



*Rita McBride: Particulates* is organized by Connie Butler, chief curator.

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Rita McBride, *Particulates*, 2017/2023. Water molecules, surfactant compounds, high-intensity lasers. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Gift of Brenda R. Potter. Installation view, Hammer Museum, March 26–November 5, 2023. © Rita McBride. Photo: Joshua White

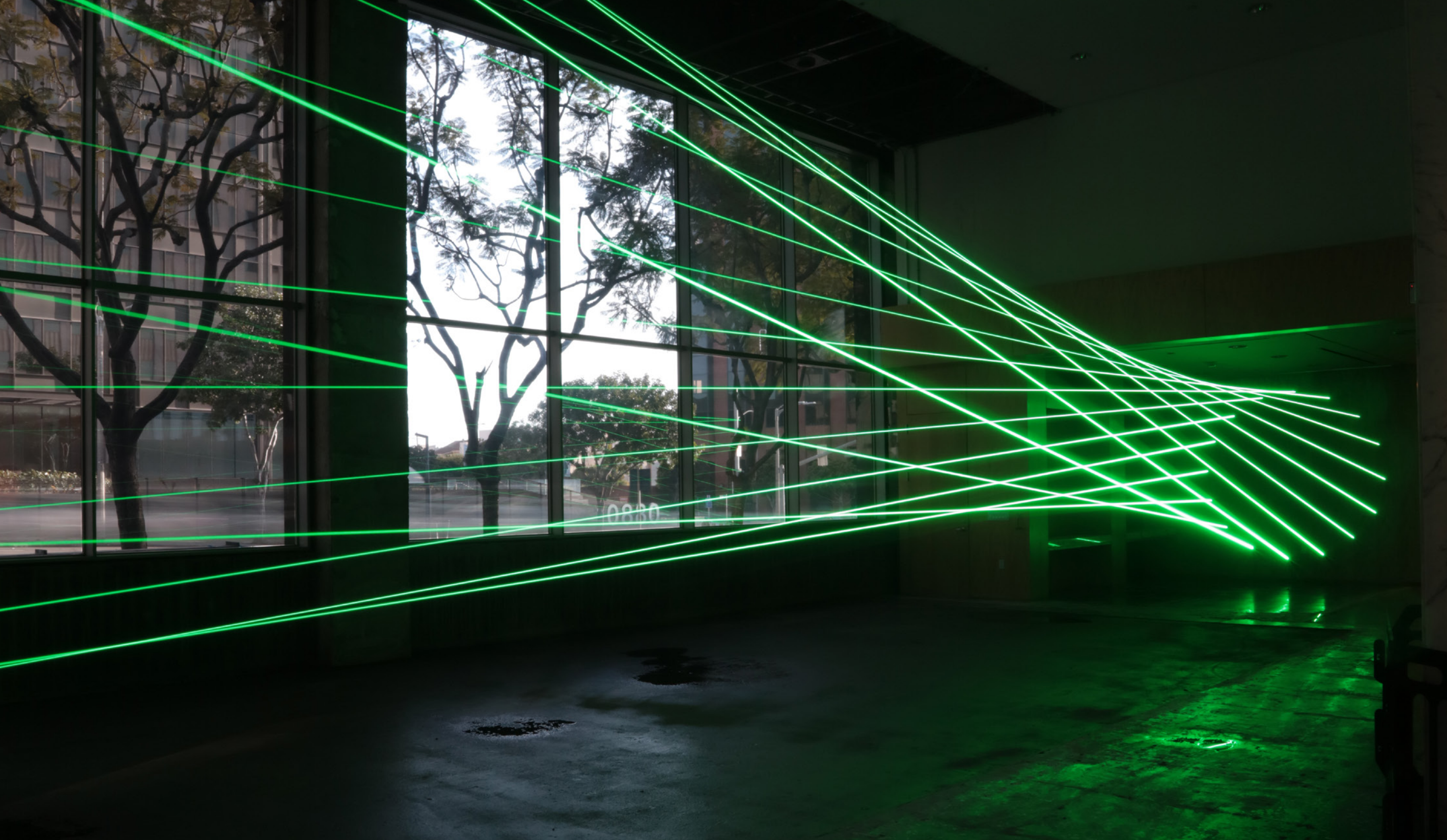
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# RITA McBRIDE

Particulates

March 26–  
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**For many artists  
the universe is  
expanding;  
for some it is  
contracting.**

