

Adam McEwen

Revue de presse
Press review



PARIS

Adam McEwen

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L'Anglais McEwen semble entretenir un lien privilégié avec les situations anxiogènes ou les catastrophes, notamment celle du Titanic. Celle-ci est en quelque sorte inscrite dans son héritage familial, puisque son arrière-grand-père comptait parmi les victimes du naufrage.

Cette catastrophe maritime fait partie de notre imaginaire collectif, dans lequel elle a la particularité de s'inscrire en noir et blanc : elle s'est passée de nuit, dans une profonde obscurité et la photographie couleur n'existait pas. Ce ressenti particulier transparait dans les images d'Adam McEwen ; il les traite soit au graphite, soit avec un pigment phosphorescent sur du grafoil. L'ambiance nocturne est de mise, accentuée par le support utilisé : des plaques d'éponge en cellulose, matériau ingrat gommant toutes les précisions du cliché. Il entretient ainsi un flou mémoriel qui pourrait peut-être se justifier, si ce n'est que certaines images sont affublées d'accessoires (une ventouse, une cymbale, un cerceau) qui mettent le spectateur à distance, voire le provoquent. Aussi cette œuvre évoquant une catastrophe majeure se révèle-t-elle quelque peu anecdotique, les associations d'idées de McEwen paraissant plutôt incongrues.

Aux icebergs dévastateurs, quoique métaphoriques, on préférera des scènes plus contemporaines, comme cette catastrophe aérienne ou ce tunnel sous l'Hudson, à New York. Ici, le sentiment de catastrophe ou de dangerosité n'a aucun affect historique. Il offre un aspect distancié de la réalité, notamment par l'usage de couleurs ambivalentes, comme si tout cela n'était qu'un cauchemar, comme le fut naguère le Titanic, la nostalgie en moins.

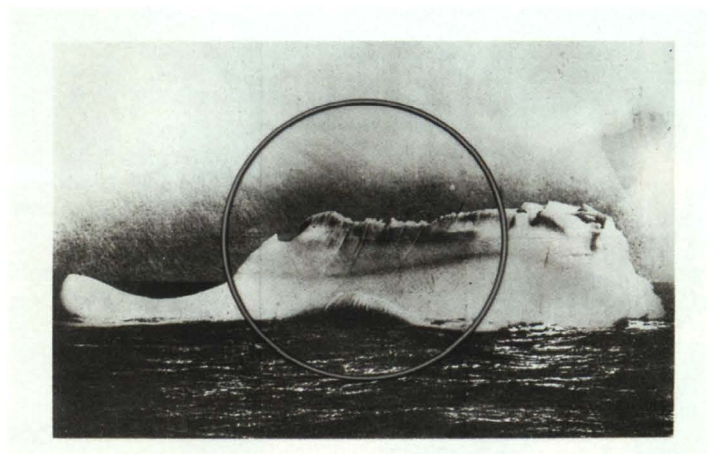
Bernard Marcelis

This British artist seems to have a personal connection with anxiety-producing situations and catastrophes, especially the sinking of the Titanic. It's related to his family background—his great-grandfather was among the victims.

That disaster at sea is part of our collective imagination, and among its particularities is that we always think about it in black and white. The liner went down at night, in total darkness, and color photography hadn't been invented yet. That particular mode of perception marks Adam McEwen's images of it. He prints them either in graphite or with a phosphorescent pigment on Grafoil. The ambience is always nocturnal, accentuated by the support he uses, cellulose sponges, a difficult medium that blurs the precise details of the photo. This might be said to correspond to the fuzziness of memory, except for the accessories some images are decked out with, generating a distancing effect or even a provocation. Thus this work based on a major disaster has a bit of an anecdotal feeling to it, and McEwen's associations seem incongruous. Instead of the somewhat metaphorical icebergs, some people might prefer his more contemporary scenes like the aftermath of an airplane crash and Manhattan's Hudson Tunnel. There's no historic dimension to the feeling of danger or catastrophe. His version of reality is made all the more distanced by the use of ambiguous colors, as if all this were just a nightmare, like the Titanic once was, before the nostalgia set in.

Translation, L-S Torgoff

« Ice Ice Baby ». (Ph. Claire Dorn)



DISCOVERIES *art scene*



ARTIST ADAM MCEWEN WITH RECENT PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS ON SPONGE IN HIS NEW YORK STUDIO. HIS SOLO SHOW AT THE ASPEN ART MUSEUM RUNS FROM JANUARY 13 TO MAY 28 (ASPENARTMUSEUM.ORG).

Provocative Statements

On the eve of his first U.S. solo museum show, *Adam McEwen* opens his studio for a look at his wry, wondrous works

At first glance, the through line of Adam McEwen's art appears to be humor—of the deadpan variety often associated with Brits

like himself. There are his parodies of shop-window signs, such as the one announcing “Fuck Off We’re Closed,” which he made shortly after moving to New York in 2000, and his pitch-perfect obituaries for subjects who are still alive. There are his drawings of real text messages (one reads, “Cant. Dad’s shooting a porno in ohio, mom’s flying to seattle”) and his photographs, printed on colored kitchen sponges, of chewing gum stomped and baked into sidewalks.

But take another look, and something darker, more unsettling surfaces. Those wads of gum in fact reference bombing patterns from the Second World War. Graphite sculptures of everyday objects, meanwhile, may look hyperreal, only that mailbox doesn’t open, and that elevator button doesn’t light up. “A lot of things I’ve made in graphite, like a watercooler or an ATM, are analogies for nondelivery,” McEwen says in his Long Island City, New York, studio. “That sense of wanting to deliver and failing—art can feel a bit like that.”

Tall and lanky, with a plummy English accent, McEwen has a knack for keeping viewers off-balance. Videos shot driving through Manhattan’s tunnels loop so the car never reaches an

exit. An infamous photograph of an executed Mussolini and his lover hanging by their feet in a public square is inverted, so the couple appears to be flying. His obituaries have a similar effect. “You see it and are like, Is Bill Clinton dead?” McEwen says. “In that split second, things become unstable.”

“There is a poeticism about the realities of the lives we lead,” says Heidi Zuckerman, director of Colorado’s Aspen Art Museum, which has organized McEwen’s first solo museum exhibition in the U.S., on view from January 13 through May 28. “The show is really about death.” Case in point: a 2013 graphite version of the coffin carrier McEwen and his fellow pallbearers used to take his father, Rory—the influential folk singer and botanicals painter—to the graveyard 35 years ago. “If you had made that object in 1450, you would have made the same object,” says McEwen, marveling at the timeless form, a minimalist abstraction embedded with emotion.

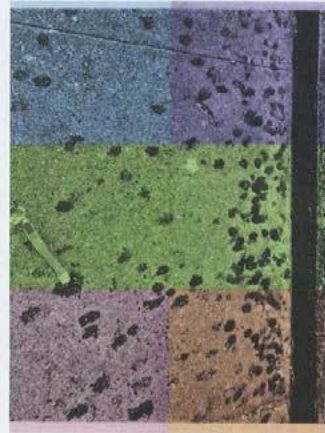
It took McEwen several years to come to terms with his own artistic ambitions. Raised in London and Scotland, he studied English at Oxford, let a family friend guilt-trip him into taking a job at an investment bank, then bolted for the

DISCOVERIES *art scene*



1

1. DISPLAYED IN HIS STUDIO ARE SMALL CONCRETE SCULPTURES OF DEPLOYED AIR BAGS. 2. AN UNTITLED 2015 PRINT ON SPONGE. 3. HOLLAND TUNNEL (YELLOW), 2016.



2

“That sense of wanting to deliver and failing— art can feel a bit like that,” says *Adam McEwen*.

California Institute of the Arts. After graduating he returned to London, where he took a part-time job writing obituaries for *The Daily Telegraph*. Struggling to find his artistic voice, he composed an obit for punk icon Malcolm McLaren, then living. After moving to New York at age 35, he made more faux death notices, some of which attracted attention as part of the 2006 Whitney Biennial. “They’re homages, not wishful thinking,” he says. An homage to Macaulay Culkin? “He was pretty incredible in *Home Alone*. Nothing wrong with that film.”

More recently McEwen has created concrete sculptures of deployed air bags and a series of long, narrow photographs of stretch limousines, printed on sponge. “Again, they speak of people wanting,” he says, exclaiming with a tragic twinge, “It’s going to be the best night of our lives!” As he points out, such limos have fallen out of favor. “These guys are cruising around desperately looking for work.”

McEwen empathizes with the drivers, obscured behind tinted windows. “As an artist, you’ve got to reveal yourself, because if you don’t, you won’t make good work,” he says. “But you don’t want to reveal yourself, because it’s horrible.” —**JULIE L. BELCOVE**



3

Try 'Til You Die: Adam McEwen's Art of the Obituary

BY MARGARET CARRIGAN, MODERN PAINTERS | JANUARY 12, 2017

Bill Clinton

Forty-second President of the United States who presided over a decade of prosperity and stability

BILL CLINTON, who has died aged 58, was the 42nd President of the United States, the self-styled 'Man from Hope' whose life both enchanted and appalled his nation. He was a man of oversized appetites, ready emotion and the warm embrace for a voter regardless of wealth, station or race.

