

# Strawberry deaths and hide and seek - it's serious stuff

**HISTORICALLY, the role of the artist in society has been to produce and criticise culture. In an unstable climate of religious censorship and governmental control over the arts, never has it been more pertinent to restate the value of art and its role in society.**

If the Scottish Executive ever needed reassurance of that value, then Patricia Ferguson, the Minister for tourism, culture and sport, could hardly have done better than to visit the Tramway in Glasgow at the weekend for this year's National Review of Live Art (NRLA).

Celebrating its 26th year, the five-day [extravaganza](#) leads cultural debate with a discursive immediacy that other artforms can only imitate. Political issues and questions of identity are presented through action and installation art that places the viewer at the centre of the issues surrounding the work.

The highlight of this year's packed programme was an affecting performance by Eva Meyer-Keller, *Death is Certain*, in which Mayer-Keller skilfully juxtaposed the recognisable and domestic with the unimaginable cruelty of systematic torture. With the unflinching professionalism of a chef she inflicted a series of "deaths" upon 40 strawberries using household objects, cataloguing a list of violence including hanging, burial in concrete, and electrocution.

The work had the humour and inventiveness of the *Book of Bunny Suicides*, while getting across the full horror of the economy of death (between deaths, Mayer-Keller paused to wipe the red juice off her fingers on to a white apron).

Elsewhere there was a collective preoccupation with ecology and place. Geraldine Pilgrim's installation of a hotel interior in the corner of Tramway two was a microcosm of a fragile world holding back danger - you walk along the corridor inside, shattered plasterboard revealing a wall of bubbling water and LCD displays, behind which submerged bodies swam towards you.

Artists in residence, FrenchMottershead, produced their own LRNA within the NRLA - that is to say, a Local Review of Necessary Amenities, consisting of a map of routes to places where one could find "A Quiet Drink", "Rome", and "The Miracle", in a poetic presentation of urban banality.

Urban environments and failures of town planning were also the subject of a work by Lisa Wesley and Andrew Blackwood. Over the five days of [the festival](#), they built a sculpture of a white model city. The work reached a dramatic peak as night fell and simple side-lighting created a composition of long shadows and Modernist towerblocks. The panels of light between the buildings created a world of contrasts, of urban dreams and bleak realities.

Wandering around the festival all day I felt I was at the centre of the artworks, never more so than in an interactive video installation by Ji Hoon Byun, which allowed the audience to leap around a waterfall made of light, which responded to their movements. Dan Norton's interactive computer game, *In Mixing*, let the audience perform the work, and in-between times some RSAMD students engaged members of the audience in an impromptu game of Hide-and-Seek.

This year was a sad farewell to the evocative underground spaces of the NRLA's previous home, the Arches, but [the festival](#) has found a new openness at the Tramway and this year was surely its busiest yet. Even the smallest slice of what was on offer left me with a feeling of awe, as I left changed by the debates at the centre of the work and carried those issues home with me.

With such consistent quality and engagement, Scotland should be proud that Nikki Millican has again succeeded in producing a festival that holds a pride of place in the international cultural calendar.