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ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Tour Artist Adam McEwen's New York City Studio

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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.

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 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.”