Clinton was at once the most cynical of political opportunists and the guileless son of the Deep South truly hungry for the love of all he met. But while his extraordinary charisma and the gift of empathy made him unbeatable at the polling booth, his weakness to a siren's call and a willingness to parse the truth cost him dearly when he became only the second President to face impeachment.

Perhaps more than any other President, Clinton stood for his generation. The first of the post-War "Baby Boomers" to reach the Oval Office, he embodied both their idealism, their hopes for a perfect America in an orderly world, and the self-indulgence of their unprecedented wealth.

Through two terms as president he led the nation through a period of unrivalled prosperity. It was a period during which America seemed to perfect the doctrines of capitalism and of



Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He was a popular student, became class president and on graduation sailed into a prestigious launch-pad as a clerk to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It was the beginning of a relentless climb to the top: the committee chairman was Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas, leading the emerging opposition to the Vietnam War, and he took the young Clinton under his wing to sponsor him for the Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford.

Oxford was followed by Yale Law School, and Clinton's momentous meeting with a plain, bespectacled young scholar quite unlike the 'beauty queens' he had been used to dating at home in the South. She was Hillary Rodham, from Chicago, and she became his wife in 1975. Described as the perfect baby boom match, they mirrored the seismic changes that had taken place in American life. Clinton may have strayed, but he regarded his wife as his professional partner and his equal, and she brought a new, if controversial, role to the West Wing. Through all the ups and downs of power, scandal and the persecution by their opponents in what Mrs Clinton famously termed a "vast right wing conspiracy", they

Detail of "Untitled (Bill)," 2004.
(Adam McEwen)

RELATED

VENUES

Aspen Art Museum

ARTISTS

Adam McEwen

As a former obituary writer for London's Daily Telegraph, Adam McEwen is all too familiar with death. [An exhibition](#) of the British-born artist's work at the Aspen Art Museum, on view January 13 to May 28, takes his fascination with mortality as its cue.

In the early aughts, McEwen began writing imaginary obituaries for notable living subjects such as Bill Clinton and Nicole Kidman. "It's not morbid," he says, "I definitely know they are going to die. I take death as a perfect rule and work backwards from that." The faux obits highlight a central theme in the artist's practice: What constitutes the "real world" when our time — and scope of experiences — on this planet are limited? For

McEwen, the real is subjective and dependent on our ability to ignore the constant reminders that life is fleeting. "We live, by nature, optimistically and, therefore, in denial."

His sculptural works — which often represent everyday objects such as yoga mats, air conditioning units, or car passenger airbags in materials like graphite or concrete — are exercises in denial since they are fundamentally unable to serve their intended purposes. “A graphite air conditioner is guaranteed to fail at what it’s supposed to do,” McEwen explains. “But it tries, despite its obvious limitations. We all try to do our best.”

The artist’s focus on the mundane, however, keeps his work from becoming too macabre. For instance, his text message series renders banal mms correspondence gleaned from his and his friends’ phones into framed, haiku-like musings. The content of the texts ranges from making plans to meet someone to blistering breakup words, reminding us that life is lived in the details.

ART & DESIGN

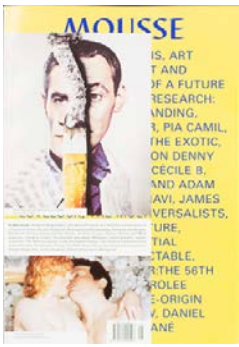
Review: Adam McEwen's 'Harvest' Explores the Movement of People, Vehicles and Information

By ROBERTA SMITH MARCH 24, 2016

Adam McEwen is an excellent journeyman artist who keeps a low profile behind an astute recycling of objects and images. His work has a streamlined intelligence, attention to detail and austere beauty that make it seem transparent yet mysterious, straightforward yet perverse. His latest show, "[Harvest](#)" at Petzel Gallery, takes its theme from one of Jean-François Millet's paintings of gleaners in a field — talk about detail work. Its sculptures and paintings examine the movement of people, vehicles or information through relentlessly controlled channels. "[TSA](#)" recreates the table and stack of plastic bins from airport security checkpoints but in stark white Corian (the table) and machined graphite (the bins). They're fragile, luminous and nonfunctional, like art.

Two dark minimalist sculptures, "IBM Blue Gene 1" and its mate "2," recreate the mass and exterior detailing of giant supercomputers, also in graphite. They evoke both the fictional runaway machine of the 1968 movie "2001: A Space Odyssey" and the actual data-gathering behemoths of the National Security Agency.

Four paintings appropriate black-and-white photographs of the sleek empty interiors of tunnels — Holland, Midtown, Lincoln and Brooklyn-Battery — connecting Manhattan to the surrounding area. Printed on sheets of cellulose sponge, a staple of kitchen cleanliness, they have the smoky allure of charcoal drawings until you see the bubbles. Nearby is a symbolic attempt to prevent easy access: an actual example of the sticklike door-to-floor locks endemic to unrehabilitated New York lofts and tenements — a madeleine for creative types of a certain age. The final piece is interactive, a handsome steel-and-wood sculpture shaped like a giant K, a form that neatly accommodates a steep switchback staircase. It reaches almost to the ceiling, and a dead end.



ART IS A TRANSLATOR,
ART IS A FRIEND

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
ADAM MCEWEN AND URS FISCHER

Above - Urs Fischer, *Problem Painting*, 2013, installation view at Gagosian Gallery, Rome, 2013. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist and Gagosian Gallery, Rome. Photo: Stefan Altenburger

Opposite, left - Adam McEwen, *Instrument*, 2014. Courtesy: the artist and Art : Concept, Paris. Photo: Claire Dorn

Opposite, right - Adam McEwen, *Conduit*, 2014. Courtesy: the artist and Art : Concept, Paris. Photo: Fabrice Gousset

Adam McEwen and Urs Fischer weave a conversation that touches on the more personal and human aspects of the work; on the one hand, the past that intervenes as an element of investigation and comparison with the present,



and on the other the revelation of what is in some ways a manifest truth, though it has been repressed and resurfaces to destabilize things. Art as the maieutic possibility of extracting an upheaval, not to free ourselves from it but to reify it, to make it visible and manageable. Finally, poetry as ultimate, rarified, available and universal expression.

Urs Fischer was born in 1973 in Zurich and studied photography at Schule für Gestaltung, Zurich. He has exhibited extensively all over the globe, and his work is included in many important public and private collections worldwide. His recent solo exhibitions include "Urs Fischer," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2013), "Madame Fisscher," Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2012), "Skinny Sunrise," Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2012), "Oscar the Grouch," Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, Connecticut (2010), "Marguerite de Ponty," New Museum, New York (2009), Cockatoo Island, Kaldor Art Projects and the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, Sydney (2007), "Mary Poppins," Blaffer Gallery, Art Museum of the University of Houston (2006), "Paris 1919," Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (2006), "Jet Set Lady," Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milan (2005), "Kir Royal," Kunsthaus Zürich (2004), and "Not My House Not My Fire," Espace 315, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2004). Fischer's work has been presented in numerous group exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (2003, 2007, 2011), "Lustwarande 2011—Blemishes," Park De Oude Warande, Museum De Pont, Tilburg, the Netherlands (2011), "L'invention de l'oeuvre: Rodin et les ambassadeurs," Musée Rodin, Paris (2011), "Modern British Sculpture," Royal Academy of Arts, London (2011), "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century," New Museum, New York (2007), "Fractured Figure: Works from the Dakis Joannou Collection," Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens (2007), "Sequence 1: Painting and Sculpture in the François Pinault Collection," Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2007), and "Cinq milliards d'années," Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2006). Fischer lives and works in New York.

Born in London in 1965, **Adam McEwen** lives and works in New York. He studied English literature at Christ Church, Oxford, before attending California Institute of the Arts, where he graduated in 1992. His work moves freely between the disciplines of painting, sculpture, and installation. After writing obituaries for the *Daily Telegraph* in London, McEwen turned the genre into artworks with a series of obituaries of still-living figures, including Kate Moss, Bill Clinton, and Jeff Koons. He is known for his life-size graphite sculptures of such familiar consumer objects as an ATM, a drinking fountain, or a credit card. His "Bomber Harris" series consists of monochromatic paintings covered with chewed gum, and other recent works include prints on oversize sheets of sponge. McEwen's recent solo exhibitions include "Non-Alignment Pact, Art : Concept," Paris (2014), "Factory Tint," Capitain Petzel, Berlin (2014), "Sawney Bean," the Modern Institute, Glasgow (2013), "Rehabilitating the Steinway Tube Ducts," Rodolphe Janssen Gallery, Brussels (2013), and "The House of Marlon Brando, Art : Concept," Paris (2011). He has been in the important group shows "Love Story, Sammlung Anne und Wolfgang Titz," 21er Haus, Belvedere, Vienna (2014), "Wanted: Selected Works from the Mugrabi Collection," Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2013), "Haunted," Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010), the Whitney Biennial (2006), and "Into Me / Out of Me," MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York (2006). As a curator he has conceived various projects, including *Fresh Hell: Carte blanche à Adam McEwen* at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2010).



