

frieze

November/December 2006

Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, USA

The two bodies of work that constituted the bulk of Adam McEwen's show '8:00 for 8:30' at first seemed distinct from one another, and awfully simple. One room featured a sequence of nine identical pictures of a building in Lefrak City, a massive housing complex built during the 1960s alongside the Long Island Expressway in Queens, New York. In the main gallery nearby was an equally monotonous group of 12 large monochrome paintings - mostly grey and black, two a sickly green - each speckled with an array of blackened chewing gum blobs like a typical section of Manhattan pavement.

But on the way to these pictures hung two photographs that retrospectively began to unpack the exhibition. In one the artist appears in the guise of Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, the British RAF commander who ordered the firebombing of German cities in World War II. The other appears to be a damaged negative, or a flight of sparks, both of which it is in some way: the photograph turns out to have been snapped by a British airman during one of the night-time sorties over Dresden that Bomber Harris ordered.

A glance at the checklist revealed that each of the paintings is named after a different German city attacked in this annihilating campaign (Lübeck, Darmstadt, Kassel etc.), and if you asked the gallery to turn the lights off, the formal link between the pattern of blooming fireballs in the Dresden photograph and the gum-spotting became more explicit. The green grounds of *Hamburg (Phosphorbrandbombe)* and *Dresden (Phosphorbrandbombe)* (both 2006) glow in the dark, in reference to the phosphorous matériel used against the cities - in Dresden, some

700,000 bombs for 1.2 million people. In the reversed after-images that our eyes make when the room darkens, the black gum spots become brightly epiphanic explosions. That aerial view of the total and wilful destruction of a city and its citizens finds an odd equation in these lowly, pedestrian views looking down on small markers of urban decay. The corporeal immediacy of wads of chewing gum, spat out and darkened beneath the soles of our feet, makes an absurd mockery of the Bomber's distant remove from his landscape of destruction. I can think of few other paintings that look as good when you close your eyes.

On closer inspection the Lefrak photographs are in fact minutely different from one another. Like a Minimalist Eadweard Muybridge, McEwen snapped them one by one from nearby buildings; the arrangement of the cars on the highway changes, and the clouds move slightly. Taken as a whole, the images register and measure the pace of the metropolis' natural degradation against the speed of war: it is minutely slow, yes, but no less sure. In a small and revelatory book of images that McEwen put together in connection with the show, we find an obituary advertisement published on the occasion of Samuel Lefrak's death in 2003, which proclaimed that he had 'the vision to see, the faith to believe, the courage to do'. On the facing page is Bomber Harris, who must represent to McEwen the flip-side of that blind faith, the dark courage made possible only by self-deception.

We are able to mislead ourselves more regularly than we think, and technology only emboldens us. Mostly, though, these aren't lies so much as they are small choices free of repudiation, tiny decisions afforded to us by the abstractions inherent in the big things in life. The elasticity of time, for example, is open to this kind of negotiation: even though the calendar never lies, we feel that the last time we saw each other couldn't have been that long ago.

But these are simple, happy deceptions. Only rarely do we contend with the power that our imaginative faculties have to deny the discomfiting desires and outright horrific deeds for which we retain some responsibility. McEwen realizes how well this problem lends itself to art, sharing, as it does, similar conundrums of vision and faith. As the *faux* simplicity of the exhibition suggested, we can hide our hands and conceal those desires while yet acting on them. Aware of the depth of this inconvenient truth, we push it further away, cloaking even that choice in a dense fog beneath which any semblance of moral justice or self-examination becomes almost unrecoverable. Does one need to point out the timeliness of this exhibition? In the dark gallery of McEwen's show our eyes played tricks on us. When the lights came back on, we forgave ourselves for thinking we had glimpsed the enormity of this lie and its consequences amid some bare-bones paintings and photographs that we could barely discern.

Peter Eleey

Pierre Klossowski
Roberte agressée par les esprits qu'elle a censurés
(Roberte attacked by the spirits she censored)
1976
Coloured pencil on paper
162x110 cm

Adam McEwen
Dresden
(*Phosphorbrandbombe*)
2006
Phosphorescent paint and
chewing gum on canvas
229x178 cm



Adam
McEwen