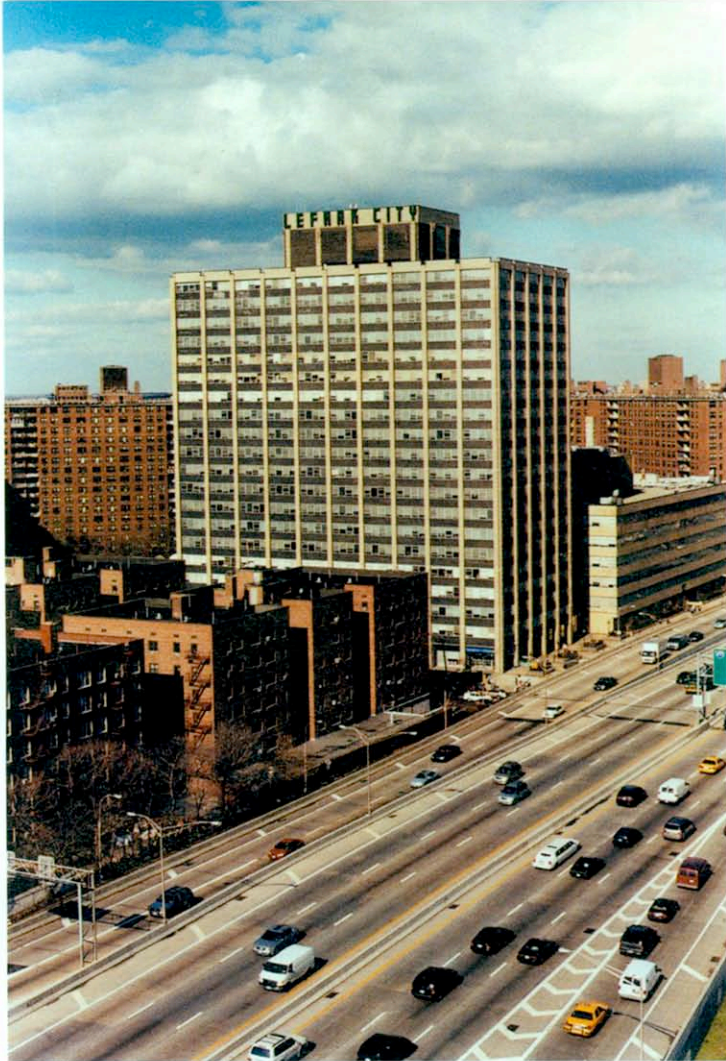


# MODERN PAINTERS

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ADAM MCEWEN  
**LEFRAK CITY NO. 7, 2006**  
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NEW YORK

## ADAM MCEWEN

NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY

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Fresh from the success of the tongue-in-cheek celebrity obituaries he showed at the 2006 Whitney Biennial, Adam McEwen, in his second solo show at Nicole Klagsbrun, confronts the artistic and social legacies of the 20th century with deadpan humor that masks gravitas. On view are what appear to be 12 white, black, and glow-in-the-dark monochromes. However, gallery literature explains that these paintings are symbolic aerial-view representations of German cities, such as Dresden and Cologne, that the British air force carpet-bombed during World War II. McEwen illustrates the rain of bombs that fell on each city by arranging clusters of chewed bubble gum across each painting (and represents the leader of the bombing, Arthur "Bomber" Harris, by incarnating him as a black-and-white self-portrait). Transforming detritus into ornament, the resulting patterns are dizzying, lyrical, and far-reaching, even though the trauma of war—in the past depicted in such figurative works as Picasso's *Guernica* or Goya's *Great Deeds Against the Dead*—is an incongruous subject for monochrome painting. How can a painting made in one color, albeit assaulted with gum, possibly express the historical consequence of violence on such a massive scale?

In fact, the monochrome is an ideal medium for the critique of the principles and brutal repercussions of modernity. The still-goey constellation of gum sprouting on each canvas effectively defaces modernism's emblem. Tarnished by saliva and sugar, the monochrome is no longer the pure expression of abstraction, but an arena for bodily fluids and low street culture. Industrialization, mass production, and consumerism, McEwen suggests, have taken their toll on the most seemingly unassailable of all artistic forms—the monochrome has

been corrupted by the same processes of modernization that resulted in the mass armament of the European nations. Indeed, it is modernization that has made it possible to transform the untouched integrity of the monochrome, as it was espoused by such prewar figures as Kasimir Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko, into a receptive surface infiltrated by the debris of mass-produced everyday life. The monochrome is no longer just a self-enclosed, vertical optical field but a symbolic allusion to the sullied, horizontal grittiness of the urban sidewalk and the streamlined rationality of the production line.

McEwen turns his attention to the degeneration of high modernism and modernity on American soil as well. His almost-identical photographs of the Queens, New York, housing complex known as LeFrak City, all shot on the same sunny day, are portraits of a ruin left over from the postwar dream of collective living. With 5,000 apartments built on 40 acres of land and rented for 40 dollars per room, the humble motto of LeFrak City was "Live a Little Better." Unfortunately, a "little better" was not enough. What was meant to be a utopia of public housing eventually dissolved into a den of crime and gang violence in the 1980s. In retrospect, this slow slide into urban blight seems inevitable, echoed by the decline of hundreds of similar housing projects across the country. In staging this double assault on modernist painting and modernist housing, McEwen suggests that ideals of progress are inseparable from forces of violence.

—NUI BANAI