Above - Adam McEwen, "FactoryTint"
installation view at Captain Petzel, Berlin, 2014.
Courtesy: the artist and Captain Petzel, Berlin.
Photo: Jens Ziehe

Opposite - Urs Fischer, *38 East 1st Street*, 2014,
"Burning Down the House" installation view at
Gwangju Biennale, 2014. © the artist. Courtesy:
the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo:
Stefan Altenburger



ADAM MCEWEN
When I was at CalArts in the early 1990s, the word “co-opted” was constantly being invoked. Specifically in the sense of how to make art that would resist being co-opted.

URS FISCHER
How much work from that time succeeded in that?

A M That’s what I was just thinking. For a long time, it seemed like a lot of art made then had an indestructible armor. Works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, Christopher Wool—it all seemed to be perfect. Perfectly made of steel. But now, as time goes on, and for instance Mike Kelley’s no longer around, it doesn’t seem as indestructible anymore. That’s a strange thought; it bothers me. Can Kryptonite drain of its power?

Another, related thought: on a bigger time scale, when I was growing up in the 1970s it seemed like rock and roll, and that culture, was everything. It was *the* defining factor. Now, today, I can actually imagine that rock and roll could simply dissipate.

U F It will be like jazz music. Some people still do it, but it’s not...

A M For instance a 12-year-old someday might know about Jimi Hendrix, or not. Jimi Hendrix could become a niche interest.

Then I was thinking about how any conversation about production has to come back to Warhol as the archetypal producer. But a lot of his late work was rejected when it was first shown. His last shows at Castelli, the knives and guns, didn’t sell a single painting. He was making work that was troublesome, and subversive, and political, and people didn’t want it. He was working in a context of outsider-ness on a certain level. Even though he was still going to every party, he was feeling under siege.

U F He started out as an outsider.

A M We’ve talked before about how the things we really like tend to be subversive in some way. A Mike Kelley teddy bear sitting on a knitted carpet is a fucked-up object. It implicates you.

Then it begins to ripple out and talk about everyone it touches. It’s like a virus. It talks about its context. (This is giving it the most benefit of the doubt.)

U F Like Kelley, you frequently call upon elements that have a relation to your past.

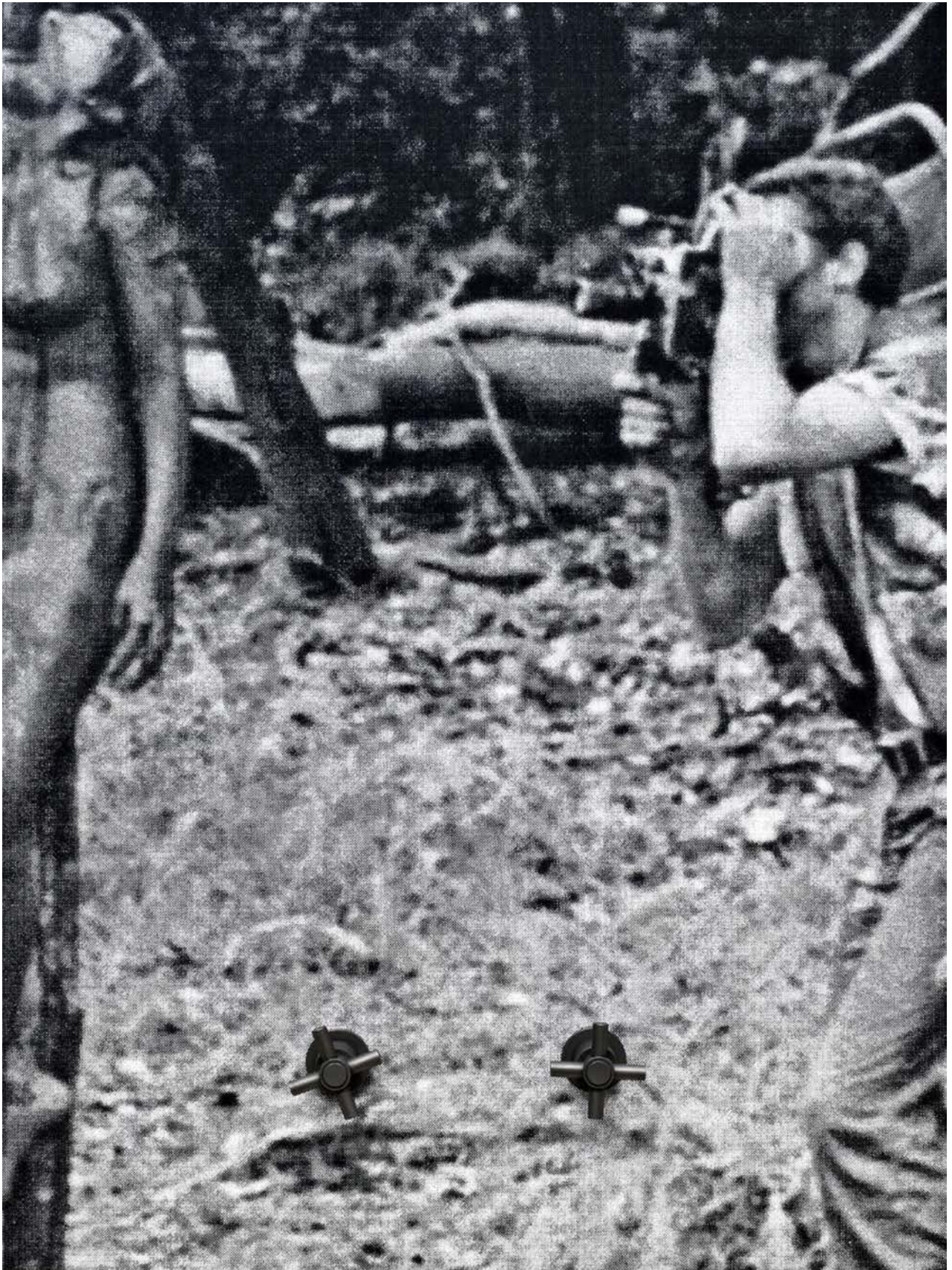
A M Yes, as a way of looking at a situation in the present. I ask myself, “What is the difference between what this thing looks like now and what it looked like then? And what is the blank area in between them?” It’s not about nostalgia in the sense of wishing for the past, but more like wondering about the relationship between the past and the present.

U F You mean the relationship between things that you encountered in the past and how they partially manifest in your memory, and how they manifest in reality now?

A M Well, it’s interesting how you can take what appears in the present and scratch the surface a bit and very quickly reveal a different present or a different reality, which is usually less manicured than you might wish. I think that’s what some of this is about—the way that time refracts and collapses and expands. You scratch the surface and very quickly get to distant places.

U F When I look at what you do, it’s charged emotionally. The memory is emotionally charged, and these things go revisit the charged memory. For instance the Cold War captures a specific feeling that was attached to something, and that feeling sometimes evacuates, like a ghost leaving a body. It leaves this thing that was charged when you were a younger person, and which is now an empty thing in some way. Or, not an empty thing, but *just* a thing. It’s just a can now. It maybe looks old or colorful or cool in this case, but all the things it links to aren’t there anymore.

A M I’m simply looking for motive, trying to keep myself interested. The Tennent’s cans from when I was a kid, they keep me



Adam McEwen, *Taps*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow. Photo: Keith Hunter







Above - Urs Fischer, *CECILLE / BRENDA / ERICA* and *Untitled (Floor Piece)*, 2006

Right - Urs Fischer, *FRANÇOIS / RENÉ*, 2013, and *Untitled (Floor Piece)*, 2006

Opposite - Urs Fischer, *Mr. Flosky*, 2001-2002; *Problem Painting*, 2011; *Untitled (Floor Piece)*, 2006

All images: installation view at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2013. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Stefan Altenburger



interested. And I do it because I believe, I suppose, that if I stick a chair leg in the can, and it disturbs me and says something, then it will say something to somebody else—to someone I don't even know. I don't really know what the feeling I'm trying to evoke is, but in this case it's not a good feeling.

U F What are these newspaper pieces about?

A M These are two pages from the *New York Times* that appeared opposite each other on the same day in 2012. They were brought to my attention by Dick Hebdige, the English writer. He lives in Los Angeles and wrote that book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, about teddy boys and mods and rockers. Anyway, on the left-hand page is an article about Jimmy Savile, the English television personality who throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was very much a part of British culture. He was on TV every week and worked with handicapped kids, and it turned out after his death that he was a serial child molester. Even young girls in hospitals. It was something that he subtly kind of boasted about and everybody unconsciously knew it was happening, but nobody wanted to do anything about it. But when it was revealed after his death, nobody was surprised. The article has a photograph of him with a cigar.