—Robert Smithson

The installation of Rita McBride's *Particulates* in the Hammer Museum's newest gallery space is something of a return to Los Angeles for the artist, although she now lives in both Los Alamos, California, and Los Angeles. McBride grew up in Des Moines, Iowa; attended Bard College; and received her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in the late 1980s. She briefly settled in New York, but her career as an artist and committed teacher took her out of the city in the early 1990s and led to a somewhat itinerant life and practice, with many formative years spent in Europe and a long period of dividing her time between the United States and Germany, where she has taught at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf since 2003. Her work is in dialogue with that of an international and multigenerational constellation of artists—including Leonor Antunes, Nairy Baghramian, Katharina Fritsch, Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, Charlotte Posenenske, and Jessica Vaughn—whose work, like McBride's, engages architecture, design, and the problem of sculpture in the wake of modernism. What is important about this biography is its tendency toward nomadism and the rejection of any one aesthetic trajectory in favor of absorbing an unusually diverse array of artistic influences and source material.

In fact there are many entry points for McBride's multifaceted practice of sculpture, depending on which afterlife of modernism you choose to pursue. It is extremely important, for example, to understand her roots in the Midwest. While not quite the middle of the country, Des Moines is spiritually and constitutionally the center. Home to historic murals documenting westward expansion in pioneer times, Prairie-style modernist houses, and some of the earliest mall architecture in America, Iowa boasts an

interesting vernacular architectural tradition, which McBride internalized. Fascinated and horrified by the suburban development and mall-ification of her home state and its close cousin, exurban sprawl, which she experienced upon arrival at CalArts, in the Los Angeles suburb of Valencia, McBride has always been a close student of public space and a critic of its misuse. A work from 2007 titled *Civic Sculpture in Memoriam* was the result of an apparently failed public art proposal for a memorial in Mönchengladbach, Germany. Composed of a marble plate on a wheeled base, paired with a funeral wreath, the work was part of a performance proclaiming and memorializing civic sculpture. This work is part of an ongoing investigation of how monuments generate meaning—or don't. *Civic Sculpture* desires to revel in the fanfare, participate in the commemoration, and pump up the pomp and circumstance, all the while recognizing the deep ironies and contradictions in the history of public works and their residual impact.

McBride's reanimation of the long-exhausted public monument has taken various forms. Her investigation of the typologies of modernist architecture includes sculptures based on the Secession Building in Vienna (1898), Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye outside Paris (1929), and Philip Johnson's so-called Lipstick Building in Manhattan (1985), in addition to well-worn vernacular forms such as the self-storage facility, the multilevel parking garage, air vents, and arenas. Each of the latter forms could be accused of sullyng the urban landscape with its generic, cancerous replication, but McBride finds the humorous and the honorific in the unremarkable, making each of these into a beautifully crafted and covetable object. *Particulates* too has antecedents in her commitment to the public realm. The elegant twist of the shaft of lasers that constitutes its horizontal column—a hyperboloid—echoes the vertical nest of towering carbon fiber rods that formed McBride's monumental sculpture in Munich's bustling city center. Titled *Mae West* (2002–10), the large conical form with a cinched waist is anthropomorphized by its title and the way its shape vaguely mimics a gown in the grand tradition of Hollywood finery. One writer characterized the loving chutzpah of McBride's homage as “burlesque realism,” suggesting that “McBride's work propagates, despite all its formal perfection, the bizarre presence and liberating potential of the wayward.”<sup>1</sup> Mae West herself was larger than life: her sexuality, her voice, her come-hither command a dare to any soul brave enough to spend a minute. A feminist icon of sorts or at least a



Rita McBride, *Mae West*, 2011. Carbon fiber.  
Munich, Germany. Courtesy of the artist.  
Photo: Sabine Haubitz

strong woman ahead of her time, West was known for her sexual independence and as a seeker of new forms, new ways of inhabiting the restricted roles that Hollywood, like American culture at large, offered up. Why can't a monument also be sexy? Such is McBride's proposal, and her objects, large and intimate, function in a similar way. Pushing form to exceed its functionality or seeking to memorialize only its functionality—as in the case of *Self-Storage* (2004); *Servants and Slaves* (2007), a series of air ducts painted OSHA safety orange and rehung to move through the gallery space rather than to be hidden above it; or any of the parking-garage sculptures—McBride plays whimsically with the reconstitution of form.

