



BRENDAN EARLEY
A Place Between
 Royal Hibernian Academy
 Dublin
 15 March – 29 April, 2012
 IMAGE by author.

Groping with Alchemy

By James Merrigan

There has been a reverberating echo of references to the films of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky in the Irish art scene of late – Ruth E. Lyons presented *Stalker* as part of the Artist Screen Series at Temple Bar Gallery & Studios in August of 2011 and Isabel Nolan followed suit by referencing *Roadside Picnic* in her solo show at The Model Gallery late in 2011 (the sci-fi novel that inspired *Stalker*) – making the term art bubble redundant and art cave more appropriate. Tarkovsky pops up again in the first paragraph of Brendan Earley’s press release for his solo show *A Place Between* at the Royal Hibernian Academy Dublin (RHA).

Removing the Tarkovsky monkey off the artist’s back – the modesty of Earley’s materiality doesn’t need that omnipotent presence – the titles of the artist’s sculptures and drawings are a jiggling key to their disguised materiality and narrative mood: *Untitled, Sacred Mountain...Dwelling in the Mountains 2...Soul Delay...A Million Years Later...Lying Awake in an Empty Building...*

Earley casts everyday styrofoam packaging in aluminium – “TA-DAH”! But this DIY alchemy is just a titbit to the depth of thinking that his art objects provoke. They perform as sci-fi poetry; they fumble with language and the life world like Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*; and they posture like a Mies van der Rohe architectural overhang. They are somehow utopian in a time when art finds it easier to be dystopian. As you can see I am a fan.

If we take away the art work labels we are left with building trade materials that are only familiar in their raw form to the Sparky, Chippy, Bricky. The coat of the everyday that dresses

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what are in fact aluminium and bronze objects, registers a desire to touch: did you have a grope of his alchemy? Most of us don’t really know how it feels to score plasterboard or experience the weight of pink gypsum in the shoulders as you mix. Such invisible labours lie deep in the infrastructure of your home: the skin of domestication is something that you apply later with ease. However, interior design can bring the house down if you get it wrong, which was the case in the relationship between Earley’s work and Gallery 1 at the RHA.

Mother’s tankstation Dublin, Void Belfast, and The Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin are the gallery caves in which I have experienced Earley’s work before. Their polished cement floors and dim lighting seem to ooze Earley’s brutalist modernist aesthetic. The question as to what comes first between the chicken-art object or egg-gallery space is inconsequential: Earley’s art objects are both the zeitgeist and out of time in such environments.

At the RHA, a floor-to-ceiling aluminium and plasterboard stud partition stood askew in the space. This was the artist making himself bigger – heckles up – to confront what is a barn of a gallery space. Earley should be commended for such an ambitious intervention, but somehow, by giving a taster of what could have been an all-out transformation of

the structure of the gallery, I was left wanting. The artist's smaller sculptures have always suggested larger architectures in previous outings, but the scale of the empty space that hung above his smaller objects at the RHA capped the imagination from imagining bigger, higher. Like previous attempts by artists to butt heads with the scale of the RHA gallery space, Earley's work became a little flattened, like the large floor-bound drawing that was unsuccessfully staged in deference to the space.



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After 45 minutes in what Earley refers to as “debatable zones,” I began to double back on my initial reception of the work. It was nearing closing time for the gallery. The daylight that fluctuates through the ceiling window of Gallery 1 dimmed whilst the interior lights brightened. All was leveled. The prevalent pink in the artist's drawings along with the plasterboard edges became more visible: the silicone block head shaded by a cotton hoodie more ominous. The Homeric epithet “when rosy fingered dawn appeared” fitted the *mise-en-scène*.

What has become another monkey but of the theoretical kind is the concept of ‘in-between’ which Earley's *A Place Between* took as its terrain. However, aren't moments of polarity the very things that make art great? Earley's work is at its best when it finds an edge, such as the ambitious stud partition at the RHA. When you are expecting his alchemy, other more commonplace materials that are not touched by the ‘is it?’ or ‘isn't it?’ question stand out: such as his previous use of a woolen blanket at mother's tankstation and the cotton ‘hoodie’ in this show.

Aside from these formal criticisms, it was either the process of waiting for Earley's work to activate in situ or the act of reflection and extension through writing, that revealed the very polarities that I am talking about, which I am glad to say have left me where art should always leave you, in a debatable zone.

SEE www.fugitivepapers.org for Michaële Cutaya's take on Brendan Earley's solo at the RHA.