And on the right-hand page is an article about the skeleton of a carrier pigeon from World War II, which was found in a barn with a little coded message around its leg. They were trying to decode the message.

Dick Hebdige suggested to me that this was what my work was like, and I thought he was right. Both have to do with scratching the surface and revealing something that is in plain sight. Right in front of you is this guy Jimmy Savile who's smoking a cigar, he's got his arm around little girls and you know he's messing with them. But you don't want to see it. The same with the bird. The past is right there: there's a lot of hidden and coded stuff right in front of us and it somehow seems to say the same kind of thing that my work is trying to say. To put somebody in the position where they feel on uncertain ground, and they don't know why. I like art that does that. I like it when art makes me constantly destabilized.

U F When you look at it, it shifts something.

A M Right. Of course, some art can do that and make you feel great. But for some reason I don't feel equipped to try and do that. Although, don't you think that even when somebody makes you feel uncomfortable, it's a good feeling, ironically? It's good to feel anything.

U F I think sometimes art works as a translator. An interpreter of sorts.

A M You mean translating feelings that you have?

U F Translating an understanding of something through matter into something you can then read again.

A M In order that it can be felt again.

U F Exactly.

A M That it can be felt anew, in a different way. So that you can feel bad again. It's like: "Here, have this, I don't want it anymore!"

U F In your case, you think you can give things away by making art that is connected to your past. The impression I get with a lot of the graphite works is that you have a very particular way of selecting things that interest you, and you go through a long process of evaluating them again and again and again. Many of the things you select reject the viewer. The roll-down gate is clearly rejecting you. Even the air conditioner pushes you away.

Or they contain, like the air conditioner or the safe. They contain something and you would like to have it, but they don't let you in.

A M That's right.

U F The air conditioner contains literally, but the AmEx card is also something that contains. It contains something that is not yours.

A M Well, they all promise. And I feel that they wish to deliver on the promise, but they fail. The air conditioner in theory provides some kind of sustenance, but it cannot deliver. There is something hellish about a machine that blows cold air, artificially refrigerated air, at a human. I remember being eight years old in a hotel room with a window unit, and it was a horrific object.

U F You could say something similar about the installation you did with the fluorescent tubes, where they don't give light. It makes a promise, and then there is nothing.

A M That was about minimalism—the promise of minimalism. When I was in my teens, what I always got from minimalism was this slightly punishing aura of a cleansing.

U F Or a ritual or something.

A M Exactly. By the time it comes to the 1990s and certainly the early 2000s, minimalism didn't seem to be able to deliver on its promise any more.

U F It has a repressive core. It's interesting to me that, say, in Carl Andre's work, the repressiveness of minimalism seems to go with a repressed emotional side. It's very emotional, but it deals with repression and manifests itself with this purity.

A M I believe that was again something that our generation inherited.

U F The absoluteness of it.

A M So the work with the lights is about the promises of minimalism. It's not that I have anything to say about that; I simply don't understand it. I don't have anything to say about anything except trying to point to things that I don't understand.

Somebody told me the other day that my art was absolutely closed and shut down. They used the words "fascism" and "fashion." In a way I don't think this person was wrong—it was actually astute—but I would then say in my defense that it's very emotional because it's talking about the attempt to deal with a closed-down system.

U F Do you think you can rid yourself of the bad by making works that deal with past memories? When you do something with a thing from your past, is it cathartic?

A M Um, no.

U F No.

[both laugh]

A M I do think it allows me to move on to the next problem. It's like, you take something unpleasant, something from inside yourself, and you don't get rid of it but rather place it outside of yourself, and then you carry it with you. Better to have it sitting next to you and visible. Then in a sense it becomes a companion. The works become friends and they talk to you, to each other, and to other people.

U F I consider art a friend.

A M Exactly.

U F It sounds so terrible.



Adam McEwen, *Safe*, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills. Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio



Above - Urs Fischer, *fountain and boy w/ tongue*, 2014, "mermaid / pig / bro w/ hat" installation view at Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2014. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York. Photo: Stefan Altenburger

Below - Urs Fischer, *Melodrama; 2; 8; 4*. All works: 2013, installation view at Sadie Coles HQ, London, 2014. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Stefan Altenburger

Opposite - Urs Fischer and Georg Herold, *Necrophonia*, 2011. © the artists. Courtesy: the artists and The Modern Institute, Glasgow. Photo: Stefan Altenburger







Top - Adam McEwen, *Wham-O All American*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels

Bottom - Adam McEwen, "Rehabilitating the Steinway Tube Ducts" installation view at Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels

A M Well, it's tough. But what might be a problem could be turned into a solution. So an enemy can become a friend. And then you realize that maybe an enemy is not an enemy. It simply has its own problems.

U F Do you consider a lot of your work as dealing with the past, the far past, the recent past, or the present? And do you make works that deal with the future?

A M I think it's all about the present—the constant, ongoing present. But since you constantly fall into the future, moment by moment, it's about trying to make the future closer to the future you wish to see.

U F Based on your past, in some way.

A M Yes. For instance, how can you make art and not acknowledge whatever other art you want to talk about, minimalism and so on? We are inheriting, we have made art in a context, and to ignore context is ignorant.

U F So you can say that art is a language. You didn't invent it, but...

U F One thing I never understand, when I look at an artwork, is why it speaks to me, or not. How can anything be transferred or invested into an object so that it communicates back? When we look at a work that has clear references to the past, for instance the Cold War, it triggers a similar sentiment in other people from the same background. But a bunch of shells, to someone from a culture where shells have a totally different value, maybe as currency, means something other than "vacation." There are so many different layers. And somehow, as an artist, you believe in something being contained, and your understanding of it, and where it begins and ends. When does your way of dealing with it become more important than what it is? At what point does this happen?

A M Ideally, the common ground actually recedes and fades, and the thing that you make is somehow empowered by your relationship to it such that it can speak to somebody else, even if you have no common ground. Of course, somebody from another culture may never have seen an air conditioner and it probably will mean nothing to them, so maybe that one is a failed artwork for those viewers. But I hope that if you have a slight inkling of what this object was, then there's a kind of iconic quality that I can get to. I think that we *don't* see the world around us. I don't see, I cannot see, the world in front of me, and I think it's possible that I could. And in a way, an odd way, making art is an acknowledgment of the attempt to see reality because I'm putting the feeling that I have in conjunction with an object. And that's a stronger sense of reality than one or the other alone.

U F This morning, while taking a shower, I was thinking about atheists.

A M Atheists?

U F Yes. Then I was thinking about believers. And about religions. The Vatican is the HQ of one religion. For any human being, given the short time you have, it's insane to ever think you're right about anything at all. Sure, people might agree on something, and that's fine. There's a lot of thought to be done, a lot of meditation. But the universe is so incomprehensibly vast, and in time, everything we ever knew will be overtoppled. It's ridiculous to insist on anything. Whereas at the Vatican, people have the audacity to think, "We know we're right. We've researched this stuff."

A M But given the vastness and the incomprehensibility of the universe, the upside of the belief is A) it deals with the problem of the fear of the unknown, and B) it makes you powerful.

U F I think that religion is a great concept. Nowadays, we get to take whatever we want from any religion without being religious.

It helps you, sometimes, as a human being. I understand that part. I'm very indifferent to it. I'm not pro or con.

A M I think that it's inspiring when you see things that include the possibility of pain and failure.

U F Spirituality.

A M Right, because it's inclusive. It's inclusive because it's made on the basis of being human. I aspire to make something out of things that are, maybe, cheap, or even better, nonexistent. No materials, available to everybody, and speaking to everybody's fears.

U F Poetry, reciting poetry. It's good, it works.

A M Poetry is the best, except that nobody has time to read it.

U F I do.

A M Do you?

U F Not a lot, but I like poetry. I like it better than fiction because it's more to the core of things.

A M Poetry is the most rarified of all. For me, I want a context that protects the artwork—that turns the noise down.

U F Your Kryptonite concept.

A M I want to walk into the room and think about the artwork, that's all. If you can perform a sleight of hand, in which—even though the context is compromised and the world is compromised and it's all an illusion—a viewer walks in and only thinks about the artwork, what it might be doing, then it gives the artwork the best chance to do what it can do. It maximizes the possibility. Given that the artwork is flawed and maybe not very good at doing what it's trying to do.

If I make, say, a limousine printed on a sponge, real scale, it's kind of funny and hopefully it's curious and slightly confusing. But it's also about the way people wish to escape their lives—escape a bad week or a bad day or a bad marriage. A limousine, those things that roll around New York, they are like sculptures. Their shape is based on a promise of desire. They talk about sex and glamour and what goes on inside. They have mirrored windows because then you feel, inside the mirrored window, that you're powerful.

