



Nothing Lasts Forever (Not Even Art)

Ian McMahon

BY SUZANNE BEAL

IAN MCMONAHAN *Cascade*, 2014. Plaster and
wood scaffolding, 22 x 45
x 30 ft.



Above and detail: *Cascade*, 2014. Plaster and wood scaffolding, 22 x 45 x 30 ft.



From mobile tractor-trailers to former churches, Ian McMahon's site-specific work transforms alternative spaces. His sculptures are as much about the appreciation of form as they are about erasure. In other words, enjoy them while they last. They're anything but permanent.

Created in 1998, the Seattle-based nonprofit gallery Suyama Space is located smack-dab in the middle of the architectural studio Suyama Peterson Deguchi. Back in the old days, the space functioned as a livery stable, turning with the tide into an automotive garage in 1929 and remaining as such until George Suyama took over the building in 1995. With the aid of curator Beth Sellars, Suyama then transformed the interior courtyard into a dedicated exhibition space. Since 2000, it has hosted three artists a year, each one asked to create in the midst of an active working environment and in response to the building's unique architecture: wide plank floors, concrete walls, and a soaring, open-beam ceiling. For McMahon, the primary concern was how to avoid coating the entire interior of the building, and its inhabitants, with a layer of fine dust as he installed *Cascade*—two floor-to-ceiling, theater-style curtains constructed entirely of plaster.

McMahon, who was born in Ithaca, New York, received a BFA in ceramics from Alfred University. Though he had worked with clay for years, at Alfred, he became interested in it as a raw material. "The kiln, firing clay, and taking it through other processes took out all of the excitement and energy for me," he says. "I was interested in seeing it age. Develop cracks. Dry out. Its flexibility fascinated me." While still in the undergraduate program, McMahon and his colleagues sought out companies that would loan them 10,000 pounds of raw clay to use in collaborative installations. They'd work with the material, then return it post-exhibition to the company, where it could be put back out for sale.



3 details of *Cascade*, 2014.

In 2005, McMahon purchased a tractor-trailer (dubbed Semi Gallery) that he decked out as a mobile display space for unfired installations. He drove it to the Area 405 Gallery in Baltimore for the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference: "I liked that it could function in any context, going from a cornfield in Kansas to the heart of New York City."

Clay as a "morphable" raw material and transient space prompted McMahon to develop works steeped in temporality. But it wasn't until he entered Virginia Commonwealth University's MFA program that he discovered a material whose possibilities were seemingly endless. "Plaster offered rigor, beauty, and spectacle just by adding water," he says, "and it allowed me to work at a much grander scale."

Cascade was an excellent case in point. Consisting of two 20-foot-high, undulating, floor-to-ceiling curtains, this tour de force was erected by hanging a whopping 1,600 square feet of rubber sheeting from the ceiling, spraying it with layer upon layer of plaster mix, and then removing the rubber foundation once the plaster had settled. Beautiful, albeit brittle, the work could very well have been a disaster. "With plaster, I push it. It pushes me back," McMahon says. "It's very collaborative. But sometimes it says, 'You're asking me to do something I can't do.'" In the case of *Cascade*, the plaster played nicely. The monumental work reached up toward the light and down to earthly viewers.

Over the course of a month, McMahon worked the nightshift, creating *Cascade* in the wee hours in order to avoid disrupting the day-to-day operations of the architecture studio. And yet, the employees of Suyama Peterson Deguchi played a major role in

the work's success. Each time they passed through either of its arched openings, the work was transformed from sculpture to silent theatrical presentation. "All the world's a stage," wrote Shakespeare, "And all the men and women merely players."

Experienced from the inside, *Cascade* formed an intimate, semi-enclosed, dream-like space reminiscent of a private chapel or a recently emptied apartment. But seen from the outside, it evoked a sense of drama and tension, a staged scene about to unfold. And, like a play, it existed only for a moment in time. "I love the medium," McMahon says, "but I also love the fact that it's a breakable material. It's not going to be here for very long."

Curtains are, by nature, fluid elements. And yet they definitively separate inner from outer. During the Victorian era, private homes in London were considered a zone of precious refuge, and curtains kept the foul external elements of industrialization at bay. The interior of *Cascade* was as smooth as glass. The outside remained roughly textured and pockmarked, with lumpy puddles of fallen plaster at its base. But with *Cascade*, there was no "safe" place. Standing inside, you felt as if you were being watched, even in private. Standing outside, you were exposed as gawking. *Cascade* wasn't intended as consciously activist art, and yet, no one got in or out unscathed.

Like a number of McMahon's recent works, *Cascade* introduced audiences to process as much as performance. In 2012, McMahon and his partner purchased the Belfry—an artist-run exhibition venue housed in a former Methodist church in Hornell, New York. McMahon has built a relationship with this space via construction



Above and left: *Double Hull*, 2012. Freestanding cast plaster, steel, and wood, 16 x 9 x 6 ft.

and inhabitation, just as he does in his installations. He constructed *Double Hull* at the Belfry.

Double Hull—16-by-9-by-6-foot plaster behemoth whose construction was dependent on McMahon finding a way to get into the heart of his work—looked like a pair of enormous pillows standing on end and hugging a small black box between them. Resembling a cross between the work of Jeff Koons and Fernando Botero, the blown-up, rotund form threatened to outgrow its space. For *Double Hull*, McMahon built two inflated plastic molds, then used the box in the middle to climb inside, shuttling back and forth between them as he sprayed their respective interiors with thin layers of plaster. Once the plaster forms had dried, he removed the molds, leaving the fleshy white exterior. The work was on view for two months before McMahon documented its destruction on video. “With *Double Hull*, I began to acknowledge the space in which it was shown in order to get the most out of the work’s material presence and construction,” he says. “From this point on, I began addressing my work as a moment in time rather than as a sculpture.”

One year later, he created *A Momentary Event with a Sculpture* at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. Like *Cascade*, *Momentary Event* took the form of a curtain, but it was smaller (16 x 25 x 7 feet). It took a week to make, remained on view for a mere three hours, and was publicly destroyed by McMahon in the span of a second—an event that he insists was just as important as the construction. To quote Shakespeare once more, “We are time’s subjects, and time bids be gone.” McMahon isn’t interested in making things last. On the contrary, he admits to spending years laboriously building works just to see



Above and detail: *A Momentary Event with a Sculpture*, 2013. Freestanding cast plaster and pallets, 16 x 25 x 7 ft.

them crumble. “Isn’t that sad?” he asked ironically during a recent lecture. “But the finale is part of the work itself.”

There is nothing new about artists who destroy their own work. Gerhard Richter, Germany’s best-known painter, made headlines when it was revealed that he’d intentionally slashed his work with a box cutter and burned it with the trash from his studio. But these acts were done in private and largely as a means of retaining control over his oeuvre. In the case of McMahon, destruction is a family affair—a way of celebrating the existence of the work, and in the process, honoring our individual existence as well. *Cascade* was an intensely time-consuming and physically demanding project involving two-tiered scaffolding, hand-built winches, applied roof supports, masses of rubber sheeting, and 4,000 pounds of plaster. And partially because of that, McMahon couldn’t wait to see it go down. On Sunday, August 17, at 5:00 pm, his cur-



tains at Suyama Space were destroyed: “My work is temporal, meant to be consumed and viewed in relation to the time frame of the architecture that it inhabits.”

The show must go on. But must it, really? “People should know that if they don’t make it down to see a work, that’s it, there’s not going to be another chance,” says McMahon. “This isn’t going to be folded up and wheeled out. You miss seeing it here and it’s just gone.”

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