

OPINION

Terrible beauty

Ralph Rugoff argues that good art does not give answers but asks questions

Not unlike the last days of the Roman empire, the calendar of the contemporary art world is marked by a seemingly endless succession of festivals and fairs. Seven international biennials opened in different parts of the world in September alone. Between 13 and 16 October, the Frieze Art Fair (which seems to be developing a tradition of opening on the heels of an international economic crisis) draws the faithful to London, where pundits may monitor sales for clues to just how precarious the economy is. The Thessaloniki Biennale, which runs until 18 December, leaves little doubt as to its view on that matter by entitling its principal exhibition programme "A Rock and a Hard Place". With the spectre of a Greek default looming over Europe, the biennial had reportedly received less than 2 per cent of its state funding by the beginning of September.

Most biennials make a point of being international in scope. Because their curators gather a critical mass of contemporary art from different parts of the globe, they almost inevitably aspire to reflect on the state of things – not just in art but in the world at large. Whether explicitly or implicitly, they make propositions about how artists engage with and respond to

the times in which they live. As though staking out an aesthetic agenda along these lines, two of the larger international exhibitions that opened in September, one in Lyons and the other in Dublin, used the phrase "terrible beauty" in their titles.

The oxymoron comes courtesy of William Butler Yeats's "Easter, 1916", an ambivalent elegy to the Irish leaders executed after a failed uprising against British rule. For the curators organising these shows, Yeats's example is worth recalling for his ability to respond to the events of his day without simplifying them, embodying conflicting thoughts and emotions that do justice to the complexities of history instead.

For international curators looking for politically responsive art, painting is not usually at the top of the list. Given a widespread disapproval of the marketplace and the corollary glorification of art that is participatory and materially ephemeral, painting is often dismissed as a tainted, auction-ready commodity or an anachronistic art form in an age of revolutionary social media. Yet, as three big exhibitions in London this autumn show, some of the most compelling and thought-provoking art today that engages with contemporary history is being made by painters.

Gerhard Richter, subject of a retrospective at Tate Modern (*see previous page*), is a thorny thinker who has said that he sees no difference between his abstract canvases and his paintings based on photographs. In the latter, however, he has drawn repeatedly on imagery evoking the history of the Second World War and its aftermath, as well as more recent events. In the mid-1960s, Richter, who early on developed a technique of smearing the surface of his paintings to "blur" the underlying image and mimic the variable focus of photography, portrayed a grief-stricken Jacqueline Kennedy, based on news shots taken after the assassination of JFK. In the 1980s, his sombre, intimate, 15-part work *October 18, 1977* depicted members of Germany's Baader-Meinhof terrorist group ►



Onecaratstud by John Chamberlain at Frieze 2010