U F It means you're happy.

A M The person outside cannot look in and the person inside cannot be seen. And maybe things get turned around: maybe you can live out a fantasy. A sense of relief. Or you might look at a limousine with disgust. And there are all these connections between the limo industry and drugs, prostitution. They trigger all different responses.

But as well as being stupid, I want it also to include people's hopes. It's about aspiration and about wishing to be helped, or to be free. It's about being trapped and about escape. Even if it is a slow release, to get to this feeling, that this 15-foot limousine would give this thought. A sense of movement, but it's not really going anywhere. I think, for that to happen, you need a context that is slow, where things are slowed down. I want the melancholia to be included.

Una conversazione fra
Adam McEwen e Urs Fischer

Adam McEwen e Urs Fischer intrecciano una conversazione che tocca gli aspetti più personali e umani dell'opera, da un lato il passato che interviene come elemento d'indagine e confronto col presente, dall'altro la rivelazione di una verità per certi versi manifesta, e tuttavia rimossa, che riemerge a destabilizzare. L'arte come possibilità maieutica di estrarre un turbamento non già per liberarsene ma per reificarlo, renderlo visibile e gestibile. Infine la poesia come espressione ultima e raffinata, disponibile e universale.

ADAM MCEWEN Nei primi anni Novanta, quando ero alla CalArts, il termine "cooptato" veniva costantemente chiamato in causa. Precisamente nel senso di come produrre un'arte che avrebbe potuto resistere alla cooptazione.

URS FISCHER Quanto lavoro di quel periodo riuscì in quell'intento?

AM È proprio quello che stavo pensando. Per lungo tempo, sembrò che molte opere prodotte all'epoca avessero un'armatura indistruttibile. I lavori di Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, Christopher Wool – tutto sembrava essere perfetto. Perfettamente forgiato in acciaio. Ma adesso, col passare del tempo, e oltretutto in assenza di Mike Kelley, tutto ciò non sembra più indistruttibile. È un pensiero strano, che m'infastidisce. La Kryptonite può esaurire il suo potere? Un'altra considerazione collegata a questa, considerando una scala temporale più ampia: crescendo negli anni Settanta, sembrava che il rock'n'roll e quel tipo di cultura fosse tutto. Che fosse il fattore determinante. Adesso, oggi, posso perfino immaginare che il rock'n'roll possa semplicemente esaurirsi.

UF Come nel caso della musica jazz. Qualcuno ancora la fa, ma non è...

AM Per esempio, un dodicenne un giorno potrebbe venire a conoscenza di Jimi Hendrix. Hendrix potrebbe diventare un interesse di nicchia. Poi stavo pensando a come qualsiasi discussione sulla produzione debba riferirsi a Warhol in qualità di produttore archetipico, tuttavia gran parte della sua produzione tarda è stata respinta la prima volta che è stata presentata. La sua ultima mostra da Castelli – i coltelli e le pistole – non ha venduto un solo dipinto. Stava facendo un lavoro che era difficile, e sovversivo, e politico, e la gente non lo voleva. Lavorava in un contesto di alterità, in un certo senso. Anche se continuava ad andare a tutte le feste, si sentiva sotto assedio.

UF Agli inizi era un outsider.

AM Prima abbiamo parlato di come le cose che ci piacciono veramente tendano, in qualche modo, a essere sovversive. Un orsacchiotto di Mike Kelley, seduto su un tappeto intrecciato, è un oggetto incasinato. Prima ti chiama in causa, poi inizia a propagarsi e a parlare di tutti quelli con cui viene a contatto. È come un virus. Parla del suo contesto. (E questo gli dà il beneficio del dubbio).

UF Al pari di Kelley, anche tu ricordi frequentemente elementi che hanno una relazione con il tuo passato.

AM Sì, è un modo di guardare a una situazione del presente. Mi chiedo: "Qual è la differenza fra il modo in cui questa cosa appare oggi e come appariva allora? E qual è lo spazio bianco che le divide?" Non si tratta di nostalgia nel senso di desiderio del passato, ma piuttosto d'indagine sulla relazione tra passato e presente.

UF Quindi la relazione fra le cose che hai incontrato in passato, il modo in cui si

manifestano parzialmente nella tua memoria, e quello attraverso cui si manifestano attualmente nella realtà?

AM Beh, è interessante come tu possa prendere ciò che appare nel presente e, grattandone un po' la superficie, rivelare velocemente un presente o una realtà diversi, che è di solito meno ordinata di quanto potresti desiderare. Credo che questo sia ciò di cui tratta parte del lavoro – il modo in cui il tempo rifrange, e collassa, e si espande. Scaffisci la superficie e molto velocemente arrivi in posti lontani.

UF Da osservatore, ciò che produci mi sembra emotivamente forte. La memoria è emotivamente forte, e queste cose vanno a rivisitare quella memoria carica di tensione. Per esempio la Guerra Fredda cattura una sensazione specifica connessa a qualcosa, e quella sensazione a volte sparisce, come un fantasma che abbandona un corpo. Lascia questo residuo che era carico di tensione quando eri giovane e che ora è, in un certo senso, vuoto. O, piuttosto che vuoto, semplicemente una cosa. Adesso, è solo una lattina. Potrebbe apparire vecchia o colorata o interessante, in questo caso, ma tutte le cose cui era collegata non esistono più.

AM Sto semplicemente cercando una motivazione, nel tentativo di mantenere vivo il mio interesse. Le lattine di Tennent che appartengono alla mia infanzia, attraggono il mio interesse. E lo faccio perché credo, suppongo, che se conficco la gamba di una sedia nella lattina, e ciò mi disturba e mi dice qualcosa, allora dirà qualcosa a qualcun altro – qualcuno che neppure conosco. Non so proprio quale sensazione io cerchi di evocare ma, in questo caso, non è positiva.

UF Di cosa trattano questi lavori con i giornali?

AM Queste sono due pagine del *New York Times* che sono apparse una di fronte all'altra in uno stesso giorno del 2012. Me le ha fatte notare lo scrittore inglese Dick Hebdige. Hebdige vive a Los Angeles e ha scritto il libro *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, che parla di teddy boys, mods e rockers. Ad ogni modo, sulla pagina di sinistra c'è un articolo su Jimmy Savile, la personalità televisiva inglese che durante gli anni Sessanta, Settanta e Ottanta dilagava nella cultura britannica. Era in tv ogni settimana e lavorava con i bambini handicappati, ed è venuto fuori, dopo la sua morte, che era un molestatore seriale di bambini. Anche di ragazzine ospedalizzate. Era qualcosa di cui lui, in qualche modo, sottilmente, si pavoneggiava, e tutti inconsciamente sapevano cosa stesse succedendo, ma nessuno voleva prendere l'iniziativa a riguardo. Ma quando questo fatto fu rivelato, dopo la sua morte, nessuno ne fu sorpreso. L'articolo è illustrato da una sua fotografia con un sigaro. E sulla pagina di destra c'è un articolo sullo scheletro di un piccione viaggiatore della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, che fu trovato in un granaio con un piccolo messaggio cifrato legato alla zampa. Stanno cercando di decifrare il messaggio. Dick Hebdige mi suggerì che il mio lavoro appariva nello stesso modo, e pensai che avesse ragione. Ambedue hanno a che fare con il grattare la superficie e il rivelare qualcosa che era pienamente visibile. Proprio di fronte a te c'è questo tizio Jimmy Savile che sta fumando un sigaro e cinge col braccio delle bambine, e tu sai che le sta infastidendo. Ma non lo vuoi vedere. La stessa cosa con il piccione. Il passato è proprio qui: c'è un sacco di roba nascosta e codificata proprio davanti a noi e, in qualche modo, sembra dire lo stesso tipo di cosa del mio lavoro. Cerca di mettere qualcuno nella posizione di sentirsi su un terreno precario, senza sapere perché. Apprezzo l'arte che agisce così. Mi piace un'arte che mi faccia sentire costantemente destabilizzato.

UF Che quando la osservi, smuova qualcosa. 308

AM Giusto. Certo, c'è anche dell'arte che lo fa pur facendoti sentire alla grande, ma per qualche ragione non mi sento attrezzato a cimentarmi. E tuttavia, non credi che quando qualcuno ti fa sentire a disagio, si tratti ironicamente di una bella sensazione? È bello sentire qualsiasi cosa.

UF Credo che l'arte a volte funzioni come un traduttore, credo che funzioni più o meno come un interprete.

AM Intendi dire traducendo le tue sensazioni?

UF Traducendo la conoscenza di qualcosa attraverso la materia in qualcosa che sia nuovamente leggibile.

AM In modo che possa essere percepito di nuovo.

UF Esattamente.

AM In modo che possa essere sperimentato nuovamente, e diversamente. In modo che tu possa sentirti di nuovo male. È come dire: "Ecco, prendilo, non lo voglio più!"

