

Before the Flood - David McQueen's Pursuit of Reason

by Adam Welch

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David McQueen's sculptures have a dual, yet unique function, both as a political critique of a society bursting with corruption and greed, and as a diorama of human intelligence. These may appear like diametrically opposed concerns, disjointedly combined under a convenient rubric. However, McQueen's art examines the inextricable essence that bonds them together - the Enlightenment. The Age of Reason has long had its critics and McQueen, perhaps unwittingly, is but one.

Postmodern pundits proselytize that the Enlightenment's climax exposed its ultimate fallibility and demise in Nazi Germany - the supposed pinnacle of reason and culture. Philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued against the Enlightenment's propensity toward the disenchantment of, and alienation from nature through science and reason. Adorno's protégé, Jürgen Habermas,



1. *Minor Deluge 2.2*, 2004

Mixed media

7' x 11' x 30"

argues on behalf of the Enlightenment, referring to it as an incomplete project. Regardless of popular trends in academia or among schools of theory, a rational critical analysis of McQueen's art makes one aware of his position and the importance of revisiting the discourses and effects of the Enlightenment.

Like so many others, David McQueen is an artist torn between expectation and instinct - a conundrum prevalent among the plethora of recent graduates churned out from art academe. Though he is a poignant and accurate depiction of many artists that are making their way to the center of the art world, McQueen is one artist whose dilemma stems not from an anxious scramble to gain art-star status (what art critic Donald Kuspit calls the Post-Artist), but rather radiates from a sense of duty - a burdened conscience. There is an old adage that says something to the effect that, "sometimes good things happen to good people." Well, McQueen is one of those who is deserving of what good fortune comes his way. Lately, the Art Gods are shining on this brilliant young Williamsburger. His works were included in several recent group exhibitions at D.U.M.B.O. Center for Contemporary Art, The Bronx Museum, and Collaborative Concepts in Beacon, New York; a



2. *Minor Deluge*, detail



3. *Minor Deluge*, detail

solo exhibition is scheduled at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art in 2006, and a group exhibition at Smack Mellon Gallery in D.U.M.B.O (opening December 4th 2004) finishes up the list.

The latest exhibition to include McQueen's sculpture - *Happy Art for a Sad World* - was curated by Hélianthe Bourdeaux-Maurin at Spike Gallery in Chelsea. McQueen's piece, *Minor Deluge 2.2*, like much of the art on exhibit, held an ambiguous relationship to the other works, and to the thesis of the exhibition itself.

Deluge is 11 feet tall, 7 feet wide, and extends 30 inches from the wall into the viewer's space - a monumental sculpture. Unlike some works that utilize scale as an aesthetic device, the size of *Deluge* is not the least bit impressive, nor does one get the feeling that it self-consciously attempts that feat. Its monumentality comes from the perfect articulation of individual complex networks - which demand closer inspection - versus an overall gestalt.

Deluge, meaning flood, utilizes key notions of Enlightenment to reinforce its metaphorical content. These notions (such as the development of a radical individualism) brought about our democratic idea of equal opportunity.

Enlightenment thinking, that is, the belief in an



4. *Stocks Project*, 2004

Laser print on paper

11" x 14"



5. *Lucky*, 2004

Lotto scratch-its on matte board

36" x 48"

endless ability of humanity to desire progress, sought to cultivate human reason and develop a culture of independent beings. Individualistic, non-superstitious, rational and educated, the new Candides would forsake God's dominion and acknowledge scientific truths over intuition.

Immediately tied to McQueen's art is the hegemony of reason over intuition, which effectively substitutes a belief in science over nature.

These Enlightenment notions, taken together with the placement of a small wooden boat upon one of the moss "islands," reference the book of Genesis, specifically the flood that covered the face of the earth:

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.
(Genesis 6:5)¹

As the story goes, everything was vanquished except for Noah and his Ark. He was saved because he was a righteous man, blameless among his people and because he walked with God.

The Ark in conjunction with the powerful metaphor of the flood is an elegant scene. The wooden ark, stranded upon the “island” awaiting the eminent and impending flood, is no subtle articulation of a powerful warning. As such, this constructed ecosystem demands more than a formalist diagnosis of its individual networks, but rather requires a rigorous critical analysis of its metaphors to appreciate its contemplative potential.

McQueen’s complex network of vinyl tubing and Pasteur pipettes creates a structure that visually and symbolically represents clouds, which in turn produces the effect of the flood. His patience and ability to manipulate materials is prevalent in the craft of his works. This sophisticated conglomeration of scientific equipment built in “cloud” groupings of 2, 3, 2, and 1, consists of dozens of pipettes suspended from the ceiling on flat clear acrylic platforms. The pipettes are joined via several feet of clear vinyl tubing with plastic water bottles that in turn connect to a

dehumidifier located just beyond view of the sculpture.

