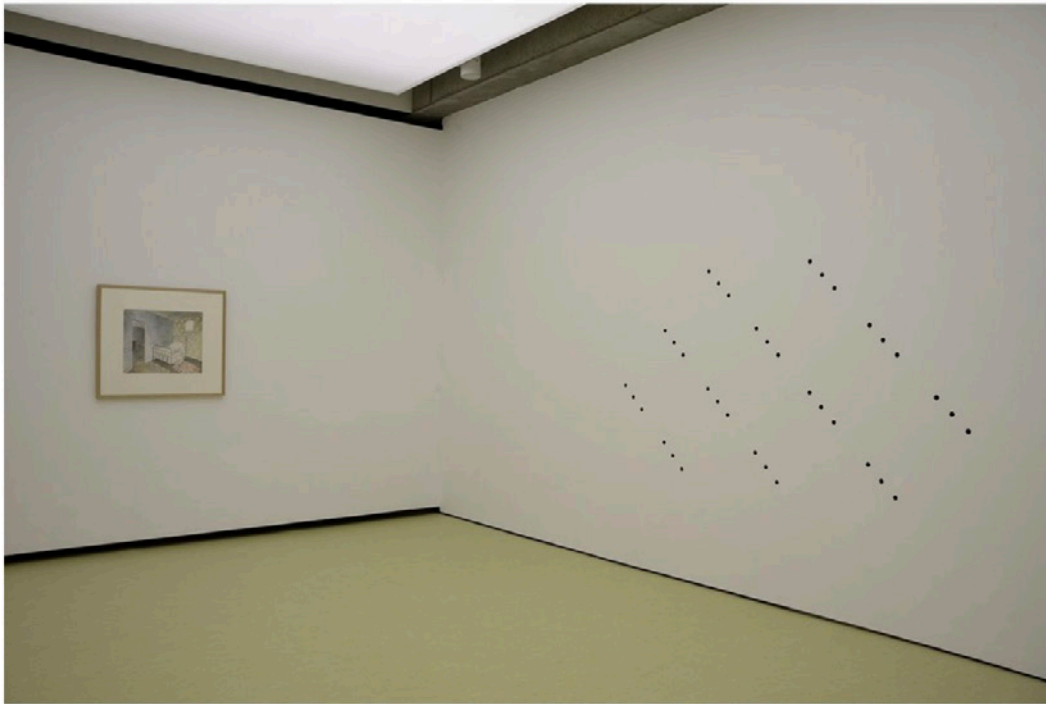


Becky Beasley OUS installation view, 2017, opening room. The dappled lino floor includes the shape of a double and single bed. Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne. Credit: Nigel Green

There was a lot to get her teeth into at the Towner commission. She'd long liked Ravilious' work and was fascinated by his group of creative friends, including renowned pattern designer Enid Marx. There was also the backstory of Ravilious himself to contend with. He'd only painted *The Bedstead* because bad weather

stopped him going out to paint Le Havre itself. This interior was to live on through the painting – unlike much of Le Havre, which was badly damaged in the war, and Ravilious himself, who was working as a war artist when he was killed in 1942. This knowledge triggers ideas of absence and mourning that are explored in OUS, not only in relation to Ravilious but to friends of Beasley's too. Along the way, the work also explores weather, light, pattern, and Ravilious' use of plane, surface and line, all using the subdued palette of the original work.

'I have a tendency to go in very close and learn through others' works. I guess in the end I'm making friends with what I view as a very live mob,' she says. 'I burrowed into this particular interior painting by Ravilious but I never intended to bring anything into the light. It isn't an excavation.'



Becky Beasley OUS installation view, 2017. The pattern of holes in the wall are derived from the wallpaper pattern in *The Bedstead* watercolour. Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne. Credit: Nigel Green

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Nonetheless she has created a work that encourages the viewer to engage more deeply with the original painting. While Beasley doesn't want visitors to get too weighed down with explanations and notes before experiencing the installation, I found the background helpful in navigating the galleries and understanding the relationship to the painting that was its starting point. Sometimes the associations are clear, sometimes rather more obtuse.