UF Nel tuo caso, credi di poter rivelare qualcosa producendo un'arte legata al tuo passato. L'impressione che ricevo dalla gran parte dei lavori in grafite è che tu abbia un modo molto particolare di selezionare le cose che t'interessano, servendoti di un lungo processo per valutarle di continuo. Molte delle cose che selezioni respingono lo spettatore. La saracinesca chiusa chiaramente ti sta respingendo. Persino il condizionatore d'aria ti spinge via. Oppure si tratta di contenitori, come il condizionatore d'aria o la cassaforte. Contengono qualcosa che vorresti avere, ma a cui loro ti negano l'accesso.

AM Sì, è così.

UF Il condizionatore è letteralmente un contenitore, ma anche la carta di credito American Express è, a sua volta, un contenitore. Contiene qualcosa che non è tuo.

AM Beh, si tratta di oggetti che promettono. E sento che desiderano mantenere fede alla promessa, ma falliscono. Il condizionatore, in teoria, fornisce un certo tipo di nutrimento, ma non può dispensarlo. C'è qualcosa di diabolico in una macchina che soffia aria fredda, refrigerata artificialmente, verso un essere umano. Ricordo a otto anni di aver alloggiato in una stanza di hotel con un condizionatore montato nella finestra, si trattava di un oggetto raccapricciante.

UF Potresti dire qualcosa di analogo sull'installazione che hai fatto con i tubi a fluorescenza che non forniscono luce. È un lavoro che fa una promessa e non la mantiene.

AM Quel lavoro trattava del Minimalismo – della promessa del Minimalismo. Da adolescente, il Minimalismo mi evocava un'aura leggermente punitiva di pulizia.

UF Oppure di un rituale o di qualcosa del genere.

AM Esattamente. Arrivando agli anni Novanta, e certamente ai primi anni Duemila, il Minimalismo non sembrò più capace di tenere fede alla sua promessa.

UF Possedeva un'essenza repressiva. M'interessa il fatto che, per esempio, nel lavoro di Carl Andre, la repressività del Minimalismo sembra accoppiarsi con l'aspetto dell'inibizione emotiva. Un'emotività viva, ma affrontata attraverso la repressiva e manifestata attraverso la purezza.

AM Credo che questo sia di nuovo qualcosa che la nostra generazione ha ereditato.

AM Quindi il lavoro con le luci riguarda le promesse del Minimalismo. Non che io abbia qualcosa da dire sull'argomento; semplicemente non lo capisco. Non ho niente da dire su niente, e quello che faccio è cercare di additare le cose che non capisco. Qualcuno mi ha detto, l'altro giorno, che la mia arte era assolutamente chiusa e spenta. Ha usato le parole "fascismo" e "moda". In un certo senso non credo che si sbagliasse – in realtà si trattava di una considerazione perspicace – ma, a mia difesa, direi che era anche molto emotiva perché riguardava il tentativo di affrontare un sistema chiuso.

UF Credi di poterti liberare della negatività producendo lavori che riguardano memorie del passato? È catartico produrre un'opera con qualcosa del tuo passato?

AM Beh, no.

UF No.

[ridono]

AM Credo che mi permetta di passare al problema successivo. Si tratta di prendere qualcosa di piacevole, che senti dentro, e piuttosto che liberartene, portarlo fuori da te, e poi con te. È meglio che stia proprio al tuo fianco, visibile. In un certo senso diventa un compagno. I lavori diventano amici e ti parlano, parlano l'un l'altro, e con altre persone.

UF Considero l'arte un'amica.

AM Esattamente.

UF Suona veramente terribile.

AM Beh, è dura. Ma quello che potrebbe essere un problema può trasformarsi in una soluzione. Un nemico può diventare un amico. E poi ti rendi conto che forse un nemico non è veramente un nemico. Ha semplicemente i suoi problemi.

UF Ritieni che molti dei tuoi lavori abbiano a che fare con il passato remoto, prossimo, o con il presente? E crei delle opere che hanno a che fare con il futuro?

AM Penso che tutto abbia a che fare con il presente – l'incessante, continuo presente. Ma dato che ricadi di continuo nel futuro, attimo dopo attimo, ha tutto a che fare con avvicinare il futuro a il futuro che vorresti vedere.

UF In un certo modo dipende dal tuo passato.

AM Sì. Per esempio, come puoi creare arte e non riconoscere qualsiasi altro tipo d'arte di cui vuoi parlare, il Minimalismo o altro? Noi ereditiamo, e creiamo in un contesto, e ignorare quel contesto è da ignoranti.

UF Quindi puoi affermare che l'arte è un linguaggio. Non l'hai inventato ma...

UF Non capisco mai, guardando un'opera d'arte, il motivo per cui mi comunica qualcosa o non lo fa. In che modo si può trasferire o investire qualcosa in un oggetto così da renderlo comunicativo? Guardando un lavoro che ha riferimenti chiari al passato, per esempio alla Guerra Fredda, si risveglia un sentimento comune nelle persone che provengono dallo stesso background. Ma una manciata di conchiglie, per chi provenga da una cultura in cui le conchiglie abbiano un valore completamente differente, per esempio monete, significa qualcosa di diverso dall'idea di "vacanza". Ci sono così tanti livelli diversi. In qualche modo, da artista, credi che esista qualcosa di comprensibile e limitato, qualcosa che abbia un inizio e una fine. Quando il modo in cui affronti qualcosa diviene più importante della cosa in sé? A che punto succede?



AM Idealmente, il terreno comune in realtà recede e svanisce, e la cosa che hai creato è in qualche modo rafforzata dalla relazione che hai con essa, così che possa parlare a qualcun altro, con il quale puoi anche non avere cose in comune. Certamente, qualcuno che proviene da un'altra cultura potrebbe non aver mai visto un condizionatore, che pertanto non avrà per lui molto senso, quindi è possibile che quel lavoro sia inefficace per determinati spettatori. Ma io spero che, se hai un vago sentore di cosa sia quell'oggetto, allora ci sia una certa qualità iconica che puoi cogliere. Credo che noi non vediamo il mondo che ci circonda. Il mondo davanti a me, non lo vedo, non lo posso vedere, anche se credo che sia possibile vederlo. In un certo senso, stranamente, creare arte è l'ammissione del tentativo di vedere la realtà perché include la sensazione che ricevo relazionandomi a un oggetto. E le due cose insieme rimandano un senso di realtà più intenso delle due cose singolarmente.

UF Stamattina, facendo la doccia, pensavo agli atei.

AM Gli atei?

UF Sì. Poi ha pensato ai credenti. E alle religioni. Il Vaticano è il quartier generale di una religione. Per qualsiasi essere umano, dato il poco tempo a disposizione, è folle persino pensare di aver ragione su una qualsiasi cosa. Certo, la gente può essere d'accordo su qualcosa, e va bene. C'è molto a cui pensare, molto su cui meditare. Ma l'universo è così incomprensibilmente vasto, e col tempo, tutto ciò che abbiamo conosciuto sarà sepolto. È insensato insistere su qualsiasi cosa. Mentre in Vaticano, la gente ha l'audacia di pensare: "Sappiamo di aver ragione. Abbiamo compiuto ricerche in proposito".

AM Ma data la vastità e l'incomprensibilità dell'universo, il lato positivo della fede è A) che si occupa del problema della paura e dell'ignoto, e B) che ti rende più potente.

UF Credo che quella della religione sia una grande idea. Oggi, siamo arrivati a prendere qualsiasi cosa vogliamo da ogni religione senza essere religiosi. È qualcosa che a volte ti aiuta in quanto essere umano. E questo lo capisco. Sono imparziale, né a favore né contrario.

AM Credo che sia motivante vedere cose che comprendono la possibilità della sofferenza e del fallimento.

UF Spiritualità.

AM Giusto, perché la spiritualità è inclusiva. E lo è perché prodotta sulla base della nostra umanità. Aspiro a fare qualcosa con oggetti che sono, forse, comuni, o ancora meglio, non esistenti; con qualcosa di smaterializzato, disponibile a chiunque, e che parli delle paure di tutti.

UF La poesia, la declamazione della poesia. È ottima, funziona.

AM La poesia è la modalità migliore, a parte il fatto che nessuno ha tempo di leggerla.

UF Io sì.

AM Ne leggi?

UF Non molta, ma mi piace. Mi piace più della narrativa perché arriva maggiormente al cuore delle cose.

AM La poesia è il mezzo più rarefatto. Per quanto mi riguarda, voglio un contesto che protegga il lavoro – che spenga il rumore.

UF La tua idea di Kryptonite.

