

Andrew Russeth, "Castles in the Sky: Adam McEwen on 'Harvest,' His Show at Petzel Gallery,"
ARTnews, April 22, 2016.

ARTNEWS

ARTISTS



CASTLES IN THE SKY: ADAM MCEWEN ON 'HARVEST,' HIS SHOW AT PETZEL GALLERY

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 04/22/16 3:02 PM



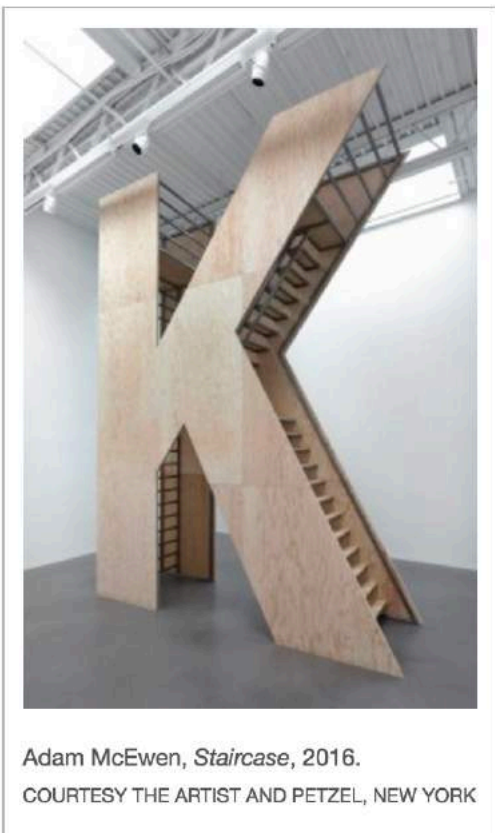
Adam McEwen, *IBM Blue Gene 1* and *IBM Blue Gene 2*, both 2016.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

For the past few years I have had a poster in my living room of Kate Moss's *New York Times* obituary. It begins, "Kate Moss, the model who died aged 33, was the most celebrated and iconic beauty of her time, possessed of a poised glamour which she translated into lasting fame and a considerable fortune." The whole thing is beautifully written, and has a photo of Moss posing, topless, in front of dark shadows. When people first see it they usually pause suddenly, trying to remember when she passed. Sometimes I do too.

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Moss, of course, is still very much alive. The article is a work that Adam McEwen made in 2007 as part of a series of obituaries of living figures, including Bill Clinton, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jeff Koons. He was drawing on his years of expertise as an obituary writer for *The Daily Telegraph*, and they are perhaps his most famous works, but it has been a while since a new piece has appeared.

"I haven't done one since 2011, but I would do another one," McEwen told me one afternoon at the Petzel gallery in Chelsea. "It's hard to think of people who would really work."

McEwen talked quickly and excitedly, standing close so that he could be heard over the drills, hammers, and saws that were buzzing in the background, assembling his show, "Harvest." He is a gangly 6 feet, 2 inches, and he towered over me. He had a crisp haircut, and with his youthful enthusiasm, he seemed a decade younger than his 51 years.

"They're homages," he added, of the obituaries. "So they have to be somebody I really think is great, in a sense. Yet they all have this thing of, the person seems to have a flaw, and the flaw seems to be that they don't seem to be really in control of reality."

As fanciful as it sounds, McEwen's art can itself exercise exacting control over reality. For a quick moment, viewing his works, someone is dead, or an apparently straightforward object reveals itself as something else entirely. We were standing in front of two large, sleek, gray sculptures that resemble giant IBM servers, which would ordinarily be filled with scores of hard drives, collecting data, humming away. These, however, are hollow inside, and they are made of graphite.

"I mean why? Why did they make it look like this?" McEwen said, almost laughing with good-natured exasperation. "These are cupboards! That's all they are. But I think they're saying, 'If you rent these, or buy these, or use our system, we will fuck with anyone you want cause we are bad and we're fast.' " The servers, he pointed out, also recall the monoliths in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and classic Minimalism—Tony Smith, Brice Marden, and Donald Judd. McEwen is interested, he said, in the way "that culture sort of drips through. Really the bottom line is, this is IKEA. Judd today is IKEA."

