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BRENDAN EARLEY INTERVIEWED BY PATRICK T. MURPHY, JANUARY 31ST 2012.

PTM These abandoned urban spaces, benighted landscapes, that hold so much meaning/potential for you. I am reminded of those great tracts of dereliction one sees around the large cities of the northeast of the USA, ruins and monuments to a time of manufacture. There is a bridge over the Delaware at Trenton, New Jersey. It is a steel bridge and carries in huge lettering "The World takes Trenton Makes" there is such poignancy in its confidence.

BE My own experience was while attending a seminar in Buffalo going from the Hudson Valley into a huge rust belt that surrounds that city. The scale of production was enormous. After the war these factories were supplying the world, like Britain in the 19th Century. And now that muscle has moved to the East, to China. We have lost more than manufacturing we have lost skills. A couple of years ago on Harrington Street the last shop I knew that repaired televisions closed. It's cheaper to replace than to repair. The workings of things have become less apparent

look under the hood of a car, you can't see the component parts of the internal combustion engine anymore. Indeed, much is made of the 'inbuilt obsolescence' we find in products being made today - take for example Ikea's furniture, nobody buying these products would believe that They will be family heirlooms handed down from generation to generation. As someone who makes things I am acutely aware of production becoming an ethical question - I mean how can one add to a world(in the west) which has already too much.

PTM And these geographical spaces, these no man's land that can be found in every city, they stimulate you?

BE Well to be honest it starts with the walk out here to the hinterland where my studio is and then I begin. I find the world increasingly not making sense so here in the studio I manufacture sense. It starts with what ever I have found along the way or perhaps some thing that someone gave me. The studio accident is fundamental to

my practice – I would see the studio as a place where things come together. Like collage I suppose, things bump into each other here and by this interaction make something else – not products of ideas per se but the stuff of the world. It's about making. I regard my practice as work, as a job. I get here at nine, make some tea, and then get down to drawing [in this case the blue drawing for the planned exhibition]. I often think of my labour in those large drawings as close to craft, like work on a loom. And this labour and its effort and its time connects me with the day. I think some people have no connection with the day but these drawings ground me through their demand for attentive repetition.

PTM But there is nothing entropic about their creation it's rather the converse

BE Yes there is active energy here. And colour. I avoided colour in the past, I found it uncontrollable. But then after our first child was born, Lily, I started to admit colour. Colour used to seem to me too confusing, too hard to control – but this turned out to be its strength. Its lack of control made it interesting. It always seems to go further than your ability to control it. Plus the colour of the plaster board helped exaggerate the relationship between itself and the metal of the aluminium. David Batchelor has that wonderful book 'Chromaphobia' that deals with the qualities of colour, it being feminine or savage and our deep suspicion of it. And white being controlled, masculine, rational. My dabbling with IKEA, attempted to be irrational, to go against the determination of the flat pack to make it behave otherwise. Well, I remember when I was trying to misbehave with the three kitchen units during my installation at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, an electrician that came in during the assembly said "The thing about squares is that they will always be square".

But there is an essential nature in this counter activity. If you look at a grid- planned city people still

make short cuts, subvert the form, personalize it. In a utopian plan like Brasilia, the order is undermined by the use, people walk, they have to carry things, it's the shortest distance between points that finally creates the pathways not the plan. I think Rosalind Krauss has proposed that the grid will be the defining emblem of 20th Century art so it's anyone's guess what will it be replaced with in the 21st Century.

PTM Well right now the west is in such a state of apprehension that the rigidity and absolutism of the grid doesn't offer much comfort. It's like 1941 and we don't know the war will end in 1945, We are without certainty.

BE That reminds me of Phillip K. Dick's book "The Man in the High Castle", which examines what the world might be like if the Axis powers had won. I think that science fiction became such a vital genre after the war because the war was so literally earth shattering that all these potentials, these maybe worlds, could happen.

PTM And coming out of that you have always probed Modernism and in particular the utopianism, delivery and collapse of Modern Architecture.