AM Voglio percorrere la stanza pensando al lavoro, ecco tutto. Se potessi per magia – e anche se il contesto fosse compromesso e il mondo fosse compromesso e tutto fosse un'illusione – far entrare uno spettatore che si concentri solo sull'opera e sulle sue potenzialità, allora si potrebbe dare a quel lavoro la migliore chance di sviluppare le sue risorse, di massimizzarle. A patto che l'opera sia imperfetta e forse non particolarmente capace di fare ciò che sta cercando di fare. Diciamo, che posso stampare su una spugna una limousine di dimensioni reali, in un certo senso è divertente e forse curiosa e leggermente disorientante. Ma tratta anche del modo in cui la gente desidera sfuggire alla propria vita – a una pessima settimana, o a una giornata terribile, o a un matrimonio fallimentare. Le limousine, quelle cose che si muovono per New York, sono come sculture. La loro forma è basata sulla promessa del desiderio. Parlano di sesso e di glamour e di ciò che succede al loro interno. Hanno finestrini a specchio perché tu senta che dietro a quel finestrino sei potente.

UF E quindi felice.

AM La persona che sta fuori non può guardare all'interno e la persona all'interno non può essere vista. E può darsi che le cose si confondano: può darsi che tu possa vivere una tua fantasia e sentirti sollevato. Oppure potresti guardare la limousine con disgusto, dal momento che ci sono diversi collegamenti fra l'industria delle limo, le droghe e la prostituzione. Queste auto scatenano risposte completamente differenti. Ma oltre a cose stupide, voglio anche includervi le speranze della gente. L'ambizione e il desiderio di essere aiutati o di essere liberi. Di fuggire da dove si è intrappolati. Anche se si arriva gradualmente a questa sensazione che una limousine di quattro metri e mezzo possa riflettere tutto ciò. Un senso di movimento, ma non di andare veramente in un luogo preciso. Io credo che, perché ciò succeda, sia necessario un contesto lento, in cui le cose siano rallentate. Voglio che la malinconia ne faccia parte.

Urs Fischer and various artists, YES, 2011-Ongoing, "The Event Sculpture" installation view at Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2014-2015. © the artist. Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones

Paris

Fresh Hell, carte blanche à Adam McEwen

Palais de Tokyo
20 octobre 2010 - 16 janvier 2011

Après Ugo Rondinone en 2008 et Jeremy Deller en 2009, c'est au tour de l'artiste Adam McEwen de se voir confier un commissariat d'exposition au Palais de Tokyo. Passionnant et décalé, le résultat, placé sous le signe d'une conception de l'histoire de l'art qui échappe à toute logique positiviste, conjugue des œuvres médiévales et des propositions contemporaines, témoignant d'une constellation d'esthétiques hétéroclites. En puisant dans un tel réservoir, McEwen est parvenu à élaborer un parcours transversal inervé de rencontres improbables et à échafauder un récit d'une fraîcheur inusitée dans les institutions parisiennes. « *Toute histoire, déclare-t-il, est présente en même temps, disponible, en un sens équivalente (...) Je suis souvent plus frappé par les similitudes entre les formes artistiques ou des périodes de l'histoire de l'art distinctes que par les différences.* » Cette observation lui permet de mettre « *en résonance* » des œuvres que l'on n'aurait pas imaginé cohabiter au sein d'un même espace. Indépendamment de la présence des têtes de rois de Juda de la cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, on notera que cette exposition a également le mérite de convoquer des artistes, à l'image de H.C. Westermann, peu exposés de ce côté-ci de l'Atlantique. Et de présenter des œuvres rarement diffusées d'artistes plus notoires. Il en est ainsi des dessins de Philip Guston ou de la vidéo de Bruce Nauman et Frank Owen. Sans doute pourrait-on reprocher à McEwen de ne pas avoir su davantage expliciter et approfondir un propos qui, par moments, peut s'avérer opaque et bâclé. La fluidité du parcours, le sens du rythme et l'impeccable disposition des pièces relativisent toutefois ces réserves, l'artiste n'hésitant pas à revendiquer la part d'échec inhérente à toute entreprise créatrice. « *On s'efforce, affirme McEwen, d'avancer et on puise dans le temps et dans l'histoire (...) sans discrimination, selon des liens complètement organiques et non linéaires. (...) Mais (...) l'histoire est un mur de briques qu'il faut constamment faire sauter afin de pouvoir avancer (...) Beaucoup d'œuvres de cette exposition portent en elles les cicatrices d'échecs passés.* » Fresh Hell n'échappe pas à ce constat. La preuve nous est ainsi à nouveau donnée qu'une exposition truffée de paradoxes peut se révéler des plus stimulantes.

Erik Verhagen



« Fresh Hell ». Bruce Nauman et Frank Owen, "Pursuit", 1975. Film 16 mm transféré sur vidéo, couleur, son, 28'. (Court. Sperone Westwater, NY ; © B. Nauman). 16 mm film/video

After Ugo Rodinone in 2008 and Jeremy Deller in 2009, it's the artist Adam McEwen's turn to curate an exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo. The fascinating and loopy result combines medieval and contemporary art in a constellation of heteroclite aesthetics. This conception of art history escapes all positivist logic. By drawing his choices from such a broad range of possibilities McEwen has been able to chart a sideways journey strewn with improbable encounters and sketch out a narrative organized into several chapters with a freshness rarely seen in a Paris museum. "All of history," he explains, "is present and available simultaneously, and in a sense equivalent... I'm more often struck by the similarities between different art forms and periods of art history than by the differences." This realization led to an approach that allowed him to bring out the "resonance" between works one would not have imagined coexisting in the same

space. Aside from the inclusion of the sculpted heads of the kings of Judah from Paris' Notre-Dame cathedral, this exhibition also has the merit of bringing us work by artists like H. C. Westermann who are rarely seen on this side of the Atlantic, as well as rarely-shown pieces by better-known people such as the drawings of Philip Guston and a video by Frank Owen and Bruce Nauman. True, McEwen could be criticized for not having better explained and expanded upon an approach that sometimes seem opaque and even sloppy. But the fluidity of the exhibition, its sense of rhythm and the impeccable display somewhat counterbalance this objection. Further, McEwen himself does not hesitate to acknowledge that any artistic enterprise is bound to embrace some degree of failure. "[...] in trying [...] to move forward" he says, "you take from time and history [...] indiscriminately, according to completely organic and nonlinear connections [...]. At the same time, history is a brick wall which



« Fresh Hell ». De gauche à droite /from left: Anne Collier, Rob Pruitt, Michelangelo Pistoletto. (Ph. A. Morin)

demands to be blown up again and again in order for the next step to happen. [...] A lot of the work in the exhibition carries with it the scars of past failures." With *Fresh Hell*, once again, we have proof that an exhibition shot through with paradoxes can turn out to be extremely stimulating.

Erik Verhagen
Translation, L-S Torgoff

MCEWEN, ADAM

→ fig. # 43 - # 44

[f] → *1965, vit à New York. Adam McEwen s'est fait connaître grâce à ses panneaux peints à la main portant les inscriptions « Sorry we're Sorry » ou « Sorry we're Dead », ses nécrologies fictives de célébrités (telles Jeff Koons et Nicole Kidman), ses toiles parsemées de chewing-gums et ses sculptures industrielles en graphite. Suivant les traces d'Andy Warhol et Richard Prince, l'artiste exhume les fantômes de l'iconographie pop afin d'explorer les contradictions des normes culturelles. Il opère des décalages précis de détails de notre quotidien et, par la juxtaposition d'éléments en apparence déconnectés, il questionne l'élaboration de nos systèmes signifiants. Il envisage l'histoire comme un ensemble de constructions soutenues par la croyance et la confiance du public envers les discours prépondérants et les médias. Ambivalents et impassibles, ses travaux sont néanmoins nourris d'humour, même si celui-ci est parfois morbide. Avant → **FRESH HELL**, Adam McEwen avait notamment organisé les expositions « Power, Corruption and Lies » en 2003, une topographie d'œuvres d'art engagées, « Interstate » en 2005, centrée sur le paysage et l'esprit, et « Beneath The Underdog » en 2007, exposition organisée avec → **Nate Lowman** dans laquelle les deux artistes confrontaient les relations individuelles à l'imposant schéma d'un capitalisme tardif.

[e] → *1965, lives in New York. Adam McEwen is known for his hand-painted hardware store signs ("Sorry we're Sorry," "Sorry we're Dead"), his fictitious newspaper obituaries of celebrities (such as Jeff Koons and Nicole Kidman), his paintings consisting of chewing gum on canvas, and his sculptures made from machined graphite. Building on the traditions of Andy Warhol and Richard Prince, the artist excavates the shadow of pop iconography to explore the contradictions buried within cultural norms. He hijacks small details that form part of our daily life, and through precise juxtaposition of apparently unconnected elements, he questions our elaboration of signification. History is for him a sum of constructions maintained by the audience's confidence towards mainstream thought and the media. Ambivalent and deadpan, his works are nonetheless humorous even though it's a humour of the dark kind. Before → **FRESH HELL**, Adam McEwen had curated the exhibitions "Power, Corruption and Lies" in 2003, a survey of politically themed work; "Interstate" in 2005, which dealt with landscape as a psychological arena; and "Beneath the Underdog" in 2007, a group show curated with → **Nate Lowman** which

addressed the individual's relationship to the towering landscape of late capitalism.

