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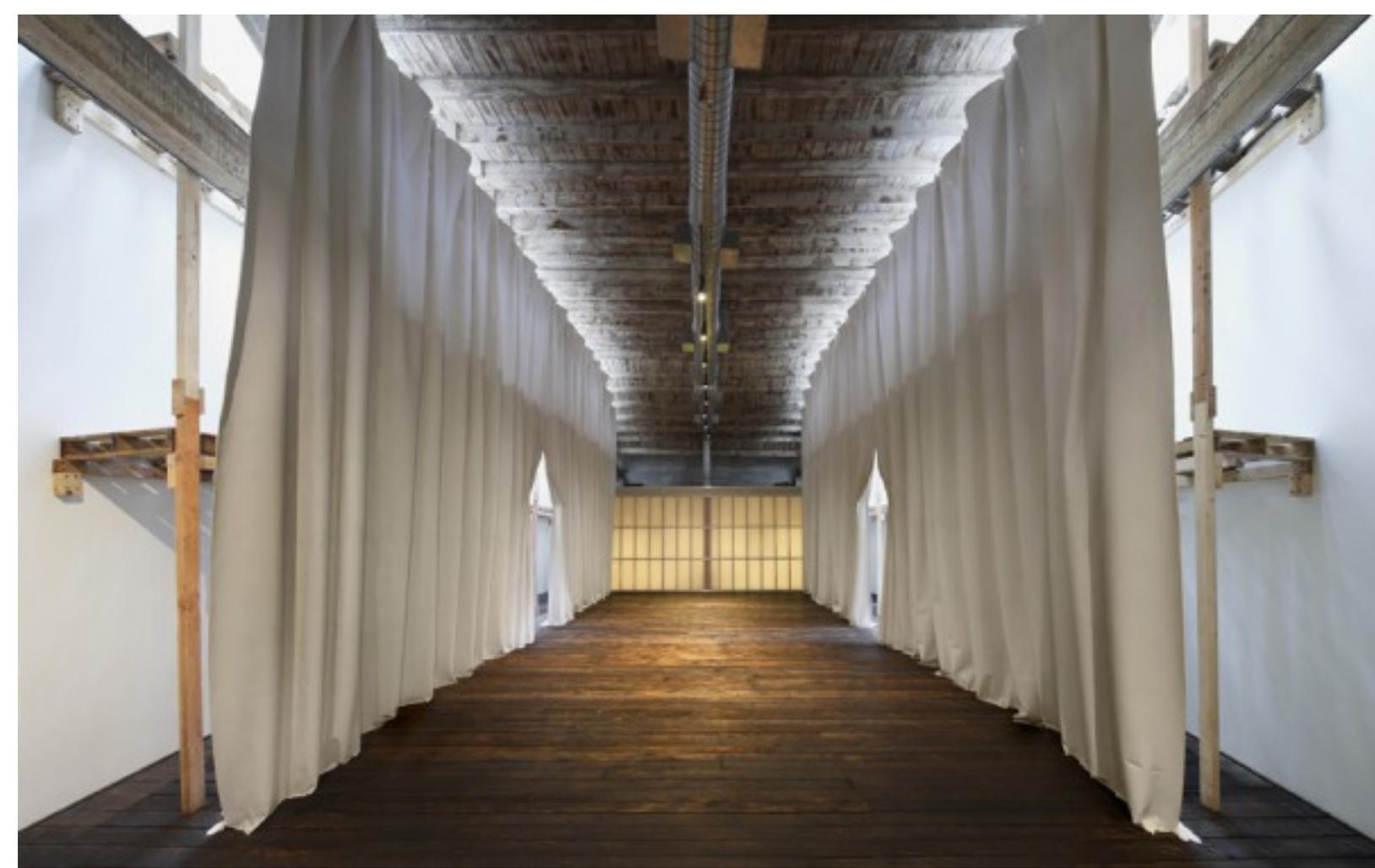
Interviews

- April 13, 2015 Written by [Ashley Stull Meyers](#)

[Interview with Ian McMahon](#)

Artist [Ian McMahon](#) is a material purist who makes monumental sculptures from raw clay and industrial

plaster. The resulting works are contradictory in impression—domineering but fragile, familiar while avoiding redundancy. In his most recent exhibitions he has introduced an element of controversy for anyone who has ever engaged with the tedium of delicate materials—the work is made to be broken.



Ian McMahon. *Cascade*, 2014; freestanding cast plaster, used pallets; 40 x 6 x 21 ft. (each side).