BE I have always found my work falls between architecture and art and I am happy in this between space. For me when I was first interested in Modernism and was making sculpture in New York (1997-99), that crucible of Modern Architecture, I was told that whatever subject you pursue it shouldn't deal with Modernism. So needless to say that is where I went. Also I was making objects, sculpture, when photography and video were in ascent. On returning to a Dublin under construction in 1999 you could see the antecedents of the design of the new buildings were going right back to the Bauhaus, Corbusier, the beginnings of Modern Architecture but they were driven not by aesthetic but by square footage, pure commercial propositions. Prior to that Modernism in Ireland was a civic value, public buildings and spaces like Busaras the bus depot,

schools, hospitals. I have recently been able to buy really cheap building materials, studding, plasterboard, all brought in just before the development era went belly-up and I have to say they are not premium products, they are all diluted. I am buying from a scrap yard that has salvaged this stuff from all of the abandoned building sites and half built structures. These half finished constructions are the ruins of that era. These buildings have a strange and potent temporality, they are past, present and future. What the build was to be, what it is but also, what it could still be. Again it excites the fictive, the stories they harbour both historical and speculative.

PTM I suppose underlying all of this discussion on failed utopia, ruins, fictions is Romanticism

BE Well there are many degrees of Romanticism. I am of a generation when there was a strange blending of Romanticism and Conceptualism. You could see it in the work of Tacita Dean and Rodney Graham, there was also a rediscovery of Bas Jan Ader's work during my time in NY which had a real effect on me. Again my preference for being between things, occupying a hybrid space.

PTM So kinda second generation hippy.

BE (laugh) Those off the cuff remarks are often true.

PTM Yes I remember seeing the meadowlands of New Jersey, that feathery swampy area just across the Hudson from Manhattan and thinking god this is where Robert Smithson came to experiment and play, a hybrid space right under the nose of Manhattan.

BE That was the interesting thing about that generation they didn't really have to go to Utah the wasteland was just over the river but Smithson, Michael Heizer et al where perhaps extending into the exotic, But for me the exotic is the other side of that wall. Thing is about Ireland, it's been so lived in there is no desert, no wilderness to go to. The neglected, the overlooked tends to be next door. Whether that is the seemingly un-owned land around here or the rubbish I find discarded on my way to work. I think sculpture has this wonderful ability to reclaim objects/things from being rejected and give them another life than that intended. Indeed this is why I am attracted to these hinterlands – their unmined wealth. However, I stress it's not recycling, that would be too pat a description but it is a redemptive act.

PTM Well in something like the Styrofoam pieces you elevate the design of this packing material into the architectonic but then go on further and cast it in bronze and patinate it in black. That's a complex progression.

BE It's like transubstantiation, an alchemy of sorts – through





process fundamentally changing something into something other. What fascinates me about Styrofoam is that it is an engineered negative space. I take something white, light and negative and through process turn it into an object that is black, weighs 100kg and is positive (as in "A Million Years Later"). I don't subscribe to the Modernist idea of reductivism, whittling away to an essence but I add, elaborate things.

PTM Your objects are always comprised of a number of elements, pairs or triads.

BE I like the complexity it offers, like in Nature. We always assume that Nature is in balance. Almost static with a tilt here and there to reset it but Nature is constantly and dramatically shifting in and out of balance and creating new hybrid possibilities. Some of these possibilities become viable, natural, others don't and perish. That's my process, bringing things together and see if they work.

PTM So do you destroy a lot of work?

BE Well I disassemble them and send them to the bad corner where they hang out until they are called up again. There is a piece there at the moment called "Day for Night", it has been through several evolutions and I think its finally starting to work. I am constantly cannibalizing existing pieces to bring new pieces into existence.

PTM Robert Morris, who was your tutor at Hunter, was one of the foremost artists to ride the Conceptual wave however he never abandoned making objects whether his more severe work from the early seventies to almost Baroque over the top approach of the 80s

BE I met him in the 90s and at that stage he had been teaching for thirty years, he's retired now. He was very supportive to me personally and had such vast knowledge sometimes about the most obscure subjects.

He recalled that he knew the death of Minimalism had occurred when in 1968 he went to see Kubricks 2001 -A Space Odyssey. When the Monolith arrived Morris knew that the world had moved on. The avant garde had become another style. He was a deep thinker that made things. When I met him he was elderly but he held himself tall, like a cowboy - a wrangler from Missouri that rode into the New York art scene in 1960. And there was a Romanticism to him.

PTM Well when I look at your super large drawings, and feel how phenomenal they are and how they will behave in the gallery space, there's a Romanticism there too.

BE Well with these big drawings, they are so large that I am putting myself literally and metaphorically into them. You can sense the labour and the time involved, they are performative. And another

aspect of these drawings is that they wear their mistakes well. It's drawing's tautological nature; forever describing its own making that attracts me, its eternal incompleteness always re-enacting imperfection and incompleteness. This is complemented by another aspect to drawing, not based upon a theoretical or philosophical understanding but on areas of human experience that this medium has become associated with: informality, immediacy, subjectivity, memory, narrative. These considerations often demand that drawing be explored beyond the primal ontological qualities in order to look at ways it can reaffirm my commitment to basic human experiences. And of course these large monochromes are shown on the floor, they hold the horizontal plain and I expect that they will always implicate the space above them in an implied column. So they will act as a two and a three dimensional object, a hybrid space, a space between.

