

Building Bridges with John McEwen **A review**

Joyce Millar

Number 43, Spring 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9688ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Millar, J. (1998). *Building Bridges with John McEwen: A review*. *Espace Sculpture*, (43), 38–41.

Building Bridges with John McEwen

Joyce Millar

a r e v i e w



"Thinking and 'working' is complex, a bit like life and love. One is hopeful and working, one is defeated and working, one is needed and working, one is inventive and working. I've been making 'work' for more than half my life and that's long enough to see a range of patterns." —JOHN MCEWEN*

After twenty-five years of making «work», sculptor John McEwen is taking stock. Ironically, it's not so much a question of psychological self-probing or self-evaluation as it is a realization that making art is a lot like building bridges. And like any good engineer, McEwen wants to understand the stresses that continually cause the *expansion and contraction of the vehicle we know as Art*.

As I drove north from Toronto on the 400 to my interview with John McEwen last November, ominous, dark clouds threatened. By the time I had reached Barrie, the ground was already covered in 5 cm of snow and autumn's first blizzard showed no signs of stopping.

Welcome to the snow-belt, said John, grinning.

The purpose of my trip was to review McEwen's exhibition, *Paradise (Unlimited Warranty)*, part of the MacLaren Arts Centre's on-going effort to take art out of the gallery/museum context and integrate it into the community. The site for this particular exhibition was Barrie's largest and most profitable GMC car dealership, Georgian Pontiac.

Even before we entered the lot, I caught sight of the external components of McEwen's installation/exhibition. There, neatly juxtaposed against the rows of shiny, sleek automobiles, was a row of seven seemingly disparate objects.—three large-size «car» grills, the now familiar «star» tower observatory, an open-frame house that encaged a massive polar bear, a stripped bare tree trunk bearing a glass panel etched with the text of a short poem,¹ and, finally, a large gold star securely grounded in the earth. Set up along the furthest boundary of the dealership property, these elements served as a point of demarcation between the cars on the lot and the «spill basin», a depression of land overgrown with weeds

John McEwen, *Babylon and the Tower of Babel*, 1991-1996. Photo: John McEwen.

i n t e r v i e w



John McEwen, *Paradise*
(Unlimited Warranty),
1996. Photo: J. M.

and grasses (mini wilderness within the urbanized landscape) that separated this area of commercial activity from the adjacent one.

Inside the dealer's showroom, surrounded by the quintessential icons of our consumer society, McEwen had hung a 20 foot tall perpendicular column of steel made into a mesh-like screen with 1000 star cutouts. Scattered beneath the column on the floor were the steel stars, 350 of which had been reclaimed and inscribed with well-known names of automobiles: Jaguar, Aries, Firebird, Sunstar, etc. Like the names on a genealogical chart, this lineage of the car evoked its own memory, its own history.

It's fascinating, for instance, you go from a Pontiac which is named after an Indian (chief)... so you have a Pontiac Chief, the first one probably in the 40s, but by the time you get to the 60s it's the Pontiac Strata Chief which, of course, is the space age ... and then you look at all the different ideas of class; the Towncar, the Estatecar and it all seems to be particularly a North American phenomena ... go to Europe and you find that the business of naming cars is much more numerical... and then you come back to the more contemporary time with the Japanese influx into the system...the development from Chief to Strata Chief seems to be fairly forward so ... from that initial name after the aboriginal to the space age and so forth—but with the Japanese I realized the whole sense of sound coming into it—like I bought a Toyota and it's a Tacoma—that odd comfortable sounding name that is both Japanese and English... of course it's also Tacoma which is a tribal place... but it's also its sound... and, of course, you get the whole business of gender coming into it, too, and you start to get sound and gender... soft and hard sounds and what are you going to emphasize... and then it seems totally off the wall... I mean like who would call a four-wheel drive vehicle a Jimmy?

The seemingly incongruous nature of the objects in the installation are all part of McEwen's thought process, the result of gaps in his syntax; gaps that are filled with both images and ideas. They are what I would call «concept-constructs» or built cognitive links that denote the relationship of art and life, artist and work, *living and working*, that has served as the structural model for all of his work. Within these elements is the notion of

potential that allows one to make an *imaginative leap* across time, place, and experience.