Ashley Stull Meyers: Let's talk about the scale of your work. How long have you been making monumental sculpture? Does that impulse predate your current circumstances or was it born from it?

Ian McMahon: I've been making large work since I was a student. For a while, all the work I made was very specifically dictated by the amount of studio space I had. I was frustrated by that and the fact that there is already such regimented labor in making ceramics. I was getting results that were really boring, and if there's no potency, there's no conversation.

I started spending a lot of time rethinking all the projects I hadn't made for various reasons—like scale or uncertainty about the materials. I chose to tackle the strange idea of how to suspend raw, unfired clay. At first I wasn't sure how to build an armature that would support that much weight or ambiguous form. I had a real *ah-ha!* moment once I got the hang of the mold. The result was an outcome I couldn't have predicted, and it resonated to me and fortified my drive to build installations. Shortly after graduation, a group of collaborators and I were offered a site-specific opportunity in Portland where I ended up with *Arena*.



Ian McMahon. *Arena*, 2006; unfired clay, wood, hardware cloth, drywall; 115 ft. x 30 in. x 16 in.

ASM: *Arena* seems determined to coerce a viewer into making some big decisions about his or her relationship to it and the room. It's intimidating. How did you hope to see people function around it? Can you speak about the politics of boundary making?

IM: With *Arena* I was thinking about a room within a room and how to achieve that without building walls. I wanted to capture that feeling in presence instead of literal form. In our proposal, my collaborators and I had written about the seductiveness of raw clay as a finished product and how we hoped to marry that concept to architecture. It was interesting to work in the courtyard of a school.

The idea of sight line became important. If you cut down a specific plane of vision—in this case, at head height—it really changes the way a person moves. It was confrontational; you couldn't walk through it. You could walk around or walk under, but either way you had 12,000 pounds of clay to contend with.

Once you were “inside” the structure, you felt you had a space to yourself, which is memorable considering it was a busy public area. The material also behaved in a way that created a sound barrier because it was so dense. There was a mezzanine that allowed watching from above. I learned a lot about human behavior during that exhibition.



Ian McMahon. *Double Hull*, 2012; mixed media; 9 x 16 x 6 ft.

ASM: What sorts of spaces attract you most? Is that attraction more about architecture or social context?

IM: Both are interesting. I'm interested in how I can alter the intended use of a space and the structural nuances I encounter as I'm trying to do that. I recently made a work for Suyama Space in Seattle, and as an architecture firm, the particular language that's already projected onto it was a challenge. I liked trying to interrupt that. I think of my work as performative in many ways, and that's a catalyst for a lot of technical decisions.



Ian McMahon. *Momentary Repetition*, 2014; freestanding cast plaster, steel; 30 x 15 x 17 ft.

ASM: Speaking of technical decisions, there's a level of pragmatism that has to be involved in both the making and transporting of these sculptures. It has me wondering about a closing-night performance where you shattered the plaster curtain you had created as part of the exhibition. Was this a practical gesture regarding your inability to properly store it? Or was it part of a conceptual tension—making something for the purpose of being destroyed?