In *Deluge*, the dehumidifier represents the pinnacle of human reason, and, thus, Enlightenment ingenuity. The dehumidifier's function is to remove moisture from the atmosphere, condensing it into disposable water, collected in a convenient container located within the machine. McQueen runs a vinyl tube from this collection tank to plastic water bottles that feed the pipettes and produce "rain." In a conceptual conceit, McQueen uses the dehumidifier as a conduit to supply his "clouds" with rain from the moisture that it collects from the environment, thereby reintroducing it back into the air through the rainfall - an ironically vicious cycle.

Minor Deluge 2.2 is a relatively minor disaster on the Richter scale. Nonetheless, the biblical reference is a comment on the extent to which people have become, once again, completely self-absorbed and arrogant. Instead of cultivating one's own reason - the war cry of Enlightenment - people are allowing their own reason to be governed by others. Coincidentally, the same thing happened in Nazi Germany and is exactly what Horkheimer and Adorno warn against - the propensity of the Enlightenment to produce and

propagate Totalitarianism. *Deluge* is a warning of an impending crisis.

It was a significant concern of Horkheimer and Adorno that the Enlightenment demystified nature. Enlightenment-influenced thinking, led society to privilege the empirical and scientific over the spiritual or mystical. The mere mention of the latter in today's discourse brings forth negative connotations of New-Age spiritualism. A lot has changed over the centuries with regard to our understanding of science and superstitions, though one aspect has carried on - a concern that philosopher Hans-George Gadamer poignantly expressed. Science and art make "truth-claims" about existence. However, the light that radiates from the very truth-claims that science makes is so bright, it casts a shadow on all other possible truths. Despite the valiant effort made on art's behalf by McQueen and other artists like him, those "truths" often pale in comparison to scientific certainty.

Donald Kuspit, in his newest book, *The End of Art*, argues against the validity of the artist as social critic, suggesting artists of all people are no better suited to predicting or supplying a remedy for social maladies:

In a post-aesthetic art world the work of art becomes a bully pulpit, and the artist tries to bully the spectator into believing what the artist believes. He becomes a self-righteous bully preaching to us (or rather at us) about what we already know - the ugliness and injustice of the world - without offering any aesthetic, contemplative alternative to it. Indeed, the aesthetic, the contemplative, and the beautiful are bad words in the artist's "revolutionary" vocabulary. They do not speak to his attempt to make the world a better place to live in, at least according to his idea of a better world. Social criticism is no doubt a noble cause, and changing the world for the better is no doubt a heroic enterprise, but it is far from clear that art is effective at both. The artist is not exactly the best person to educate us to the realities of the world nor the best person to help us endure and even overcome our suffering.²

There is a sense of pretentiousness that is inherent to political works of art. McQueen avoids this dogmatism by creating a sculpture that does not rely on heavy-handedness, but rather on a belief in art's ability to transcend temporality and speak about universals, not specific political actions. Coincidentally, Kuspit's argument against the artists' credentials for educating "us to the realities of the world" is

indebted to the Enlightenment's propensity to create specialized fields. This argument is what often becomes construed as authoritarian and equivocates the line drawn against the Enlightenment by Adorno, Kuspit's onetime teacher.

McQueen bemoans neither the demystification of nature nor the mechanization of society. Rather, his sculpture serves as a foreboding of an impending crisis. The artist as social critic, McQueen has set out in this brilliant sculpture to rally our social consciousness and warn us of the inevitable reckoning. One does not have to be a specialist, as Kuspit would like to believe, to see what led God to flood the earth, and the situation on earth now.

In addition to the sculptural objects, McQueen has exhibited works of a more conceptual nature utilizing readymade objects, as it were, over the manufactured object. In the *A.I.M.* exhibition at the Bronx Museum, McQueen displayed his printed stock certificates called *Stocks Project*. The prints of the certificates are scanned copies of stocks, purchased by McQueen through a stockbroker, from companies who are or were involved in corporate scandal. *Lucky* is a collection of scratch lotto tickets that are mounted in a grid on matte board and framed.

First exhibited at the Collaborative Concepts Gallery in Beacon alongside *Minor Deluge 2.2*, *Lucky* utilizes scratch lotto tickets that have all but one surface scratched away. Sections that are revealed acknowledge the possibility of a big win, suggesting - possibility, temptation, and luck. These works, though they hardly compete with the complex manufacture of his sculptural objects, require no less conceptual consideration. They are more engaging within a contemporary art discourse and are inherently tied to ideas born from the Enlightenment - liberty, progress, and the pursuit of happiness.

McQueen is an important young artist whose complex networks of ideas and brilliant formal constructions double as poignant social critiques. He is a political artist, ingeniously manipulating the aesthetic to illuminate his critique of human consciousness. As such, McQueen effortlessly negotiates his sense of social obligation, bringing to light what he considers important issues - namely, raising awareness about contemporary existence and making truth-claims about the human condition. His urgency to raise criticality reminds us of an eternal truth, which often goes unexamined - when did Noah build the Ark? Before the flood!

¹ The Holy Bible, (New International Version,

New York International Bible Society, 1978),

p. 6:5-8

² Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.37

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