As I viewed the exhibition, a number of intriguing issues obviously came to mind — the inversion of the concept of Art as vehicle/car as art,² the on-going debate surrounding corporate sponsorship *vis-à-vis* museum autonomy,³ and the whole ideology of power structures. So, too were the questions that rose as a result of McEwen's placement of his work in the margin, outside of the traditional "art designated" realm of museum/gallery or the usual public spaces. In fact, my initial response was to enter into, extend, and expand on such provocative commentary as David Tomas' 1994 *Parachute* article, "The Chrysler Effect and the Museum's Terminal Paradox"⁴ on the act of displacement i.e. automobile dealership to art museum and related issues.

However, as the snow mounted, and visions of unplowed highways led me to accept John's hospitality for another day, the immediacy of question and response, view and review faded. Clearly there was more to explore. Why did an artist of McEwen's stature, with an impressive list of public works on permanent display, choose to set up a temporary piece in such a location? Why a car dealership? Why Barrie? Why November? A simple review of the exhibition no longer seemed relevant and, as the snow banks grew higher, the notion of McEwen «building bridges» evolved.

...the thing that seemed to have the most value is to have an intersection where you actually, literally inserted the work within the scheme of things. For McEwen, it is indeed the intersection of his art into the scheme of things that provides the potential for creating links. By creating hybrids whose elasticity allows for a fluctuation of the gaps and the shifting parameters of art, McEwen's objects act as mediators between culture/nature, conception/reception, past and present — between poetry and prose. Whether he is bridging universes with his telescoping "star" tower or responding to the human's innate need for memorials to mark one's place and give concrete expression to collective and personal memory, there is an underlying thread that winds throughout McEwen's work.

The extensive discourse and rhetoric surrounding McEwen's production underlines the depths of experiences and strategies of engagement to be found in his sculpture. Ian



John McEwen, *Paradise*
(*Unlimited Warranty*), 1996.
Photo: J. M.

Carr-Harris has commented that "John makes art in an attempt to understand why he makes it"⁵ and refers to the dualistic context in both his art and his life. Others have seen his work in terms of Jean Baudrillard's "sign-objects" in which, as Bruce Ferguson notes, his condensed glossary of images and sculpture as *mise en scène* both withholds and transforms their meaning simultaneously.⁶

The use of the animal as vehicle is analogous to all of McEwen's work. But why a polar bear in *Paradise (Unlimited Warranty)* instead of the familiar dog/wolf silhouette, I asked?

...I chose the polar bear because I thought it was probably one of the few things that a car hasn't been named after... but it also had to do with the classic definition of paradise which is when will and desire are in harmony. I thought the polar bear was an excellent example.

In McEwen's work, the animals provoke multiple associations from John Berger's notions of a parallel universe between animal and human with its incumbent analogies to nature and man's desire.

I'm here, the animal is here, you're here. We are distinguished only by our language or lack of it. We run parallel to death.⁷

Certainly the lack of any verbal language between these animals of steel guarantees their exclusion from, and of, man. McEwen's work, however, is not without its use of language. Like Michel Foucault's "infinite relation" between words and objects, it has both attempted to run parallel to and across the divide of language. This is literally "spelled out" in *Babylon and the Tower of Babel* (1991-96) with its biblical and linguistic referents. But his communication is not only about language, especially one which is limited to a dichotomy of opposites. It is a reciprocal discourse, one peculiarly Canadian.

It is, therefore, in McEwen's commentary on the nature of the gaze—that corridor of sight that projects the idea of unlimited freedom as defined by the animal vehicle—and the notion of art as a mode of communication, that one can see McEwen forging each span in his bridging process. Standing as witnesses to the notion of projective freedom, McEwen's animals also act as qualifiers. Clearly, the seeking of *paradise* with *unlimited warranty*, is not unconditional or without limits. It is only, McEwen infers, through the recognition of our limitations

that we can, in fact, achieve freedom. In fact, it is a leap from the "steel" to the "real" animal that reminds us so.

