

mother's annual 2014

Brendan Earley *Before the Close of Day*

February - April

Tomorrowland

There are always new beginnings. There are metaphors to feel better about forgetting: ideas of revisitation and continuance, other places and next days. There are fictions to mute the tasteless parts of the past and selectively reveal its greatest hits. The title of Brendan Earley's second exhibition for mother's tankstation is situated in the temporally unstable present: 'Before the Close of Day', a blurry and nervous moment where time is 'unstoppably' running out. In a short text pre-empting the work, Earley references Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, in which a father and son wander through the greyish, dried-up remnants of Earth. ⁱ An unstated cataclysm has fractured the place, bringing it to a moment of malign finality. And so the pair walk and time wears on. They hunt for scraps of food and detritus that might keep death at bay. They talk briefly with an elderly survivor who recalls that in 'the previous way of life' people were always getting ready for tomorrow. But tomorrow wasn't getting ready for them. It didn't even know they were there. ⁱⁱ

Telling stories about the future is an old trick. It takes the quick route to neutral context. In *The Night Watch*, Lucy Lippard and Brendan Earley collaboratively edited Arthur C. Clarke's 1948 short story, *The Sentinel*, and broadcast a looped recording of the story into the gallery. In Clarke's original text, three scientists land on the moon to hunt for rare minerals, but end up finding and destroying an object of untold significance. Lippard takes on the narrator's identity. Her retelling issues from an unseen source carrying a calm, measured tone. The original protagonist of *The Sentinel* was a more typical construct of mid-twentieth century science fiction. Clarke depicts a good-natured scientist with whom the reader can easily empathise - a cipher that commits expressly political acts, and yet, carries no political character. In this context, Earley's situation of Lippard as the story's central voice is both deliberate and meaningful [Lippard's work is generally understood by its political character and the idea that she would enter an unfamiliar context and destroy a valuable object is purposely illogical]. She is not a planet-hopping hunter-gatherer.

Midway through the story's lunar exploration, Lippard's scientist leaves camp to climb the sheer face of an uncharted mountain range. She voices the ascent: "Even when we were out prospecting, the discussion would continue over the radio. It was absolutely certain, my companions argued, that there had never been any form of intelligent life on the moon. I knew that as well as anyone, but there are times where a scientist must not be afraid to make a fool of oneself." ⁱⁱⁱ

The willingness to 'make a fool of oneself' is doubly significant. In using the word 'oneself' Earley and Lippard edit away the narrator's original gender, and the 'story's' voice is posed as a merely human one, neither male or female. And in being ambivalent to foolishness, the scientist reaches the mountain's peak to discover the mysterious lunar beacon in the distance and begins the exploratory walk that is destined to end in the object's dematerialisation.

In a 2009 companion artwork entitled *9 Reports*, Earley situated Brian O'Doherty as the narrator of J.G. Ballard's short story *Report on an Unidentified Space Station*. In a similar way to *The Night Watch*, O'Doherty's words were only part of the fiction; the past and character of the person voicing them clothes the scene with context and reality, and the author's identity shifts from writer to speaker. That shift unearths a remaining resonant aspect in the narration: the way the scientists of *The Night Watch* explore the moon's rocky surface to gather rare minerals. Earley tends to make artworks from the fabric and influence of detritus he finds while walking through abandoned land. In *The Messenger and the Key*, a circular sheet of transparent acrylic is laid flat on the floor with an elliptical grey object resting on its surface. It looks like the kind of moulded polystyrene used to steady a television in transit: a picked-up piece of waste-in-waiting. But the polystyrene impression is given by a carefully made aluminium cast, and being flipped on its side this supporter device morphs into the style of a building's bays, struts and vertices. On the other side of the acrylic circle, a small meteorite rests inside a cut-out crater. This is a different kind of detritus, which is still a wasted part of some larger whole, but seems more precious because of its ancient and celestial birth. The meteorite is small and smooth, with a shining rust coloured shell and spotted sections of amber running through its core. Self-evidently, it is not the kind of

rare mineral one would expect to find in a wasteland. Lucy Lippard's voice is still raining through the building.

