

GALERIE FONSWELTERS

Rita McBride

leeway

13 January – 2 March

Rita McBride in conversation with Zoë Gray

ZG: “leeway” is a typically McBridian title: concise yet enigmatic. It is a synonym for “room for manoeuvre”, “latitude” or “margin” for freedom, or some form of action. What is the leeway being offered by this exhibition and to whom?

RM: It is offered to everyone as a perceptual condition, a clue, a thought, a bit of potential for a position of newly formed freedoms necessary as human beings. It is a call for participation, a signal for movement through compression, of the conditions in the foyer after the facade and the potential for looking while circulating – inspired by the specific designation of space that the gallery has modeled and equipped.

ZG: The exhibition brings together a precise grouping of works made over the past two decades: from *White Knight* (2001), presented at the entrance, to *Under New Management* (2024). How did this invitation from Fons Welters and the context of this space lead to this specific configuration of pieces?

RM: The Mai36 Gallery in Zurich offered the introduction and suggested several *Manager* works for an engagement with Fons Welters in Amsterdam. I added another *Manager* named “Gerhardt” and the new offer of a management standard female template in a banner format; a work that I have had in mind for several decades and the conditions of “leeway” finally availed that possibility.

ZG: *White Knight* is a work that puzzles me. Its tri-partite form evokes a loudspeaker, ready to broadcast instructions to workers on the factory floor, but its low position – resting on the floor – and the choice of materials contradicts such a figurative reading. The heavy steel balancing just off the ground highlights the tension between gravity and verticality that has been a recurrent issue of Sculpture. What are the main questions that this work is exploring?

RM: I love to hear your take on *White Knight*! Actually, it was an attempt on my part to reverse the hierarchy of the gallery spaces at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by letting gravity determine the light conditions provided by the iconic canister designs for illumination that visually dominated the spaces and exposed the preference for wall real estate. Gravity brought down the lights, they hit the floor and become sculpture or something like that.

ZG: The *Mini Managers* and *Middle Manager (Gerhardt)* are remakes of objects that are at once anonymous and highly recognisable. The *Middle Manager* is based upon electricity or telephone cable connection units, contained within metal cabinets and found in urban environments across Europe. While the *Mini Managers* are based upon small modem units, often wall-mounted in office spaces. Both are simultaneously mute – in material, colour and

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scale – and highly eloquent, evoking the moments in which usually invisible communication systems ‘break cover’ and erupt into view. What drew you to make these works in the mid-2000s and have your impressions of them changed since?

RM: Yes, my impressions have changed but the *Managers* have changed also. Most of the *Mini Managers* have shed their modernist box casing yielding to digital presentations of domestic environmental control called smart home “managers”. The larger *Middle Managers*, in real space on the streets, may be found still waiting to be filled with all the infrastructure connections for the speculative development that never was. I still have some designs on these manifestations. So, To Be Continued / coming soon...

ZG: There is a shift as we move in the exhibition from the aforementioned abstract works to the ‘figurative’ work *Under New Management*. However, this shift – or, more accurately, coexistence – is common in your work. Even though most of your sculptural work is produced by external fabricators using industrial methods, does the human body remain a reference point for you?

RM: Of course the human body is calibrating all kinds of decisions for my works, the scale, the orientation, the material. It is time to bring out the human templates I have been collecting and reposition the content. Recently, I included a “Public People” template in my *Generative* exhibition at the Konrad Fischer Galerie in Duesseldorf. The figurative templates act as a reference point, connecting the various works in the show, somehow it never felt right to bring them into coexistence until now.

ZG: Another shift operating here is from the three- to the two-dimensional. Previously, you have made several two-dimensional pieces that suggest three-dimensional forms. I am thinking, for example, of the stencil-like metal pieces that depict the form of your monumental public sculpture *Mae West* (2011), or the series of die-cut steel sheets featuring the outlines of keys and locks (2015). What interests you in this very graphic, flat approach to solid forms?

RM: I guess I consider these works that come from templates, as tools we used to use to design the world once upon a time and before computer vector graphic programs took over. They were full of aesthetic decisions, time specific tropes and simple geometry.

ZG: *Under New Management* is a title taken from the kind of sign one sees pasted across the window of a service business. It is at once optimistic and vague. Its presence evokes a history of bad management and perhaps bankruptcy, but its wording offers the promise of improvement. “Come and try us out,” such signs seem to be saying. You use it here as the title of a work featuring a female body. Could we read this as a nod to new, female forms of management?

RM: Well, I am always hopeful for more diverse decision making in management systems at any scale, global especially. It becomes obvious to me that even the most basic preconceptions about figuration in general need to be reevaluated. But in this case, I think it is less about a capitalistic vocabulary and more about pausing to consider the fundamental structure of life management as female.

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Rita McBride was born in Des Moines in 1960 and lives in Düsseldorf and Los Alamos, California. She received a BA from Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. In 1988, she began exploring architectural and sculptural form in works ranging from small-scale objects to public commissions. Her major public commissions include Mae West, Munich (2011); Bells and Whistles, the New School, New York (2014); and Obelisk of Tutankhamun, Cologne (2017). Major presentations include Rita McBride: Public Tilt, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (2014–15); Rita McBride: Gesellschaft, Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, Germany, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2015–16); Rita McBride: Explorer, Wiels, Brussels (2017–18); Particulates, Dia Chelsea, New York (2017–18); National Chain 2020/Social Practices (in collaboration with Alexandra Waierstall and Fontys Dance Academy), Museum De Pont, Tilburg (2021). In 2001, she initiated a series of genre-bending publications that often use anonymous, collective writing structures. In 2018, she also initiated Particulates, an anthology of science fiction, edited by Nalo Hopkinson, that accompanied her exhibition Particulates at Dia Chelsea.