



## Review: In the Midnight City

*Brendan Earley's work on urban life plays with the imagination*



### Time Out says... ★★★★★

In vain, dear readers, shall we attempt to describe Brendan Earley's *In the Midnight City*. The first thing you notice are the concrete monoliths, towering over you, encircling you in their vertiginous lines and with their monumental sameness, enclosing you like a circular fisherman's net. You crane your neck upwards, but the sheer scale of the towers induces nausea. You look down, to check if your feet are still on solid ground, but what you find is concrete – the soft earth we used to call ground has long since disappeared; it remains only as vague specks of mud on your memory.

This is the world of Brendan Earley's work; that it is drawn on paper rather than a physical construct makes the disorienting sense of entrapment no less real. His current exhibition is the continuation of a recurring concern with the city, but it is the first time that the Irish artist has turned his gaze on Beijing. To enter Earley's cities is to find oneself trapped in the panopticon: a circular surveillance structure that is the 18th-century ideal of a penitentiary, where guards are stationed in a central tower, and inmates do not know whether or not they are being watched.

Those familiar with Beijing will know that the bureaucratic headquarters stand in the middle. Looking at the title work of the exhibition, one thinks also of Ernest Burgess's famous concentric model, which divides the city into zones according to economic strata, each stratum represented by a different gradation. Earley's city is not a fixed, ideologically neutral space, but a socially constructed bastion, an inescapable labyrinth that reproduces and reifies existing power relationships and hegemonies. The city makes concrete that the privileged gorge while the infirm starve, and the unfortunate break their backs toiling to avoid a similar fate. But, as in the 'midnight' of the exhibition's title, the city is always changing, always transforming and, as such, permanently incomplete. In this lies the possibility of salvation.

Between the two large sheets of paper that make up the title work, is a prominent gap, a conspicuous absence that is repeated in the circular holes that have been cut out of 'I Wait for Sleep 1' and '2'. Along the same lines, the semblance of things in Earley's work is constantly shifting, constantly reassembling its meanings in our imagination. The sense of perspective in the aforementioned works is simultaneously top-down and side-on; the sense of form in 'I Will Always Take You with Me When I Go' calls to mind both a bar of soap and a bath tub, and the sense of scale in the title piece means that the densely scratched lines can be seen as both concrete towers or persons; structures or individual lives.

We are the city, and the city is us. The city is being constantly constructed, not only physically, but also in our imagination. To enter 'In the Midnight City' is to be transported to the imagination of the city: yours, mine, ours. As Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan at the end of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*: 'Seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure – give them space.'

*In the Midnight City* is at Galerie Urs Meile until Sunday 28. See event details.

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