

CHINA RESIDENCIES

ARTIST PROFILE :: Brendan Earley at Urs Meile

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Brendan Earley (b1971) is an Irish artist who lives and works in Wicklow, Ireland. After graduating from NCAD with first class honours, Earley spent a number of years travelling before receiving the Fulbright scholarship to attend Hunter College, New York City. He graduated with a Masters in Fine Art in 1999, and returned to Dublin where he exhibits regularly. He is represented by mother's tankstation. Earley completed a residency at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing, and Iona Whittaker caught up with him over email to learn more about his time there.

China Residencies: What sparked your interest in China?

Brendan Earley: Really, my interest in China has been always there but not necessarily in the foreground. An entity its sheer size has meant that one cannot help noticing it, but for most of my early life China was a closed society, so I suppose my interest has been a slow development. Although I do remember that an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art at PS1 in 1998 ["Inside Out: New Chinese Art", September 1998–January 1999] really focused my interest on its contemporary culture.

CR: How did you hear about the residency?

BE: Finola Jones introduced me to Karon Seiz in New York at the Armory art fair in 2011, and the invitation to participate in the residency at Urs Meile Gallery came out of that meeting. She had seen some work Mother's Tankstation [Earley's gallery in Ireland] brought to Liste fair the year before and felt that I would gain from experiencing China first hand.

CR: Did you go with a specific project idea in mind, or were you looking for inspiration on the spot?

BE: I really didn't have any specific project in mind. I feel that one of the most important things a residency can provide for an artist is new experience, so I went to Beijing with expectations - to be as open to things as one could.

CR: Tell us a bit about the project(s) you worked on while you were there.

BE: The project as such came out of an offer of exhibiting in the galleries. The decision was made quite late in the day, but it was too good an opportunity as the exhibition spaces in the gallery are wonderful – big and challenging. They also seemed the complete antithesis of the chaos I found outside in the immediate area. Caochangdi is a very ad hoc, hectic urban space.

CR: Did your work or practice change significantly as a result of your time in China?

BE: Yes it did. However, it is hard to pin point when it happened. Shortly after I came back from Beijing, my family and I moved to a new home in the mountains just south of Dublin. I even moved out of my studio in the city and have built a small one at the bottom of the garden here. So after many years of living in an urban environment and the intense creative time of Beijing, I find myself in a wholly different environment with new challenges.

CR: How involved are the organizers with the resident's daily life?

BE: I found that the people who ran the residency extremely helpful but stayed out of the way which, once I was set up, let me get on with my work.

CR: Did you have a show? Did you give lectures or classes during your time there? If yes, tell us more!

BE: Yes, I had a show just after the residency; but I think that this is not automatically so. Alas, I did not lecture in Beijing – there was the language barrier. As a part-time lecturer here in Ireland I would have like to see how art is taught in China to make some comparisons.



Brendan Ealey's exhibition "In the Midnight City" [Courtesy: Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne]

CR: If there were other artists around while you were there, what were they like? Did collaborations occur?

BE: No. No collaborations happened; it's not something I really go looking for. But I got to meet many Chinese artists through the gallery, both on a social level and as people dropped into the studio. The residency is set up to cater for just one artist, which I personally prefer.

CR: What was Beijing like as a city?

BE: Like any large contemporary city it has familiarity, although I was surprised at how western its appearance has, as a first impression, and very disappointed with the disappearance of the hutongs. But of course, as soon as you really start to look, a city begins to reveal itself bit by bit. I was really very taken by the locals practicing Thi Chi in the temple of Heaven park early in the morning or late in the evening when the sun is closest to the earth. It's insights like that make me travel.

CR: Had you been to China before?

BE: No, I hadn't been to China before and was determined to see as much of it as I could. So I was delighted to follow my colleagues from the gallery on a break to Fallun, and saw its majestic mountain ranges. I felt I had walked into a Chinese ink drawing. Another trip took me to the city of

Jingdezen in search of porcelain casting. I was eager to try some new techniques which would allow me an insight into Chinese culture, so working with porcelain was an obvious choice.

CR: Did China fit your expectations? Or did Beijing surprise you?

BE: To be quite frank the first thing I realized is that China is enormous and so any expectations went out the door fast as I attempted to get to grips with just one tiny corner of Beijing. The city itself remained a mystery to me, mostly because I found it hard to get around on my own, the underground system was too far away to use on a practical basis and the taxi service was tricky at the best of times, so trips on my bicycle were my outer orbits.

CR: Did you speak any Chinese before coming? If no, did you learn any during your stay?

BE: I am embarrassed to say I arrived with no Chinese and left with only two words – nihao and xixie -- “hello” and “thank you”! However I did develop a great admiration of the intricacies of the spoken language.

CR: Did you feel you encountered a significant cultural or linguistic barrier?

BE: I would say my lack of verbal understanding lent a strangeness to my environment and consequently to my experience of it. But at no time in my stay there was I ever put in an uncomfortable position, so I really can't say I found it a barrier. In fact, if anything it added to the visceral experience of the city. I think I spoke in colors and textures by the end of my stay!

CR: Overall, which experience, adventure or encounter will stay with you?

BE: Floating down the Li river on a raft through the karst mountains of Guilin. I felt a long way from the Wicklow hills! Fantastic.

CR: Are you interested in going back and spending more time in China?

BE: Yes of course, but I think my next trip to Beijing will be with a specific project in mind – what that is, I don't know.

CR: Do you miss being in Beijing?