... it struck me at a certain point and I realize, of course, that one of the things that I thought art could do... had to do with a kind of dream and a certain way of coming to terms with living that way—so it has, at different times, been very important that things that were imagined, had to be verbalized and the gap bridged.

In the transformation of ideas to concrete images, the verbalization of the imagined, one thing has dominated McEwen's art making—the notion that art and the idea of potential are analogous. That there is, in the re-materialization of the object and its insertion into the scheme of things (be it the public, corporate or museum sphere), the potential for traversal. Over the past two decades, McEwen has attempted to span oppositional distances of ideologies blinkered by notions of exclusiveness, be it nationalism, linguistic or other. He has, indeed, been building bridges.

Postscript

Several weeks after my interview with John, the papers were filled with articles and letters surrounding the controversy and legal battle over the McMichael Collection of Canadian Art in Kleinberg. Ironically, McEwen, the bridge builder, and his work *Babylon and the Tower of Babel* had become implicated in a power struggle between the museum and its patrons. The troll had come out from under the bridge. John wrote:

With *Babylon and the Tower of Babel* we have both the notion of confusion and the gateway of God. Each visitor [to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection] drives through it on their way to the collection. Eventually I made the «tower» a satellite dish... a tower in reverse... that's our confusion. I still think the vastness of the Canadian landscape is a potent force. I still think it is a gateway. It is simply that the route is horizontal and parts of the bridge invisible. One unexpected result [of the controversy] was, for me, a renewed interest in the Group of Seven. I found myself reflecting on Northrop Frye's commentary on Tom Thomson in which he writes: "What is essential in Thomson is the imaginative instability, the emotional unrest and dissatisfaction one feels about a country which has not been

lived in: the tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it."⁸

NOTES :

* All quotes in Italics are from the artist.

1. The poem is by the American poet Wallace Stevens. The section quoted reads: *Each man/ Is an approach to the vigilance/ In which the litter of truths becomes/ A whole, the day on which the last star/ Has been counted, the genealogy/ Of gods and men destroyed, the right/ To know established as the right to be./ We shall have gone behind the symbols/ To that which they symbolized, away/ From the rumors of the speech-full domes./ To the chatter that is then the true legend./ Like glitter ascended into fire.*
2. The notion of the automobile as art object has been most recently propounded by the Montreal Museum of Fine Art's 1995 exhibition *Moving Beauty*.
3. Numerous examples of corporate invasion into museum space can be found. In the context of this article, two examples will suffice: the Art Gallery of Ontario's display/auction of a Chrysler LHS in conjunction with its 1993 William Morris exhibition *The Earthly Paradise*, and the placement of a Toyota Lexus in the lobby of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts during the 1992 exhibition *The Genius of the Sculptor in Michelangelo's Work*.
4. David Tomas' 1994 *Parachute* article, «The Chrysler Effect and the Museum's Terminal Paradox» (*Parachute* 75 July/Aug./Sept. 1994).
5. Ian Carr-Harris, "John McEwen: Recent Work" in *Real Sculpture*. Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, 1979, 15.
6. Bruce W. Ferguson, "Cinema of Silence" in *John McEwen: Public Work*. Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1988.
7. Artist's Statement. *John McEwen. The Power Plant*, 1995.
8. Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971, 200.

Lors d'une entrevue menée à l'occasion de l'exposition *Babylon and the Tower of Babel*, John McEwen fait le point sur certains thèmes récurrents dans son travail de sculpteur au cours des vingt-cinq dernières années. Poursuivant une réflexion sur ce «véhicule» nommé Art—tandis que l'exposition se déroule chez un concessionnaire de voitures, bref hors les murs des lieux consacrés au monde de l'art—, resurgit la question de l'autonomie muséale en regard du contexte économique et socio-politique. La présence d'un ours polaire encagé, ou celle d'une tour d'observatoire d'astronomie sont autant de rappels, par ailleurs, que les œuvres de McEwen agissent à titre de médiateurs entre culture et nature, poésie et prose, etc. Bref qu'il s'agit pour l'artiste de rendre prégnante la nécessité de «construire des ponts» entre des zones réputées hétérogènes.