

## Art in America

MUSE



View of Adam McEwen's installation *Switch*, 2009, graphite and light fixtures, dimensions variable; at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York. Photo Jon Abbott.

# A Ludwig Snare Drum

by Adam McEwen

### OPENING

SOON  
Adam McEwen's solo show at Petzel, New York, Oct. 30-Dec. 19.

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WHEN I WAS FOUR or five years old, I would tap incessantly with my fingers on any and every available surface. It was, I think, very irritating for everyone around me. It might have had something to do with Ravi Shankar, the Indian classical musician, and Ali Akbar Khan, his sarod player, and Alla Rakha, the great tabla master, performing in the house where I grew up in London, as my father was deeply interested in Indian music. I don't know whether this drew something out in me or planted something inside me, but all I thought of was rhythms. When I was six, my father arranged for me to take tabla lessons, but the soft-spoken and serious Indian man who came once a week to teach me talked of 10-beat cycles of five over four, and I had trouble getting it, particularly as the lesson clashed with "Star Trek" on television. Later, as a miserable nine-year-old at a decrepit Roman Catholic boarding school in Scotland run by disturbed Benedictine monks, I would sit through daily Mass quietly tapping on the wooden pew in front of me until my knuckles were swollen. With my eyes closed I fantasized about drum sets, cymbals, rhythms.

I stretched a piece of tire rubber over a wooden board and nailed it down on the back to make a practice pad, which I would play with sticks. Then, when I was 12, a family friend gave me the little drum set he'd had as a kid, an Olympic kit with a pearlescent silver and gray smeared finish that looked like kneaded Plasticine. From this time on, every moment of my holidays was spent sitting at the drum kit. I had been obsessed with cutting, gluing and painting to make balsa wood models and

structures; overnight, they were forgotten. At home, all I wanted to do was sit at the drum kit and try to play along to my father's vinyl records—1960s and '70s rock, Motown, The Band, Elvis. I loved Ginger Baker and had an album by his mentor, the British jazz drummer Phil Seamen. The photographer Lee Friedlander, who came to stay one summer, made me a cassette featuring Baby Dodds, the great Chicago drummer who performed with Louis Armstrong, that I played until the tape wore out. One of my favorite albums was called *Rich à la Rakha*, which featured Buddy Rich improvising with Alla Rakha in a studio in 1968. I listened to the American session drummers of the early '70s like Jim Gordon and Jim Keltner, who were so good that they could appear to let things fall apart, be behind the beat, lazy, as if they were playing the feeling of *Quaaludes*. I loved Keith Moon, but for the look in his eye more than for the way he played. I idolized John Maher, the drummer of the punk band Buzzcocks, who was barely older than me and had joined the band by lying about his age. His playing was so ferocious and precise, it felt like a race car engine constantly straining to accelerate. I tried to play to Steely Dan, to Steve Gadd or Bernard Purdie. It was endless, the things I was unable to do.

THE FEELING OF playing a repetitive rhythm is deeply calming while at the same time calling forth a net of tensions—of muscle, of pressure, of feel and idea. It circumvents language; if you try to think about what you're doing, you lose it, it escapes you, like a blur or irregularity on the lens of your eye, which slides away as



# Petzel

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you roll your eyeball to catch it. This different way of thinking, or thinking with a different part of your brain, was what I wanted. It is the polar opposite of writing, of searching through a meager and fast-fading vocabulary for the appropriate word to try to express something. Sitting in a beat at a drum kit is a strange merging of the fleshed and the mechanical, of the deliberate and the thoughtless, that seems to speak to a deeper pulse.

In the early 1970s, James Brown specialized in long tracks with mesmeric, repetitive beats that drew listeners in and held them. His drummers—Clyde Stubblefield, John "Jabo" Starks—were masters of feel and restraint. Around that time, Holger Czukay, leader of the German prog rock band Can, compared James Brown's music to the Volkswagen Beetle, meaning it as the highest compliment: the rhythm was democratic, accessible to all, profoundly reliable, irresistible, perfect, Warholian—a machine for everyone. I became obsessed with Can, and with their drummer Jaki Liebeck, a dignified genius who created deceptively simple, looping rhythms that acknowledged the band's whiteness while tapping into the deep well of repetition opened up by American soul.

In the early 2000s, soon after I moved to New York, I wrote a letter to Walter De Maria, suggesting that *The Broken Kilometer* is an analogy for the experience of playing a repetitive rhythm, of loosening the rigid connections of conscious thought and riding the visceral routings of nerve endings and muscles. The precision of the placement of 500 brass rods is a gateway to an infinite, hidden reality, a perfect equation. It brings to mind the autism of one of Oliver Sacks's patients, who perceives experience as a landscape of numbers and for whom the solution to a complex mathematical sum is simply a matter of stepping out into the scenery and picking up the answer. De Maria was a drummer who had played with the early members of the Velvet Underground. I received a polite



Cover of Buddy Rich and Alla Rakha's album *Rich à la Rakha*, 1968.

letter from his studio in reply, but no confirmation of what I was sure was the key to his sculpture. Somebody once asked De Maria what the difference was between his work as a musician and as an artist. "There is no difference," he is said to have answered. "In both of them I'm just deconstructing time."

In my mid-20s I bought a snare drum from a London musician, an early 1970s Ludwig, for £100. It had belonged to David Bowie's drummer, Woody Woodmansey, and was said to have been the drum used on the album *Hunky Dory*. It is very loud. If you hit it right, it sounds like a pistol shot over a bed of granite, but it has a warmth, too. For me it is a beautiful, powerful object, numinous, spare, loaded with potential. You just have to place the beat in the right spot, the right place in time. And think less. ○



McEwen's Ludwig snare drum.