PTM and another space to the vertical implied space is that it cannot be penetrated as one doesn't walk on a drawing the viewer stands on its edge.

BE Well I don't know, there may be a point of entry, because the way the lines of the drawing veer a kind of jetty appears, a cup shape. It will be interesting to watch how viewers behave but my suspicion is that they will gravitate towards this feature.

PTM And you have two very distinct aspects to your drawings the large abstraction and the small figurative drawings

BE I started on the larger scale because I was getting fed up with depiction, with being tied to creating an image. And I wanted to find a way to move from depicting an object to making a space, an architectural space. Even the small drawings in this show use elements such as photocopies, fragments of photographs that document either performances or interventions from the seventies, as Brian pointed out to me memory is also a way of occupying a building. In terms of the

larger drawings in order to get this architectonic quality the scale had to be vast. You know Serra's big black drawings, well they are not like that, they are nearer to Chinese scrolls. Those scrolls act both like maps and paintings, they are so topographically rich, and their length means that you have to move to comprehend the image. And that's what I wanted from these large drawings, to create place, somewhere between cartography and architecture.

PTM For the upcoming installation at the RHA the drawings are framed in an architectural context by a huge floor to ceiling stud and plasterboard wall. The language of construction sets the context.

BE Yes but in two ways, firstly when you enter you are confronted by the prosaic, metal studs and grey plaster board impeding your view of the space, then because we are using anti-fire grade plasterboard the other surface is covered in foil and will act as a reflective surface for 'the pool' [A Place Between]. I can't wait to see how it acts. And this is what excites me at the moment. The small drawings dealt with the romantic pathetic, a bit like Bas Van Ader in some of his pieces. And these are more optimistic, look at the colour. Bright, but I hasten to say, artificial. These colours come from the petro-chemical industry. The pinks, the blues, the Styrofoam are all from petrol. That was an epiphany for me when I realized that everything I used came from that one industry - which is on its last legs, it's finite. I am working at the end of an age, with the materials of that age.

PTM You almost say that with nostalgia

BE No but with a resignation. As I said, the world is not making sense to me, I have no idea what is going to happen.

PTM And here in the studio where you manufacture sense, what sense does your sculptural object offer?

BE well I think that they are anxious objects. They are nervous about what they are, what their



function is, whether they should have been made. I think this lack of confidence also explains why they all hug the ground avoiding the issue of gravity. And in all of that they are endearing.

PTM Yes it will be a very horizontal low level installation.

BE Yes you will be looking down at the sculptures, an aerial view, another nod to Romanticism. And perhaps this scale also comes from my own history with models and creating objects that stand for something else.

PTM Symbolism?

BE I have no trouble with archetypes, I think we need new ways of looking at them. The relativism that had arisen from Post-modern discourse didn't offer me a starting point. These works do.

I think that the resurgence of sculpture emphasizes this search for a new or refreshed language of objects pertinent to contemporary issues. Such as "January" which is effectively a Janus Head made from Styrofoam from an IMAC. You get a sense of that seeking and anxiety in something like the inaugural show at the New Museum 'Unmonumental' there are so many combinations of materials striving for attention. There was a more refined thesis in a similar exhibition at the Hirshhorn slightly earlier entitled "The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas", it was a seminal show for me and my embracing object making again.

PTM The coining of new archetypes that would seem to contain a moral position, a societal responsibility.

BE Well there is a shamanism in the work, my acts are amplified out into the ether, connecting with the other world as a way of finding a cure, an attempt at addressing an imbalance which I suppose is an ethical response too. I feel as Bachelor suggests that the only real possibility for relevance of any medium is through its corruption, actually being made impure rather than pure. The hybrid works of late tend to work across sculpture and drawing combining some sort of sense of meaningful instability. This strategy isn't about any sort of Post-Modern pastiche but some thing akin to a belief in an ecology of production that relies more on displacement and mutability to get at the root of the problems to do with production and consumption in this world.

PTM Thank you Brendan.

BE Thank you.

Patrick T. Murphy is Director of the Royal Hibernian Academy. From 1989 to 1999, he directed the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and prior to that, was Director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College Dublin from 1984 to 1989.