The public sculpture *Mae West*—the result of a protracted process of conceiving and eventually installing the abstract rendering of a sex symbol above a city square—launched an ongoing body of work capitalizing on that form and pushing the limits of its conceptual and formal elasticity. The site of *Mae West*—atop a traffic circle with a tunnel passage underneath—dictated that the sculpture could not be as heavy as it appeared. Each time McBride has returned to this parabolic form, she has embraced the various contextual parameters and material modes suggested by different venues and fabrication opportunities. She (*West*) has been woven into wool tapestries produced in collaboration with Oaxacan weavers in *Mae West Mandala (Oaxaca)* (2009) and *Mae West Mexico* (2009) as well as in prints, templates, and other two-dimensional images of the helix structure in dialogue with other modernist forms. In 2016 the Liverpool Biennial provided a context for the first laser installation based on an elastic interpretation of the *Mae West* parabola. Installing the work, titled *Portal*, in an old subterranean reservoir, McBride became interested in the water element necessary to make the lasers visible. Citing the politics of water both now and in the future, she embraced the uncanny mash-up of a preindustrial city waterworks and the notion of time travel to a future in which water is and will be a contested commodity.<sup>2</sup> The sheer ethereality of the lasers cutting through space and quietly sparkling in the cold architecture of the underground storage tank was physically arresting and memorable because of the searing precarity of the form itself. In 2017 McBride reimaged the laser sculpture for a former marble-cutting workshop adjacent to Dia Art Foundation's Chelsea location. Calling the work *Particulates* (2017) to reflect the actual way in which the light, dust particles, and moisture interact to create the image and

experience that constitute the installation, McBride resited the form so that viewers could have an immersive experience safely from just outside the helix made of light, a carbon fiber barrier acting as a sculptural fence. At Dia a small window made the work visible from the street, and it is this wormhole view that the artist has exploited and made huge for the Hammer's installation.

McBride's ongoing interest in science fiction is well documented; she published *Future Ways* (2004), a volume of commissioned texts from well-known and unknown writers as part of the Ways series of books exploring different genres of fiction, and a second anthology, titled *Particulates* (2018), edited by Nalo Hopkinson, accompanied her installation at Dia. The artist included her own writing in both, publishing under the pseudonym Gina Ashcraft, a superhero moniker if ever there was one. For McBride's generation, space travel and the mythology of the cosmos are inextricable from the development of intellectual movements such as postmodernism. The writings of Robert Smithson are just one example. In texts such as "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," published in 1966, Smithson discussed the expanding universe, the labyrinth, history, and time. Time as a medium was of course integral to Smithson, as it is for McBride's *Particulates*. The sixteen lasers materialize when they intersect with the particulates in the air or are activated by the mist that is continually introduced into the space. Each laser manifests and is experienced over and over in real time as the chemistry of the entire arrangement works its magic. Water accumulates, particulates dance and move, and the lasers cut through space with precision regulated by accident. It is here in this mix of controlled and shaped chaos that the sculpture takes hold and becomes a thing to behold, continually revealing and regenerating itself in time and space. As with the "transporter"—*Star Trek's* fictional teleportation machine, which was also made of a cluster of light beams—belief in the process is key to the success of the object. No small amount of pure belief in the experience is necessary as well.

*Particulates*, as reimaged for the Hammer, relies on a significantly different set of variables than were present in Liverpool or New York. Occupying a former bank space, which still boasts a vault with steel door and antiquated locking device that make it appear to be from another time entirely, the sculpture stretches across the cavernous



space as if it landed from outer space and lodged in a corporate ruin. Most important is the light of Los Angeles, the bright Pacific glare that bounces off the mirrored office towers that surround the museum. The all-glass nature of the corner gallery space and its presence on one of the busiest intersections in the city posed a new set of challenges. Could the sculpture be made visible from the street and at night? Though darkness was a condition of the previous two spaces, light and the urban milieu become the backdrop for the experience of *Particulates* in Los Angeles.

McBride was interested in the problematics of the space as it exists in a partially renovated state. Playing material and color off the thick black columns that anchor the exterior of the vault, seeming leftovers of some prior mechanical ductwork, she created an enormous black partition with a huge hole in the middle. This square doughnut shape acts as a receiver for the lasers. It also provides a wormhole view for members of the public as they peer through the hole and into the heart of the shape created by the

geometry of the sixteen lines of light. Plastic construction mesh attached to the ceiling helps collect the moisture as it drips down and collides with the light. Each of these structural and material decisions became a sculptural choice, and what results is an extremely strange and beautiful environment. *Particulates* hovers like an apparition during the daylight hours and like an anchor at twilight, when the fiery sunset skies of Los Angeles reflect back on the shimmering lines of its sculptural form.

—Connie Butler

#### Notes

Epigraph: Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 1 (November 1966): 28.

1. Daniel Krujakovic, "The Echo of a Burlesque Realism in the Work of Rita McBride," in *Rita McBride: Previously* (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Düsseldorf: Richter, 2010), 40.

2. For more on McBride's project for the Liverpool Biennial, see <https://www.biennial.com/2016/exhibition/artists/rita-mcbride>.