Gathering an artefact, something like a meteorite, tends to bring up questions about the thing's parentage. That speculation is a much larger project than the finding. In speculating, we stop asking what 'was' and begin to ask what 'might have been'. In a piece titled after the overall exhibition, a small drawing hangs in a silver-coloured frame next to a square-cut length of oak. The oak rests laconically from floor to wall, and it is tipped with a wrapping of fluorescent green tape that glows on dark evenings. It looks like a small pointer or a beacon with a handle, something to lead the way in newly wandered places. One's first introduction to 'glow in the dark' is usually a memorable disappointment. The words conjure up an image of an arcane compound that disguises its awesome searchlight power until the strike of moonlight. Of course its true glow feels like another harsh truth 'set up' to dash the imaginations of children everywhere. But the fiction of seeing in the dark still retains its resonance. Many of Earley's previous drawings used short, repeating lines to describe spatial forms and environments. In *Before the Close of Day*, the pencilled pattern fans out like an illustrated night sky, its focal point interrupted by a white pulsation pouring from some floating amorphous shape—a semblance that seems empty save for its thin skin of phosphorescent green. The elusive formal representation casts doubt on its status as any particular subject. It too glows in the dark, mutating its context into a radial false light.

Whatever possibility is offered by a story, whatever latent depth promises to eventually bubble into the viewable surface, is cast from a mixture of reality and tiny symbolic simplicities. The story becomes soluble when seen from above—when each rocky conceit composites itself together into a grand narrative. Earley's work purposely uses examples of weakly-conceived modern myths: the space-brutalist aluminium architecture of *The Messenger and the Key*, the arcane moralism of *The Night Watch*. And above those things, the boyishly predictable limits of science fiction. The way it reanimates the failures of the past in a malleable future, discarding the probability of realist chaos in favour of hazard-tested metaphors. In 2003, Earley created an installation named *Arrival*, which incorporated a shining black monolith built inside an abandoned apartment building in Dublin. The contrast between those intense utopian fantasies and their fatiguingly tangible context remains active in the work. In *Mono*, the spectre of a severe cuboid survives, but its core is emptied out in favour of wireframe lines drawn in steel and brushed smooth where the welds meet. Its black shining surface has been shrunken down and backed onto a mahogany plank. Its title is chopped in half. The remaking of this smaller monolith, more than a decade after Earley first produced its parent, is a meditative gesture. The original utopian odyssey was built on contrasting themes of humility and incredible possibility. But the remake dispenses with dreaming in favour of a terribly imperfect reality.

A large wall-drawing entitled *New Morning* approximately follows the style and shape of Earley's works on paper. He lays a pattern of thick red lines directly onto the wall and washes them out with white paint. The ink thins towards the floor, slightly softening the pinkness. It edges quite precisely around a big, blank circular space—a floating shape that suggests the impression of an eclipse. Towards the drawing's lower reaches, the lines take a slight curving inconsistency that signals the bending and reaching to draw—the spatial infirmity of a human touch. This cognisance and incorporating of the hand carries over from Earley's habit of rooting through ignored land for abandoned things. The physical acts of reaching and pulling, selecting and taking return to the work in subtexts and undercurrents, remembering their maker. It is useful to think of this eclipse in context with the exhibition's title: 'Before the Close of Day'. Tales of the future never seem to carry the greyish relativism of the past or present. It's easier to forget the difficulty of thinking about the future, and design some mawkish, neutral context in which to situate the next fable - some blank planet. In this, the journey from rock-smasher to atom-smasher can coincide with a moral fugue state: an extrapolation of present conditions rolled down a slippery slope. In this, we think that the future won't be beautiful.

Seán O Sullivan

ⁱ Earley, Brendan. *Before the Close of Day*. motherstankstation.com, 19 Feb 2014.

<<http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/before-the-close-of-day/>>

ⁱⁱ McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. p.142

ⁱⁱⁱ Clarke, Arthur C. *The Sentinel*. New York: Berkley Books, 1986. p.122