



■ **April is the cruellest month**  
The book's opening sequence retraces the final moments of Stephen Lawrence's life: the area near the roundabout in Eltham where the gang of white, racist thugs crossed the road to attack Lawrence while he was waiting at the bus stop on Well Hall Road on Thursday 22 April, 1993.



# Unreal City

Urban photography marries themes and passages from TS Eliot in a striking look at London

**A**driaan van Heerden's new photographic collection weaves together two types of 'wasteland'. According to Bernard O'Donoghue – Irish poet and Oxford University lecturer – *Unreal City* 'illuminates our contemporary wasteland with cold and understated ferocity, through the prism of TS Eliot's masterpiece, *The Waste Land*'.

Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, with civilisation apparently in ruins. 'As we approach the centenary of the first publication of this literary work (in 2022), one does not have to look far for evidence of our current wasteland,' says Van Heerden. 'A decade of austerity has resulted in 130,000 unnecessary deaths and 320,000 homeless people living on the UK's streets, as wealth inequality keeps growing and property becomes more and more unaffordable, especially in London.'

Property development has brought uneven benefits, with tens of thousands of poorer families displaced and struggling to cope as a result of welfare

cuts. In O'Donoghue's assessment, Van Heerden posits that we now live in the future of Eliot's *Waste Land*, and that much of what is traumatic in our world is anticipated or described with great urgency in this century-old document.

'In Eliot's work, London is the *Unreal City*, the background against which many of the characters have their entrances and exits,' says Van Heerden, who switches the focus to contemporary London, marrying the harsh everyday realities of its most vulnerable inhabitants with the poem's lyrical descriptions.

'London is many things to many people,' he says. 'To those for whom money is no object it can be an opportunity to indulge in every luxury dreamt up by man and woman; a cultural paradise of galleries, theatres, refined music, Michelin-starred dining, exclusive public schools and private members' clubs. London is home to the greatest number of billionaires on the planet and has the only shop in the world where those with enough money can walk in off the street and buy a private jet. But to those who are

not so fortunate it can be a squalid and dangerous place, where one's person is constantly in harm's way; where one is at risk of knife crime, acid attacks and gun violence; where one does one's best to eke out an existence doing menial jobs on zero-hour contracts; where one's children might easily slip through the fingers of failing schools and into the waiting arms of violent gangs.'

For Van Heerden, 'Unreal' has a double meaning: 'as if imagined; strange and dream-like, and a slang version: extremely or surprisingly good,' he says. 'Whether London can reverse its descent into "unreality" (in the first sense) and become a surprisingly good place to live in for all its inhabitants remains to be seen. The dark humour in several of the pictures emphasises the "unreality" of life in the capital, but also holds out a few rays of hope that all may not be lost.' ●



■ A launch for the book will take place at Bonhams in Knightsbridge on 2 December, from 6-8pm. To attend, RSVP to [matthew.haley@bonhams.com](mailto:matthew.haley@bonhams.com). The printed collection of *Unreal City* can be purchased at prices starting from £49.95 at: [adriaanvanheerden.com](http://adriaanvanheerden.com).



## ■ Looking into the heart of light, the silence

This above picture of All Hallows-by-the-Tower, one of the oldest churches in London (reflected here in a nearby office building), illustrates one of the book's primary themes: the failure of religion to fulfil a spiritual or socially healing role in our contemporary waste land environment.

## ■ HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

In the poem the line refers to the usual call at pub closing time. The picture, taken at Waterloo Station, illustrates another theme: that the demands of the city leave little room for rest, relaxation and reflection. The escalator and overhead casings appear to be shaped like an hourglass as workers are being summoned to work.



■ In the mountains, there you feel free



■ By waters of Leman  
I sat down and wept

The contrast between towers of the poor and towers of the wealthy (two examples of which are shown left and right) illustrates a key theme in *Unreal City*: growing wealth inequality and the apparently unbridgeable divide between rich and poor. The towers of the rich are glitzy, shiny and clean; the towers of the poor are often dilapidated, dirty and depressing. The name of the residential 'mountain' on the left (Windermere Point) evokes scenes of idyllic beauty: the iconic Lake District in Cumbria. However, the reality here is starkly different. On the right, of course, is the one-time office of the now-bankrupt American investment bank Lehman Brothers.



■ I have walked among  
the lowest of the dead

In looking for ways to mitigate the more dreadful aspects of London life, one often looks to the arts for distraction and amusement. However, because of the high cost of living, and the fact that the laws of supply and demand frequently do not work in their favour, artists (musicians, poets, actors, painters, sculptors, et al.) are often poorly paid, and live from one gig to the next. In this picture, taken at Highgate Cemetery, one can make out a ghostly figure between the gravestones top left.







#### ■ The profit and loss

This picture, taken on Primrose Hill, explores the breakdown of communication between people in contemporary society (represented here by the pernicious omnipresence of the smartphone). It also evokes the rhetorical question in Mark 8:36 ('For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?').



#### ■ This music crept by me upon the waters

The theme of the struggle of artists is picked up again in the above image taken on Hungerford Bridge. Although some are privileged to perform in cultural hotspots such as the Royal Festival Hall (clearly visible in the background), others are not so fortunate and have to take their chances with the elements.

#### ■ What should I resent?

This picture, taken in a pub on Trafalgar Square, illustrates the failure of people to connect in meaningful ways. In the context of the poem, this line appears just after the young woman ('the typist') has been abandoned by the young man ('a small house agent's clerk') after an unsatisfactory sexual encounter. Here, the young woman is presented as more defiant, rather than a mere passive spectator of her own seduction. A comic element is provided by the rising phallic symbol of Nelson's Column, bursting forth on the left-hand side of the frame.



#### ■ He who was living is now dead

This image, taken in Mount Street Gardens, Mayfair, demonstrates how wealth inequality is eroding the lives of rich and poor alike, as well as the lives of communities. One could argue that the *Unreal City* is a coming together of the city of the rich and the city of the poor. The wealthy have to cauterise their compassion in order to enjoy themselves with a clean conscience, while the poor suffer from a lack of opportunities, often coupled with reduced life expectancy.