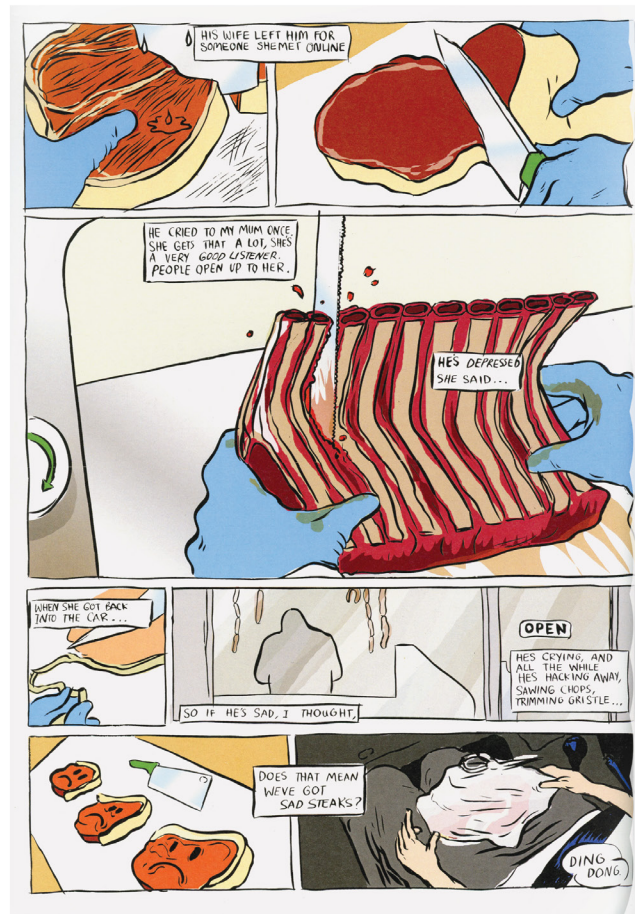


Home Economics



STUART MIDDLETON's sculptures, stories
and films reflect on the violence of gentrification and
London's changing urban landscape by *Paul Pieroni*

THEY'LL PISS IN YOUR MOUTH, bash in your skull. They'll make you watch as they fuck and fight on the floor. Desperate bodies doing desperate things: Stuart Middleton's work is full of them.

Middleton, who studied at London's Camberwell College of Arts before graduating from Michael Krebber's painting class at the Städelschule in Frankfurt in 2016, makes sculptures, comics, animated films, architectural models, paintings and site-specific works. He also writes short fiction. To say he's an important artist right now is not a particular reflection on his status: it's to put forward his work as an expression against recent social reform in London.

Now relocated to Glasgow, Middleton is part of a generation of artists who came of age in lockstep with the regeneration, gentrification, corporatization and privatization of the capital. His work and that of others – such as Dean Blunt, Jesse Darling, Morag Keil and Matthew Richardson – can be read in relation to the harmful impact these processes have had on already marginal bodies, spaces, communities and cultures. 'There used to be a city here,' writes Berlin-based artist Hannah Black – another of London's displaced – in her essay collection *Dark Pool Party* (2016). We all feel it.

December 2014: Middleton's solo exhibition, 'Sad Sketches', opens at the artist-run Piper Keys in London. Four bar tables, each supported by a twist of human limbs, sit on a dirty rubber floor. The gallery is painted 'drunk-tank pink' – a supposedly calming colour used on the walls of American correctional facilities. Made from papier-mâché, the limbs have varicose veins and bruised skin. It's a grim scene. One review compares it to a boisterous night at a 'local boozier or German *Kneipe*'. Not a fantasy place, just somewhere everyday, somewhere 'normal'. Middleton's porno-gore comic *A Year Passes Like Nothing* (2013) is an equally grisly quotidian snapshot. It follows a picaresque narrator (presumably Middleton himself) as he crunches through a year in London. A relentless cycle of sport, sex and drudgework is backdropped by chimerical meditations on city life: 'I used to think I could retreat from it,' states the narrator, 'but a while back I looked up and realized ... It's a gut. And we're in it slowly dissolving into shit.'

The cereal-box-sized architectural portraits that Middleton began making that same year shift attention from desperate bodies to desperate buildings. The series comprises scale models of whole rooms or sections of rooms – empty, neglected spaces fashioned from cardboard or foamcore. Placed on plinths or displayed on the floor, some models are vac-packed with milk and cheese, which

OPPOSITE PAGE
A Year Passes Like Nothing (detail), 2013.
Courtesy: the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

RIGHT
Sad Sketches I, 2014, papier-mâché, cardboard, watercolour, coloured pencil, polymer clay, aluminium foil and laminated chipboard, 1.1 x 1 x 1 m.
Courtesy: the artist and Piper Keys, London; photograph: Original&theCopy

BELOW
'Sad Sketches', 2014, installation view at Piper Keys, London.
Courtesy: the artist and Piper Keys, London; photograph: Original&theCopy



produces blooms of mould over time. These 'homes' betray all domestic expectations, offering an image of neither comfort nor privacy.

