

Josie-Thaddeus-Johns, "The irrational object: an interview with Adam McEwen," *Sleek Magazine* online, May 6, 2014.



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## The irrational object: an interview with Adam McEwen

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Adam McEwen, "Franklin", 2014. Inkjet print on cellulose sponge. 551.2 x 80.6 cm. Courtesy Captain Petzel, Berlin. Copyright the artist. Photo: Tom Powell

ATMs, made of graphite. Text messages, silk screened in ink. And now, limousines, portrayed in sponge. Adam McEwen has always been a fan of working in unusual materials. The artist is best known for writing obituaries for celebrities who are still alive, but throughout all of his work, he seeks that elusive moment of incomprehension in the familiar. In his current show at Captain Petzel, the British artist has created homages to that ubiquitous American sight, the limousine, each of which is printed in inkjet, onto sponge. Laid vertically, the shapes become defamiliarised, yet still nod to the phallic promise of a fantasy night created by the gargantuan cars. Alongside these key works, the artist also shows the installation "Assembly" (made from disassembled elevator steps) and "Escape from New York" (four films of the inside of the tunnels that lead out of New York, inspired by the John Carpenter film of the same name). *Sleek* spoke to McEwen about finding art in moments of the unfamiliar, and what limousines have in common with dildos.

# Petzel

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Installation view: Adam McEwen, "Factory Tint", May 2 – June 21, 2014. Courtesy Captain Petzel, Berlin. Copyright the artist. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

## What led to your creating the photos of limousines?

I had been thinking about limousines for a few years. They hooked into my head as being insane and irrational. When you stop and think about it, there's a 25-foot white object trying to get around the street corner. You're used to it, but if you step back, it's insane!

There's a strange accumulation of emotional reasons for it. When you see a stretch limo, it conjures up all these ideas of fantasy, sex, drugs and rock and roll. It's about desire. You want to be excited. It's about transforming your life, inverting the situation. It offers this promise, which is a bit like an art work in a way: the irrational object.

I also like that all you need to indicate a limo is a white rectangle, with a black rectangle inside and maybe some little lines, then you would instantly see "stretch limo". So, I realised that you could defamiliarise them like that.

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## **Why did you choose to print these limousine photographs onto sponge?**

I thought that the sponge might be a good way of tripping the viewer up. I like it when you are forced into a moment when you're not sure how something works. It's the same with the graphite works I made. You look at it and think "What is that?". But every five year old kid has used an HB pencil, and knows that colour – it's not black, it's not silver, it's pencil. I'd never seen a sculpture made of this, which makes it feel unfamiliar, but it isn't. The aim is to make this sliver or doorway that you can step through.

**It's funny that the sponge doesn't absorb the colour much, even though that's what it's known for.**

It printed much better than I thought it would. And because it's inkjet and sprays ink, it sprays into the holes which gives it this 3d aspect – if you move your head, it changes, because you're looking into a hole.

**The names of the works in the series are from the drivers of the limousines ("Big Mike", "Fernando", "Esteban") . These also sound like pornstar names, or dildos! There seems to be a link there between the phallic promise of limousines and the drivers you named them after.**

That's so true and hilarious! I remember Big Mike, he was really proud of his big long limo! It's so overt and stupid, that you want to say "Really? You think you're going to impress people by being 25 foot long?" And basically, the answer is yes: it works, which is very "porn".

It was a big deal to realise that the limos should be titled by the drivers, because it's the driver I'm interacting with. They make the whole thing happen. Yes, someone's offering a limo as a fantasy, but meanwhile there's Big Mike driving up front, and he's working.

**The films of the tunnels in "Escape From New York" are very bound up with the city of New York, where you live. Could you have made this work about New York if you weren't originally an outsider?**

The thing is that most Americans are outsiders in New York – if you come from Wisconsin, it's such a different place.

There's something very New York about those films. After 9/11 and watching the towers go down, there was this period of a couple of months where you were very aware that you were on an island and you maybe wouldn't be able to get off. That's why you can't get out of the tunnels. [The films loop back to the start once the camera reaches the end of the tunnel]

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Installation view: Adam McEwen, "Escape from New York", 2014. 4-Channel Video Projection, Varying Lengths. Courtesy Captain Petzel, Berlin. Copyright the artist. Photo: Jens Ziehe

I am an outsider, but I had that idea for a tunnel film when I was 27 in London, I remember driving in my old car alone at 3am through a tunnel, and thought: there's something about this that is interesting. It just stuck in my head. I find this happens a lot. The idea slowly cooks inside you.

It seemed to fit that I was showing these very phallic objects [the limousine series] and then tunnels. I don't know what that is – I'm just foregrounding this stuff.

**You filmed it on an iphone, right?**

Yes, I did. Why would I use a proper film camera? I was using something available. There's a good expression that Sarah Lucas uses: if it's good enough, it's perfect.

**Adam McEwen – Factory Tint is showing at Captain Petzel May 2 – June 21, 2014**

<http://www.sleek-mag.com/showroom/2014/05/the-irrational-object-an-interview-with-adam-mcewen/>