

ART PAPERS

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Adam McEwen, *Lefrak City No. 2*, c-print, 40 x 30 inches (print), 40.75 x 30.75 inches (framed), edition of 3, courtesy of the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York

ADAM MCEWEN NEW YORK

How do you represent a subject as vast and horrible as war? These days, the prevailing answer seems to be, you don't: you make a work whose subject is incomprehensibility rather than war itself. At first glance, Adam McEwen's latest show *8:00 for 8:30* [Nicole Klagsbrun; September 7—October 14, 2006] would appear to be no exception to this rule: there's no blood and guts to be seen, and the objects on view are very cool and quiet. But beneath the apparent formalistic hush a storm is definitely brewing.

McEwen employs media on an as-needed basis and, in this show, he favors painting and photography. Large and uniform in format, the paintings are covered with a single, flat color, ranging from matte grays and blacks to lime green. These surfaces have been dotted, like a sidewalk, with flattened wads of chewing gum. Their titles reference Dresden and Magdeburg—primary targets of the controversial 1945 Allied bombing campaign. We are told that the gum spots' random-looking patterns are derived from the actual distribution of targets in each city—in reference, perhaps, to Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, where a map of London bomb sites is found to correspond to the locations of the protagonist's sexual conquests. Otherwise, the pictures resemble nothing so much as Larry Poons' 1960s dot paintings. The paintings ask us to reflect on the removed, abstract vantage from which modern civilizations can now be blown apart. They do so by referencing postwar abstraction and by visualizing warfare from the bird's-eye view of the British bomber pilot or war room cartographer. Yet, McEwen's description of war in comparatively harmless terms of littering seems to suggest subtle, mundane, and thoughtless forms of destruction. Masquerading as quotidian gestures, this type of destruction spreads unnoticed and virus-like through our world.

A series of nearly identical photographs of the Lefrak City housing development in Queens, built during the 1960s, forms the other half of the show. Promising "Total Facilities for Total Living," the Lefrak Organization, Inc.

hoped to provide spacious, air-conditioned apartments as well as transportation and recreational services to working- and middle-class people. In these images, McEwen trains his camera on a single large building, on top of which a sign proclaims the development's name. The images seem to have been taken at one or two second intervals, as revealed by the progress of cars drifting down the Long Island Expressway at the foot of the tower. The specificity of these few instants is surprisingly unsettling, as it suggests the ticking of a time bomb or surveillance photography. The energy of the pictures owes much to Warhol's film *Empire*, 1964, an eight-hour, single take of the Empire State Building. Even as we marvel at the structure's immense presence, filling both time and space, we also feel its fragility, hear its existence being counted away.

Whereas the gum paintings investigate thoughtless destruction, *Lefrak City* exemplifies thoughtless construction. The passing cars are visual equivalents to the pock marks of the gum/bombs. They similarly convey the contradiction of vitality and desolation. The glistening cultural and economic optimism that *Lefrak City* once represented has now tarnished beyond recognition: high crime rates and poor maintenance have plagued the community for thirty years. High on the gallery wall hangs an easily overlooked *trompe-l'oeil* painting of an air-conditioner, whose non-functionality echoes the broken promises of the Lefrak Organization. It seems that Eisenhower's warning against the perils of the military-industrial complex rings loudly in McEwen's ears. We can destroy our world even as we are trying to build it.

—Adam Thompson