McEwen has also made immaculate graphite sculptures of locked gates, water fountains, and ATMs. All of those subjects obscure their contents. They hold back products, water, or cash until

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Installation view of 'Adam McEwen: Harvest' at Petzel in New York, 2016.
COURTESY PETZEL, NEW YORK

the push of a button or the turn of a key. I asked him what makes for a good graphite sculpture. He said, "I think usually the suggestion that something might be offered and that the object can't deliver."

"They all want to offer, and they're optimistic, I mean in the sense that they are designed to offer you something," McEwen added. "But, what if they are restricted somehow? What if an ATM can't deliver?" His works sit resplendently in a zone of certain failure. (He once made a version of a "Sorry, We're Closed" sign that read, "Sorry, We're Sorry," which is, he told me, "another thing that can't deliver. It's like: Sorry, I can't give you anything. I can't even give you a new word, so here's the same word. Sorry.")

One has a flash realization before his objects: these things are making promises that they can never fulfill. "I think that if you can try to find that hiccup, then in that moment, for a split second, somebody drops into a different place," he told me. "And if you get them in that different place, then you can flip things over. That's why you might make a drinking fountain out of graphite, because they go, 'Drinking fountain,' and then there's that, 'What?' And just in that second—that is why very familiar things are useful, because it's a starting point. Banal things. They kind of creep up on you."

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And to that end, there would seem to be nothing quite as familiar as a letter of the alphabet. McEwen has blown up one—"K"—into a gigantic sculpture with metal beams and plywood boxing. It stands almost 19 feet tall, nearly filling one room, and has stairs and platforms that allow one to walk up inside of it.

Why a K? For the first time McEwen paused and thought hard. "It's hard to explain," he said. "I can't...I...partly, it comes from Kafka," referring to *The Castle* (1926), whose main character is named simply K. He then launched into the story of LeFrak City, the housing complex that Samuel LeFrak built in the 1960s in Queens, which fell into disrepair in the 1980s and '90s, coming to be known as LeCrack City, and Bomber Harris, the British Air Marshal who oversaw bombing campaigns in World War II, whom McEwen learned about in his youth.

"This guy bombs cities, this guy builds cities," McEwen said, "And in the meantime I'm thinking there's this huge city with a castle with a K, and it just all sort of seemed hard to understand. I was interested in the way that these two stories don't meet...And they kind of seem to talk to each other, but they don't—the gray area in between is weird. And somehow the K, which sort of reaches out to, let's say Kafka and *The Castle*, seemed to be like the link."

Once he came up with the shape of the K—in Helvetica font with a few subtle alterations—it was an easy job to build, McEwen said, simply a matter of placing in stairs and railings the only places they could logically go. "Down to the last millimeter, it completely designed itself," he said. "You just had to iron out the wrinkles. It determined what it did. It's very weird. Really satisfying." And at this he took a deep breath, looking truly pleased.

