



**STICKY SITUATION**  
Adam McEwen next to his gum paintings in his Manhattan studio. Turnbull & Asser black shirt. The suit, by D Major, was his father's and is made from the family tartan. Gucci boots. Sitings Editor: Esmé René.

Photographed by Raymond Meier

# THE ARTIST

Adam McEwen administers personality tests to gallery-goers. But what makes him tick is no mystery: Dentyne Ice, Ludwig drums, and questionable viewing.

**V**isitors to the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2006 Biennial, the preeminent exhibition of American talent, viewed works of oil on canvas; of ink on paper; of Styrofoam, felt, wood, steel, and papier-mâché—even a house constructed of bread. But it's safe to say that without Adam McEwen, nobody would have had the chance to confront the artistic merits of chewing gum.

Onto a large and otherwise pristine canvas evenly painted in a serene shade of gray, McEwen had mounted several dozen wads of gum to mirror identical splotches on the right, so that the whole thing resembles a Rorschach inkblot crossed with an aerial view of New York City. "It's the city as personality test," he says.

The gum is black and flattened, as if plucked from a sidewalk after repeated encounters with pedestrians and bike messengers, but nothing about the McEwen method would leave so much to chance. He accompanied his assistant to an underground parking garage—"so that the rain doesn't wash the dirt away"—with hundreds of "pieces of anything from Strawberry Fusion Trident to Wrigley's Extra Polar Ice. Dentyne Peppermint Ice is probably the best," he says. "Hardens up nicely and takes the dirt quite well." He had detailed instructions to 1) chew gum; 2) affix gum to several sheets of Plexiglas; 3) char gum with blowtorch to mimic a recent sully; and 4) stomp on gum wearing two different types of shoes—smooth-soled boots and Adidas Rod Lavers.

McEwen, 41, is a rangy, rail-thin Brit. His weary eyes suggest a certain welt-schmerz, befitting the obituary writer he once was at *The Daily Telegraph*. (His other Biennial entry was a series of fake obituaries of real, still-living people, including Bill Clinton, Jeff Koons, and Nicole Kidman.) He grew up mostly in London, a child of culture. Rory McEwen, Adam's father, was a botanical painter, a folk singer, a talk-show regular (*The Tonight Show*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*), a pal of Jean Shrimpton, Bob Dylan, and various Beatles and royals. His sister Christabel is a

sculptor and is married to the musician Jools Holland, late of the former band Squeeze. McEwen studied English at Oxford ("I can't really get away from words," he says), and then art under the late Cuban painter Felix Gonzalez-

Torres at California Institute of the Arts. With no less enthusiasm, he played drums in now-disbanded Owada, a high-concept art band whose style was "Steve Reich meets the Ramones." Owada's guitarist and singer was his friend Martin Creed, a Turner Prize-winning British artist.

It was an Owada gig—at Gavin Brown's enterprise on the West Side—that jump-started McEwen's art career, years after he arrived in New York City in 2000. At the punk show he met Clarissa Dalrymple, an art-world stalwart and freelance curator who soon entered his work in some group shows, including one at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, which now represents him.

His atelier is a small, materials-strewn walk-up in Tribeca, much of it currently filled by an enormous wooden sculpture: an enlarged replica of a Black Flag Roach Motel. "These days, it's easy to come into my studio around 11:00 in the morning and then work until 2:00 A.M.," McEwen says. When he's not in the middle of a project, he trolls the city for inspiration, jotting down seemingly pedestrian ideas. "If I put something in my notebook and it's still interesting to me six months later, then I'll work with it," he says. Such was the case with a series of paintings that resemble the signs seen on shop windows after hours, the kind that apologize, "Sorry we're closed" in aggressively cheerful lettering. McEwen's pieces disorient the viewer, bearing messages like "SORRY WE'RE DEAD," "SORRY WE'RE SORRY," and "SORRY RAVI SHANKAR."

This last piece expresses sincere remorse. "My dad put the Beatles in touch with Ravi Shankar, and he really admired him," McEwen explains. "Ravi Shankar did have aspirations that Indian music would enlighten the West and open people's minds. And instead, you had hippies getting high to it and thinking that was something deep. Well, my apologies to Ravi Shankar."

—ERIC KONIGSBERG

## CREATIVE PALETTE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A Ludwig 402 snare drum once used by David Bowie; Pro-Mark 5B oak drumsticks; McEwen's copy of *The National Enquirer: Thirty Years of Unforgettable Images*; a block of aluminum and a C.S. Osborne awl; *Hustler Barely Legal*, Volumes 4 and 11 ("Classics of the genre"); a Ricoh GR digital camera with macro lens; a drum head signed by eYe from the Boredoms; *Andy Warhol's Party Book*; Lee Friedlander's *New York City, 1966*; a Sony Walkman Professional; *Thistle Grove*, a painting by his father. Photographed by Stephen Lewis.

