

The Idea of the City: Miriam Innes and the Imagining of New York

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“I truly felt a strange belonging and familiarity to the city” – Miriam Innes.

It has been said that the city is the greatest invention of the human race. It marks our presence on the planet in an emphatic, unambiguous way. Cities are vast concentrations of humanity that not only mark out the technological and industrial centres of our civilization but, by their very nature, they create a border space between ourselves and the rest of the natural world. The light of cities can be seen from space, shining out into the blackness of the stellar void, announcing our attachment to this place, the Earth.

The city also inhabits our dreams and memories. Our conceptions of the past and of the future are marked by imaging how the city was, or could well be, while in the present, we associate particular cities with specific connotations and emotional resonances; a city of light, a city of romance, a city of danger. These are global cities with well-known qualities and attitudes, even to those who have never visited them.

Among those global centres, New York City is imbued with a vast range of associations, some because of its history and rich culture, but many more because of its location at the centre of a galaxy of fictions in art, in cinema and television and in music. In this way, New York exists as much as an idea as it does as a physical place.

Miriam Innes is an artist whose work has long explored the energy of the idea of the city, and specifically New York, with its dense urban landscapes of interconnected buildings, layered by age and culture, topped off by the crenelated profile of its high rise. Innes captures the essence of the city, its dynamic perspectives and receding spaces.

Innes’s work results from her first-hand experiences, the rambles of the title, but the work itself has been created in places far afield from New York City: in Logan in

Queensland, Australia, and at Innes's studio in Abu Dhabi. What the artist has found however is that there's a sense of deep connection between the subject of her drawings and her audience. This understanding of New York as an *idea*, as much as an actual place, was a communal connection that produced a sense of sharing, a kind of collective dream space amplified by the city's familiar image in popular culture, but more significantly, serving as a connective point for collective experience and imagination.

The lifetime of the city space can be measured by millennia - the world's oldest cities are 11 to 13 thousand years old. While they morph and change through the ages, their continuity is a central part of our claim to permanence as a species. Artists of the past imagined the passing of humanity as a neo-Romantic graveyard, a place marked by ruins and desolation. In Innes's exquisite drawings, the city is celebrated as a place that exists not only in the present moment, but also as eternal in our imaginations.

Dr. Andrew Frost is a writer, critic and documentary maker. He has been the editor of The Art Life since 2004, and the art critic for Guardian Australia since 2013. He is the writer and presenter of more than dozen documentaries on Australian contemporary art for ABC1, and he directed and co-produced the documentaries My Space Program: The Art of Peter Hennessey [2016] and The Grand Mistake: A Portrait of Mclean Edwards [2017].