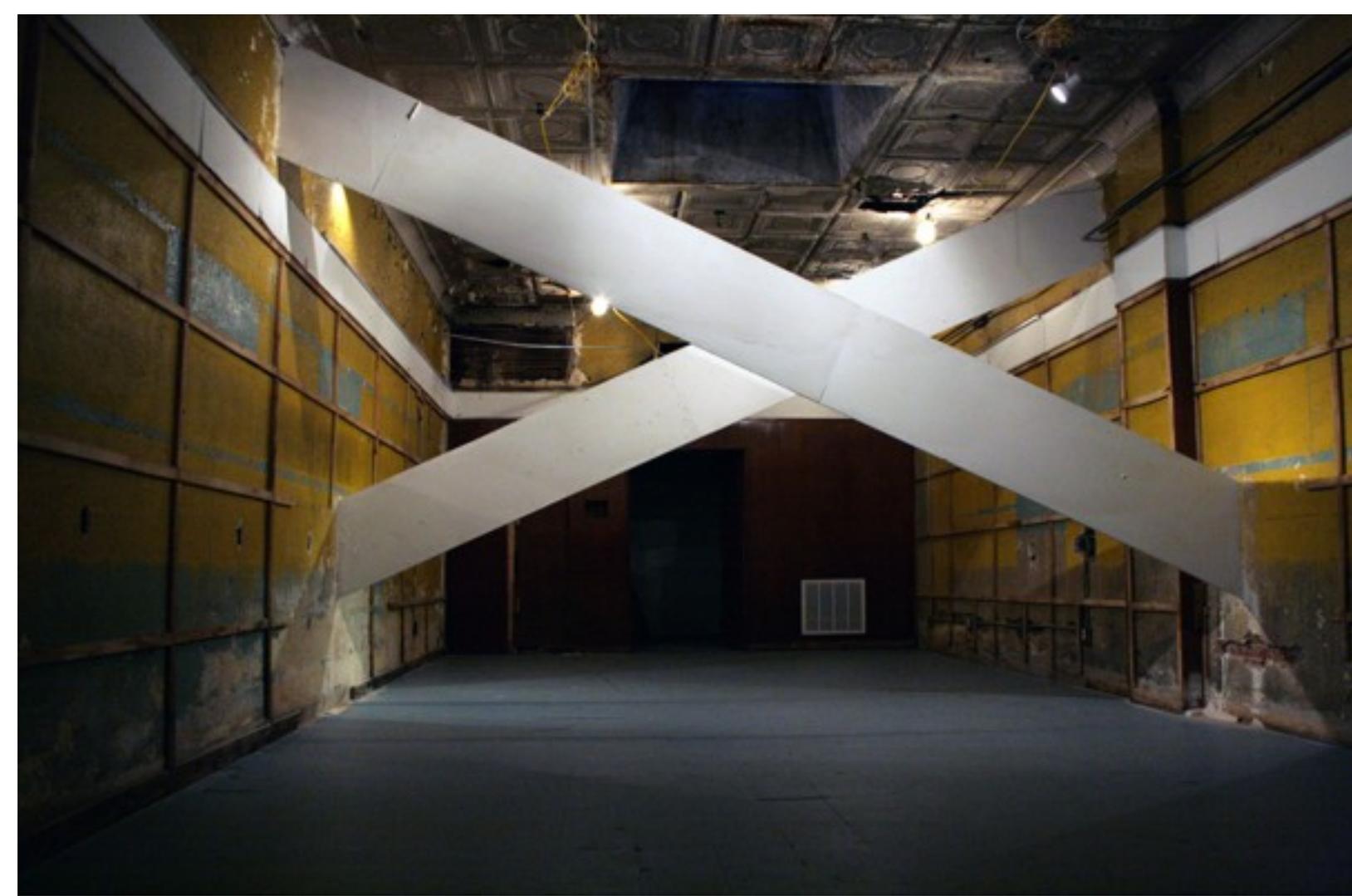
IM: The curtain is part of my most recent vein of work that's concerned with temporality. The sculptures are based just as much on destruction as construction. I like that the work lingers between two distinct performative actions. The way I was building them, I hoped to give clues that they couldn't have been built anywhere else and that they wouldn't exist forever. I wanted it to be clear that the only way they would leave was in pieces.

Some of the de-installations are laborious and some are almost instantaneous. At first I was just filming the destructions for myself with no intention of ever showing them. But once I started revisiting the footage, one work in particular—*Double Hull*—revealed so much within two seconds of crumble that I realized there is a lot conceptually embedded in that moment. From there, I made a curtain specifically with the idea of materiality as performance.

ASM: What do curtains hold for you? Is it a commentary on public/private space? Is it a pun about theater, or death?

IM: I've always been drawn to the form, and when I started to think about the performativity of ephemera it obviously worked. A curtain is fantastic because it has a front and a back. You have two demarcated areas of a stage—one for setup and one for presentation. The back is the materiality in all its glory, while the front is giving the illusion of a referential object. From behind you can clearly see the drips, cracks, and footprints.

Curtains are also architectural in that they become walls. Open, they take up no space, but when they're closed they delineate those boundaries we were talking about earlier. They mimic more solid structures that need to be navigated. Once I destroy it, there's a re-reveal of the space that I think is really special.



Ian McMahon. *X*, 2010; freestanding cast plaster, steel, wood; 17 ft. x 26 in. x .75 in. each with a 3 ft. space between.

ASM: What made you fall in love with plaster, clay, and ceramics? A particular medium can be hugely telling about one's ideologies as a maker, and there's something interestingly primal about working with earth materials.

IM: I think with my hands, and clay allows that. There's so much we intuit naturally about things that come from the dirt. I think about material as a collaborator—it's a carefully cultivated relationship. I add different materials to my roster slowly and thoughtfully, but once something makes it onto the list it never leaves.

Ian McMahon was recently featured in Sculpture Magazine and will be a summer lecturer at the Oxbow School. He is co-founder of the artist-run exhibition space [the Belfry](#).

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