

FUGITIVE PAPERS

HOME

BLOG

ABOUT

TO READ

EVENTS

LIVE

PAPERS

CRITICAL-PUBLIC

DECLARATION

PHOTO DOC

00001693

NEW BLOG 4

BLOG 3

BLOG 2

BLOG 1

FUGITIVE blog

8/5/2012

SHOCK ENCOUNTER

BRENDAN EARLEY

A Place Between

Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA)

15 March – 29 April, 2012



By Michaële Cutaya

I am not here proposing a review of Brendan Earley's exhibition at the Royal Hibernian Academy, but a meditation of sorts on a series of objects the artist proposed to our attention: the sculptures built from and around discarded parts of styrofoam packaging. To discuss these works, I may have to consider the use of a pseudonym, as I will have to confess to transgressing a taboo of art institutions: I touched the artwork does writing it down makes me liable? However tempting, I do not do it often and I only mention it here because I believe it played a crucial part in my understanding of the work: it was in the moment of touching that the work 'happened'.

At first glance, *A Million Years Later* presents itself as a piece of packaging that has been painted in black, the paint not quite covering the whiteness of the polystyrene underneath. A pool of a congealed dark liquid has formed on the floor seemingly leaking from the block. Eventually spotting the artwork label on the wall, I was baffled to find that it is made of bronze and silicone as, no matter how closely I look, I cannot see anything else but painted styrofoam. And thus I touched. And bronze it was!

What, in any case, warrants our classification? Is it durability? We use durable materials for what is precious? Leaving aside the how we decide what is precious and what is not, the durability factor does not stand up to enquiry: bronze has been a less than adequate material to protect the forms that was entrusted to it as it proved all too adaptable to changing circumstances the peacetime works of art gave way to war time demand for cannonballs. Whereas the utterly disposable piece of packaging, as the title of Earley's work points out, may well still be there in a million years and constitute our lasting legacy to posterity.

The transmutation of polystyrene into bronze also gives a new prominence to the tension between positive and negative space; between autonomous and non-autonomous objects. A styrofoam piece of packaging is basically the solid form of the empty space between an object and its container, filling that space, its form is determined upon: it is the non-autonomous object by definition. Does the change of material give it the supposedly autonomous status of art object? And how exactly do we determine the passage from one to the other?

I could go on about the leaking dark liquid as either melting bronze which turn out to be silicone in a counterpoint effect or crude oil, as the original form of polystyrene in an impossible reversal of chemical process, but that was an afterthought. In and of themselves none of these ideas are particular to this work, but the way they spun together is. And somehow bound up to this moment of encounter through touch. Would art institutions consider reviewing their policy on touching?

On a last note: the skills involved to pass a block of bronze for a piece of packaging may be compared to those of molecular gastronomy whose art is to manipulate forms and textures to deceive expectations. Chef Ferran Adrià who prefers to call his cooking 'deconstructivist' declared, in his biography, aiming to "provide unexpected contrasts of flavour, temperature and texture. Nothing is what it seems. The idea is to provoke, surprise and delight the diner. [...] the ideal customer doesn't come to El Bulli to eat but to have an experience." But, and in spite of the ongoing tendency to level all arts under such names as 'creative media'* here lies the difference: no matter how sophisticated the artistry involved to create these culinary contrasts, the concept behind them is always "Nothing is what it seems." A far cry from the flurried series of ideas and questions triggered by a work like *In a Million Years*, and a reminder that Art is conceptual as well as sensuous.

* Galway-Mayo of Technology, for instance, has just changed the name of its fine arts department to 'Centre for Creative Media' to say nothing of the re-christening of the School of Humanities as College of Tourism and Arts.