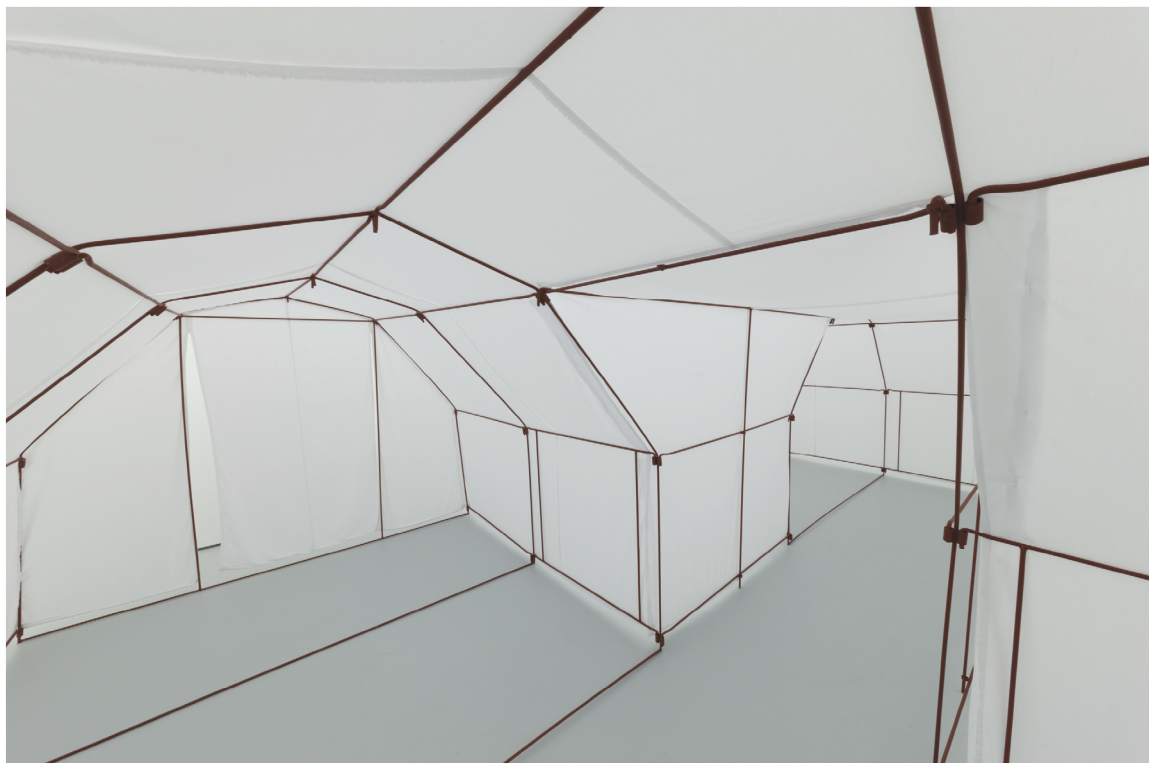
This line of thought continues in 'The Gonsks', Middleton's 2015 debut at Carlos/Ishikawa. Much of the east London gallery's industrial space is filled with a white tent. Secreted behind the tent is a shower unit, a diorama depicting an empty domestic interior in its tray. Under the glaring fluorescent lights, the tent offers a bleak vision of dwelling: crabbed away in darkness, the diorama does the same.

May 2017: Middleton opens 'Bear' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA). The Lower Gallery has been stripped bare for the exhibition – its wall cladding and suspended ceiling removed, revealing the brick and corrugated metal beneath. The sole addition to the space is a wooden platform. Raised to the level of an adjacent concourse, and made from reclaimed floorboards and joists taken from domestic properties in London, it too looks revealed.

Titled *i*, this intervention brought into play a number of references. Middleton, who grew up in a farming community in Cheshire, stated in the accompanying press release that the platform was designed to resemble the slatted livestock floors used in modern agricultural architecture. Middleton often switches between urban and rural settings in his work. An untitled short story, read at the ICA as part of the exhibition, tells the gruesome tale of an agricultural labourer who smashes pig skulls with an iron bar for a living. Against bucolic romanticism, the farm is a bloody, industrial site for Middleton: a machine for processing life, efficient and often cruel. As the press release concluded, *i* foregrounded a 'critical position on the concept of "landscape" as a product of human design composed from conflicting ideological positions'.