Adam McEwen

Adam McEwen
Switch
 2009
 Installation view



Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, USA

For his solo show 'Switch and Bait', which was housed in a large, temporary project space, Adam McEwen made clear, yet again, just how much he likes to turn things up, down and around in order to try and see them anew. McEwen has previously employed masticated chewing gum to map air raid bombing patterns on canvas, and created obituaries of living celebrities. Here, the two sculptures that comprise the exhibition are fabricated from machined graphite, an industrial form of carbon associated with artistic, military and solar applications.

Like the gum paintings, *Switch* (both works 2009) constitutes a singular form that is repeated to chart the area in which it is located. Comprised of 45 standard fluorescent light fittings suspended in five equidistant parallel rows of nine units, each is outfitted with light tubes made of solid graphite.

Self-Portrait as a Credit Card, a carbon replica of the artist's own American Express Platinum Credit Card, sits upright on a plinth in an adjacent room. McEwen not only risks potential theft by exposing his account information; he complicates the work's reception in the process. If McEwen believes that determining the value of art has become indistinguishable from its commercial function, it is troubling that he identifies himself among those having to shift gears and take 'credibility on credit' - that is, in lieu of monetary gain - to survive in an art market gone bust.

If *Self-Portrait as a Credit Card* offers a skewed perspective of present conditions, *Switch* turns this upside down - or right side up depending on your point of view. In referencing light, McEwen owes an obvious debt to both Dan Flavin and Walter de Maria. Compositionally, *Switch* bears a striking resemblance to De Maria's *The Broken Kilometer* (1979), which is now permanently installed at the former gallery

of the founder of the Dia Art Foundation, Heiner Freidrich, at 393 West Broadway. As in McEwen's sculpture, the piece is comprised of 500 solid rods, although De Maria's were manufactured in bronze, and placed in increasing spatial increments on the floor in five parallel rows to create the effect of light cascading over a wheat field. Another Dia commission, De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977) also comes to mind, as does Richard Wilson's Saatchi Gallery oil pool, *20:50* (1987): all these works use manufactured processes and incorporate the presence or absence of light to create an optical effect that evokes a kind of post-industrial sublime.

For McEwen, non-reflection is also a metaphor to analyze the space itself. Already rife with artistic, commercial, historical, theoretical and subjective associations, McEwen's void offers the possibility to 'absorb' as well as 'reflect'. This provides added weight to the work given the current threat of art spaces having to relocate or close down, and how artists are adapting to the situation at hand.

As such, McEwen's show title notably reverses 'bait and switch', a phrase referring to a common swindling technique whereby cheaper items are advertised to lure potential buyers who are then offered more expensive goods instead. Whether this laments the current state of the global economy and its effect on art or extends the hope for another outcome remains debatable. Works like *Self-Portrait as a Credit Card* highlight what 'Switch and Bait' ultimately provides - the possibility of both options being within reach.

Ingrid Chu

Art in America

Adam McEwen at Nicole Klagsbrun

It's surprising how few contemporary artists bother to address the subject of war, or manage to do so in a compelling way, particularly when one considers how often this nation has been engaged in combat since WWII.

Adam McEwen's outstanding exhibition was the more timely as we are so deeply mired in Iraq. In a recent crop of conceptual works, McEwen obliquely examines some of the myths of war.

The first images one confronted at Klagsbrun were two black-and-white photographs: *Untitled (Dresden)*, 2006, reproduces an aerial nighttime view of the bombing of the German city; *Self-portrait as Bomber Harris* (2006) shows the artist seated behind a desk, with white hair, mustache and a uniform helping to identify him as Arthur Harris, the person in charge of the massive and highly controversial Allied air campaign waged from 1942 to 1945 against the population centers of Nazi Germany. McEwen informed me that as a teenager in England, he was struck by the comic books and pulp literature glorifying the Allied forces' massacre of German civilians, stories in which complex issues were boiled down to good versus evil, and in which the supposedly good were perfectly justified in using all means necessary to squash their opponents.

The abstract paintings *Lübeck*, *Kassel* and *Magdeburg*, named after German cities bombed during WWII, allude to masticating, spitting out and squashing in beige fields of paint dotted with flattened and soiled wads of chewing gum—a familiar urban blight. However, from a distance these pictures read as beautiful

exercises in formalist painting, somewhat reminiscent of Larry Poons's abstractions of the 1960s. Viewed more closely, the chewing gum resembles drips or flecks of paint, or crushed and dried petals arranged in irregular clusters. One soon recognizes a connection between these patterns and the bright explosions in the strangely beautiful aerial photograph of a darkened Dresden, though in most of the paintings (all of 2006, and all but one 90 by 70 inches) the values are reversed, with the ground lighter than the gum. The exceptions are two glow-in-the-dark paintings subtitled (*Phosphorbrandbombe*), the yellow-green phosphorescent ground of which alludes to the phosphorus bombs used, to horrendous effect (victims' flesh was burned to the bone).

In the next room was a series of almost identical color photographs (all 40 by 30 inches, 2006) of the Lefrak City housing complex in Queens, shot from above and moments apart—only the traffic patterns at the bottom of each picture and the cloud formations at the top differed noticeably. McEwen's images of this city-within-a-city (its 5,000 air-conditioned apartments rented for \$40 a month per room in 1969) oppose Samuel LeFrak's triumph of construction—which clearly required plenty of tearing down of existing structures—to "Bomber" Harris's campaign of wartime destruction. A trompe-l'oeil 2005 oil painting of the front panel of an air conditioning unit was displayed high on the wall, playing this symbol of a cool 1960s working- and middle-class utopia against the heat of 1940s firebombing raids. McEwen makes you connect the dots.

—Michaël Amy

Adam McEwen

NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY

In a small booklet published to accompany his recent exhibition at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, Adam McEwen writes: "War. It's always been all the rage. Bomber Harris, Commando Comics, Sven Hassel and every kid who grew up in Britain of parents who survived the war knew it." McEwen's booklet also reproduces a newspaper ad memorializing real estate developer Samuel J. Lefrak ("The Vision to See / The Faith to Believe / The Courage to Do"), images of sidewalks dotted with discarded chewing gum, a view of a landscape pocked with bomb craters, and a news brief about a boy sticking a piece of gum onto a \$1.5 million Helen Frankenthaler painting during a visit to the Detroit Institute of Arts—as well as a digression into the life of Hassel, a Danish writer of pulp combat fiction who drove a German Panzer tank during the war. The mixture of flippancy and historical gravitas recalled the artist's last Klagsbrun outing—which included an enlarged, inverted image of Mussolini and his mistress on the gallows, as well as obituaries of undead celebrities

and cheeky store signs telling customers to FUCK OFF WE'RE CLOSED—though here the scales were tipped toward gravitas.

In *Self-Portrait as Bomber Harris* (all works 2006), McEwen recreates an official black-and-white portrait photograph of Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris, the British air marshal who oversaw the carpet bombing of German cities. Another C-print, *Untitled (Dresden)*, an initially abstract-looking mass of white bursts against a black ground, is actually an aerial shot of fires in Dresden on the night it was bombed. Also included were two other series—a group of monochrome paintings with dirty blobs of gum flattened onto their surfaces and named after bombed German cities, and a group of nine photographs of Lefrak City, a 1960s housing development in Queens. The latter look identical at first glance but were in fact taken by McEwen within minutes of one another, such that the positions of cars on the highway and the clouds in the sky differ slightly in each.

So, how do Lefrak, bombings, and chewing gum relate? Well, in its similarity to *Ways of Seeing*, McEwen's booklet also seems to evoke the spirit of John Berger, arguably as big an influence on an art student of McEwen's generation as the war would have been on his parents. A broadly comparable exercise in the strategic juxtaposition of word and image, the publication might also act as a kind of Rosetta stone for the artist's project as a whole, asking us to consider how a picture is read, how text and image function together, and how history itself is formed.

But where Berger's mash-up of images is, if dated, generally coherent, McEwen's efforts to "expand" certain elements into larger works



Adam McEwen, *Kassel*, 2006, acrylic and chewing gum on canvas, 90 x 70".

come off looking rather thin (a little canvas and a lot of gum don't go as far as he might have hoped). One wants to applaud art that counters painterly bombast, but comparing gum-chewing Americans with their housing developments and contrasting facile "progressive" slogans (Lefrak's was "Live a Little Better") with the devastation of wartime Germany feels clumsy. McEwen writes: "Harris made war acceptable. Carpet-bombing suggested the muted obliteration of that which was too distant to be seen. It was no more connected to the defacement of innocence than chewing gum on a concrete grid is to the saliva of the person who placed it there." A nice analogy on the page, but one that entirely loses its acuity on the gallery wall.

—Martha Schwendener