BE: No, I don't think I miss Beijing - fascinating a place as it is. It must have been one of the hardest urban spaces I have ever lived in. The pollution and general mayhem makes it somewhere one endures rather than thrives in, but I realize as I write this sentiment that I was lucky enough to be an invited visitor, rather than a migrant worker who is looking for better things.

CR: Are there ideas you have now which you can trace back to your experience there?

BE: In Beijing I felt that what was making had somehow to do with what we lived with, what is in the landscape of things that are made by people. I was motivated by a recent statistic that the world population had become more urban than rural - a first in the history of mankind - and wondered what that meant in terms of how we related to our environment on a human level, surrounded by all the stuff we have made. This search for understanding is still the case, but now I find myself wondering about why people chose not to adapt and live in a city and instead reject that sort of social living and chose to live on the outside.

CR: Do you consider your practice adaptable? Do you feel more that your work adapted to Beijing when you were there, or that aspects of the city were assimilated into your work? (It might be easiest to isolate some specific aspects).

BE: Through the use of basic craft and a continuous reprocessing of available cultural material, my practice aimed at the creation of an alternative modernity, and one which was far more subjective and malleable the historic one. The process could be linked to bricolage, the particular kind of DIY practice in which fragments from objects that no longer function are used to create a useful item. A

practice I saw going on all around me in the Beijing suburbs. “The street”, as the writer William Gibson once put it, “will find its own use for things.”



This practice in contemporary art is similar to that which has been labeled as ‘appropriation’ ‘post-production’, implying a digestion of received cultural elements that allows the construction of a new artwork with left-overs from the past. So, my work had to adapt to Beijing. One of the first sculptural works I made was Day For Night [pictured, left], which I had started in Dublin but abandoned because it refused to take form! On one of my first days exploring my surroundings, I was taken to a local restaurant which had been done up in a certain Communist chic style – lots of old chairs and radios etc. from the sixties/seventies – there was a conscious retro look going on. But I saw a tacky light stand that reminded me of a Naum Gabo sculpture I seen in London. The Chinese lamp stand bore more than a passing resemblance, but I suspect it was a fluke. I immediately went back to the studio and began working on the sculpture using light filters rather than Perspex (as Gabo and the lamp designer did). I had a lot of jet lag at the time and came up with the idea of just working at night as a way dealing with the city – almost like a doppelganger. I would remake things I saw during the day and create them at night – hence the title Day For Night. Of course it also references and early cinematic technique for shooting night scenes during the day.

CR: Could you talk a little bit about your interest in “cavities” or negative space as a way to understand the urban environment?

BE: This has been a long-standing interest of mine that seemed to fit very well into living in Beijing. Dublin was and is littered with half-built buildings from the boom times; but once the economic collapse happened, the buildings were left sitting there in all sorts of places – big concrete structures with cavities where windows should be. These negative spaces fascinated me as sculptural objects and all that is associated with decay - a general ‘Gothic’ ambiance. I am interested in a certain strain

of modernism which opposes the realistic impulse of Modernism. I see this more in early modernist writers, but it seems present in the work of contemporary visual artists such as Mike Nelson. It's a sort of "Gothic Modernism" – a strain of Modernism that makes use of the well-established language and conventions of the Gothic terms in order to express recognizably Modernist concerns about the nature of subjectivity, temporality, and, by extension, our contemporary understanding of place as being somehow atemporal. Frozen, negative spaces which exist somewhere outside, my audio installations come out of these dabblings.

CR: I wondered whether you found it an empowering place to be, creatively – did those works arise from feeling assertive relative to the context, or (productively) vulnerable, like a tiny fraction or fragment amid the city?

BE: I think Rosalind Krauss suggested that the grid was the emblem of twentieth century modernity and that it is now ubiquitous. And how, through its total flatness, the grid is able to suppress the real nature of building and living. I feel that by constantly renegotiating this grid to making new paths one is empowering oneself, and I have to say the Chinese seemed to be doing this all the time in Beijing. Those crazy illegal buildings that seem to spring up almost overnight with the influx of workers from the countryside – small winding streets that are more the in-between of buildings than right of ways.

CR: Do you still feel a compulsion to be in Beijing, in its particular environment and feeling the sensations it gave you?

BE: Not really. Most of the time I was there the jet lag was so bad I thought I was in Blade Runner, plus the city is so dark at night that I found it a very confusing place. But I suppose that ultimately, that gave me the imperative to make sense of my surrounds through working.

CR: How has being there affected how you see your home environment, your studio in Ireland?

BE: This need to give form has always been part of my daily routine, coming out of a desire to make sense of the world around me and because I have lived in cities for most of my adult life; it has tended to have a late Modernist bent. But my practice has changed and had to change since moving to Wicklow. Indeed, since working with Lucy Lippard on an audio work, I have become more interested in why people feel the need to retreat from the world. She moved to a small house in the desert of New Mexico some twenty years ago and 'dropped out' after a distinguished career in the arts. Is it still possible in this day and age to retreat from the world, in this digital time of easy contact? Certainly, a desire for solace and a hunger for the natural world is something we learn early on, but it's hard to find - the contemporary world seems to offer fewer and fewer opportunities for true respite and privacy.

CR: How would you sum up Beijing as an artistic environment?

BE: I found that the hegemonic centre of the contemporary art world still lies in the West and that the relationship between East and West is both fetishized and problematic. They seem want different things from each other. The former wants recognition and the latter wants stimulation. There is a desire for quick satisfaction on both sides, but this can result in disappointment or even alienation - this I discovered from talking to Beijing artists.

CR: Anything else you'd like to add?

BE: I wish there were more teahouses and less Irish pubs in Beijing.

This interview was conducted via email by Iona Whittaker for China Residencies.

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