Clearly, the contemporary aesthetics of gentrification – that denuded industrial look now ubiquitous in London and elsewhere, from the clothing store All Saints to members' club Soho House – is another reference point here. With its veneer of austere, pared-back functionality, there are echoes of the appearance of agricultural architecture. By drawing a comparison between the two, Middleton situated





ABOVE
'The Gongs', 2015, steel,
polycotton, metal
primer, light fittings,
dimensions variable.
Courtesy: the artist and
Carlos/Ishikawa,
London

BELOW
Untitled, 2015, foamcore,
glue, gouache, plastic,
cheese, milk, PVC, tape,
vacuum attachment,
40 x 25 x 20 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Carlos/Ishikawa,
London



OPPOSITE PAGE
2, 2017, stop-frame
animation stills.
Courtesy: the artist
and Carlos/Ishikawa,
London

unwitting viewers inside a space that could be a factory, possibly an abattoir, or a zeitgeisty city-centre bar or coffee shop. Pertinently, the intervention also evoked art-historical precedents, including Michael Asher's famous alterations of gallery spaces in an effort to expose the elitist value systems that structure art-world institutions.

As the exhibition's polysemous title suggested, far from being resolved, 'Beat' seemed to be actively churning and chewing over its terms. The image of a cow's stomach comes to mind. Ruminants (cattle, deer) are unable to digest plant matter directly. They pass their food through a four-chambered stomach, each stage working over the same material until nutrients are released. Likewise, against attempting to pitch a direct or fixed critical position, the ideation of *i* was recursive, loopy; less a cogent conceptual statement than a digestive process, with terms undergoing constant revision.

Significantly, the planning of Middleton's show coincided with a time of upheaval within the ICA itself. The last exhibition programmed by outgoing curator Matt Williams ahead of the institution's multimillion-pound renovation under new director, Stefan Kalmár, 'Beat' was perhaps a kind of exorcism: a buffer zone established as one idea expired and another began.

Finally, as with Middleton's work at large, there was something ludic about *i*'s evasion of clarity. In the ICA's upstairs galleries, a stop-motion video played on loop. Titled 2, it showed a mangy dog padding around a sterile, white enclosure. It seemed emblematic of the exhibition as a whole. 'Beat': a shaggy dog story, then.

This, of course, raises a paradox. If an artwork or exhibition is difficult – even impossible – to decipher, how does it manage to say anything at all? My own sense is that Middleton's work is abundantly readable, it just doesn't take a set position. It has a complexity that takes time and effort to appreciate. To borrow a word from our contemporary, marketized lexicon, it requires 'investment'. In a sense, we could see 'Beat' as an act of communications insurgency – jamming its own signals and, in so doing, offering an exemplary image of how to refuse and resist the 'access culture' so pervasive in contemporary art institutions.

It has only been in the past two decades – ushered in by the neoliberal one-two punches of Blairism and the yBas – that contemporary art has been re-imagined as a truly populist experience in the UK. Attempts to diversify audiences and redress endemic elitism are both worthy and necessary; however, it's impossible to deny the creeping 'Disneyfication' affecting some of the UK's larger institutions. Autographed architecture, prizes and competitions, marquee shows, bandwagon-jumping themes and large-scale commissions are all attention-grabbing strategies, but are there not other ways of experiencing art? I felt that 'Beat' signalled a wilder possibility: an institution as it might be.

'On Unbelonging' was a public programme organized by the ICA's associate curator, Rosalie Doubal, to accompany 'Beat'. It brought together artists, architects, activists, geographers and poets to explore contemporary notions of urban landscape, particularly in light of social disruption and displacement in London over recent decades. One event took place on the slatted platform of *i*: a reading by the poet Bhanu Kapil. In her introduction, Kapil made repeated references to moving below the platform, to the space underneath. After the reading, a technician removed some of the floorboards and both Kapil and Middleton disappeared beneath. There, flowers and water gathered at the spot on the River Stour depicted in John Constable's *The Hay Wain* (1821) – a seminal image of Britain's pastoral landscape delivered to the world at the height of the industrial revolution – were offered. This movement downwards – away from the public, into a different space, one separate and inaccessible – felt fugitive. As the writer Jack Halberstam states in the introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013): 'Fugitivity is being separate from settling. It is a being in motion that has learned that "organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves" [...] and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned.' While I don't know where Middleton descended to with Kapil after the reading, their movement seemed important. Within the space of one of the world's most visible contemporary art institutions, the art – just for a moment – disappeared from sight ●

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STUART MIDDLETON is based in Glasgow, UK. This year, his solo exhibition 'Beat' was on view at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK, from May to July and is currently at Tramway, Glasgow, until 23 October. He will have a solo show at KM Graz, Austria, in spring 2018.

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