

GAGOSIAN

# BROOKLYN RAIL

Adam McEwen: *Execute*

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Adam McEwen, *Bic #2*, 2022. © Adam McEwen. Courtesy Gagolian.

As I walked through Adam McEwen’s latest show at Gagolian, I was surprised to find my hands clenching. Normally I’m an alert art-viewer, of course, but with this exhibition everything felt taut, from the tightly stretched canvases to the tips of Bic pens painted barely to touch the corners of the pictures’ surfaces, and my body responded in-kind.

McEwen has prepared us (set us up?) for this sort of response from the first with the exhibition’s title. *Execute* is a contranym—or, more poetically, a Janus word—and has two oppositional meanings: both to carry out and to extinguish. “To carry out” might even be too gentle a definition, frankly. To execute something suggests the ruthless potential energy contained in a box of disposable black pens—no retractable, multi-color pens here. In *Leaning Bics* (2022), six seemingly identical, titanic pens stretch across the picture plane at seemingly identical angles,

upper left to lower right; McEwen has taped out his pens so that he paints exceptionally straight lines without much modulation in tone or paint thickness. The eye boggles at the running stripes, unable to gain purchase on the façade, constantly sliding up and down, relieved only by the lighter or darker gray drips that roll down the picture plane at true south rather than on the diagonal. This visual assault is made even clearer in *Dueling Bics* (2022), which overlap one another at cross purposes and create slight jags in the onslaught. The gallery press release suggests a relationship to Roy Lichtenstein, and that is there, but I also thought of Bridget Riley married to an inescapable, mazelike, monochrome Eduardo Paolozzi or to Frank Stella on one of his darker days.



Installation view: Adam McEwen: *Execute*, Gagosian, New York, 2022. © Adam McEwen. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

McEwen's relentless deployment of gray reminded me, as well, of midcentury exposés of the menace of advertising: *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) or *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), both of which laid bare marketing's dismal strategies and were written just at the time that Bic pens were introduced to the public. The promised efficiencies yet pervasive impotence of corporate culture echo in works like *Compressed Spring #1* (2022), one of several paintings in which a helical compression spring is depicted in various levels of contraction. Such springs bear within them the greatest amount of potential power, yet here they are trapped within the confines of the canvas. *Compressed Spring #1* implies the force exerted fully to flatten it not only by the tight lines held nearly at horizontal but also by the implacable field of gray above it, suffocating it further. McEwen's works that include color hold out the hope of some visual release, but they, too, are often exercises in frustration. *To Start* (2022) gives the lie to all our best-laid plans. A light-gray sheet of paper with a pie chart rests Cézanne-askew to the picture plane as well as to the surface on which it is placed and the wall beyond. On it is written "To Start [underlined three times in red, black, and blue]. 1. Execute [underlined twice in black and red with a particularly springy capital E]. cont." A glass cheekily half-emptied with a vile green liquid waits off to the upper left. This endlessly postponed commencement betrays an utter lack of initiation, more ineffectual than Escher's stairs. What McEwen has developed in this room is a

new type of American (im)Precisionism, all whacks on the back of the neck with a blunt cartoon blade (the painted fiberglass *Execution Block* [2022] waits for us at the center of the room).



Installation view: Adam McEwen: *Execute*, Gagolian, New York, 2022. © Adam McEwen. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

On the gallery's lower level, McEwen has included five additional paintings, including two shaped canvases: *Six Foot Two Eyes of Blue* (2022), a painting in two parts—one for each eye—resting on the floor up against the wall, like a dismantled oculist shop sign and the bedazzled *Tooth* (2022) hung high on the wall. These are surrounded by three obituary paintings (all 2022), created to look like memorial statements run in the print version of the *New York Times*. Their subjects, the mystic Sadghuru, technologist Jared Lanier, and environmental activist Greta Thunberg are still young enough that their actual deaths are hopefully far away. But the Thunberg painting especially stopped me short: she is the youngest by far and for most viewers is the best known. And yet, newspapers of record the world over almost certainly already have an obituary begun for her. McEwen's texts possess a sly humor and care for their topics and do not predict how they [will] die. But death is inescapable and, for a figure like Thunberg who inspires such manic devotion and vitriol, it must be ever-present, not least because climate change—her cause—is a death sentence. These paintings are fascinating and disturbing, almost like being compressed like a spring or being buried alive. I left reminded that as I turned the corner to walk down the stairs, I ran headlong into *Train* (2022), with its hazard-orange Vertov cowcatcher, hung in the stairwell and barreling straight toward me. It tolls for thee, right?