OUS starts with a linoleum floor on which the shapes of a single and double bed are mapped out along with a scattering of leaf-like lozenges containing variants of the exhibition title, taken from the last three letters of Ravilious. The eye is drawn to the gallery wall, peppered with a pattern of holes formed with steel tubes. In the gallery on the other side of this wall we find the source painting of *The Bedstead*, which includes the patterned wallpaper that Beasley took as the starting point for the holes, and then abstracted. As holes across the wall, what had started as dots in a floral pattern could now be interpreted as machine gunfire or shrapnel damage, given the wartime context.

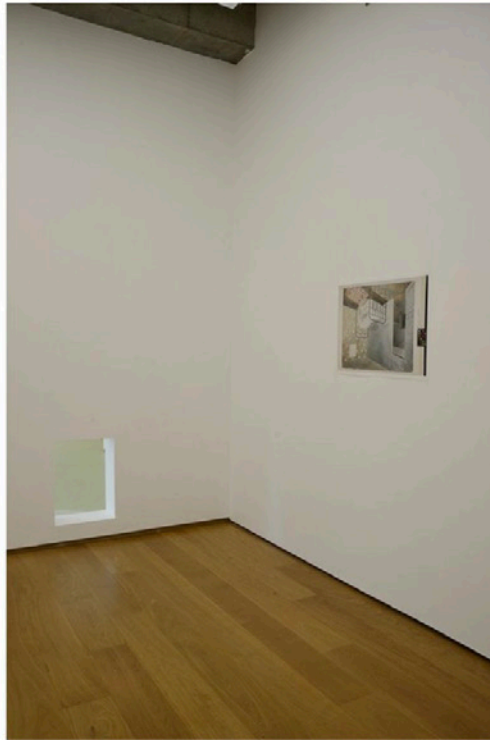
The blank patch of wall in the original watercolour is a repeat motif in OUS. It appears as a void cut in the gallery wall, placed at a low level to reflect its position in the upside down image of *The Bedstead* found further on in the installation (Beasley often finds it useful to invert images in her work) and also to allow small children to climb through. It's there again in another room, printed on a large sheet of antique French linen. This is hung alongside another linen with blue horizontal strips created by Beasley using the cyanotype photographic printing. We've already met another of these cyanotype linens in the third room, this time with vertical lines suggestive, says Beasley, of light rain on an English afternoon. It is also a reminder of the weather that kept Ravilious confined to his room back in 1939.

Perhaps inspired by Ravilious' friendships and his collaboration making a chair with Enid Marx, two of the galleries in Beasley's commission involve collaborations with friends Caroline Le Breton and David Rhodes and explore loss and memory in different ways. While on the one hand they could be seen as digressions, both are 'mourning pieces' and resonate with the sense of absence in *The Bedstead*.

Beasley recognizes that there is something of the 'Alice in Wonderland' about the installation, as if you are experiencing going inside the actual painting.

'The intention is that something happens in terms of your experience of the image that becomes a physical experience of actual space,' she says.

It's certainly a thought-provoking installation full of layers of meaning and associations. Beasley hopes that visitors will 'in a very primary way, take away something that will make the world feel slightly different at odd moments – a shift in the register of experience.'



Becky Beasley, OUS installation view, 2017. The Bedstead has been inverted. The void cut in the wall relates to the blank space on the wall in the waterpainting. Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne. Credit: Nigel Green

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Becky Beasley OUS, until 9 July 2017, Towner Art Gallery, Devonshire Park, College Road, Eastbourne, BN21 4JJ

Ravilious & Co: The Pattern of Friendship, English Artist Designers: 1922-1942, 27 May – 17 September 2017

[Source](#)