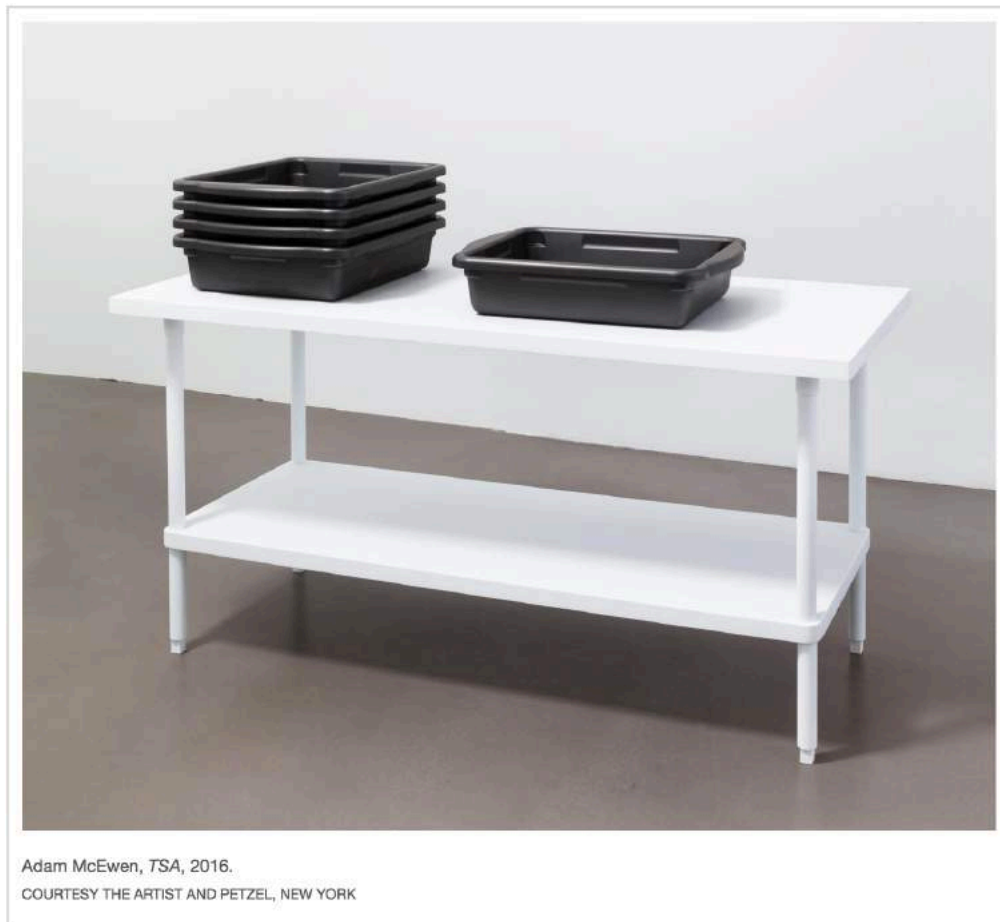
Visitors to the show, which runs through April 30, must sign a form stating they will not sue if injured on McEwen's K. Which may sound a bit silly, but it is scary as hell way up on top of it. It is wobbly, and I stepped very carefully, watching where I placed my weight.

The show, in essence, is about movement—about how information and bodies flow through space, and about how those things can be delayed or stopped. McEwen kept returning to that idea while we talked, explaining how visitors would move through the space, past graphite approximations of Heathrow security trays near the entrance and eventually ending up in a room with images of the four tunnels that flow into Manhattan (printed, improbably, on large, thin sponges) and a metal cast of a very strong Fox police lock designed to keep a door in place.

Lives and careers, to be sure, also involve movement, and McEwen's would appear to be on a steady upswing, though I think he remains deeply underrated. He was a bit of a late bloomer. After graduating from CalArts in 1991 and returning to his native London, "I failed to make an art object for about eight years," he told me, still sounding pained. And so he decamped for New York—"a last-gasp effort to change something." Ideas finally began to come, and he has gained a healthy amount of commercial success over the years. In January he will have his first solo museum show, at the Aspen Art Museum.

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Adam McEwen, *TSA*, 2016.
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“An obituary is a narrative of somebody’s decisions,” McEwen told me. “And in that narrative essentially they’re trying to do the best for themselves. You watch somebody: in 1978 she did this, and in 1983 she did this, and in 1988 she—” He cut himself off. “Clearly they’re trying to do what they want with their life, and then they die. And in a sense it’s optimistic, and in another sense it’s impossible, and that’s like making art. You’re trying to make this thing that floats, and you know that’s not going to happen, but you think it’s still worth trying.”

<http://www.artnews.com/2016/04/22/castles-in-the-sky-adam-mcewen-on-harvest-his-show-at-petzel-gallery>