

# Art in America

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## 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