





ABOVE & NEXT:
INSTALLATION VIEW OF
APERTURE

APERTURE

IAN MCMAHON

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2020



**MADART SUPPORTS ARTISTS IN OUR COMMUNITY, BRINGS ART INTO OUR LIVES
IN UNEXPECTED WAYS, AND CREATES COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE ARTS**

FORWARD

Artist Ian McMahon arrived at MadArt Studio shortly after the turn of the 2020 decade. Starting in Newburgh, New York—his current homebase—McMahon made the cross-country trek with his father and steadfast supporter, Kevin. In tow were the preliminary stagings for *Aperture*: a considerable stack of specifically-cut and labeled construction lumber, four duffel bags packed with over 50 prefabricated plastic molds, and a myriad of other tools and equipment to usher his new work to life.

McMahon creates on a monumental scale, confronting and transforming space by pushing his materials (and himself) to their physical limits. The installation period of *Aperture* lasted for over three weeks, during which McMahon and his assistant, Rich Caruso, worked around the clock to cast pressurized plastic molds with close to 6,000 pounds of gypsum plaster. This orchestrated construction was a multistep process in which each fabrication stage acted as a theatrical backdrop to the performative aspects of producing the work: the continual movement and understanding of one's body in relation to material and space. In its final stage of completion, *Aperture* serves as a record of this performance, making it impossible to ignore the intensive labor required to bring the piece to life.

Having worked with plaster for over 12 years, it is through McMahon's



ABOVE: PROCESS DOCUMENTATION AT THE VARIOUS STAGES OF APERTURE'S INSTALLATION

understanding and relationship with this material that he is able to expand into unfamiliar territories with each new work. *Aperture* is no different. Visitors entering into the space are confronted by a collection of 25 pillow-like plaster forms that reach heights of 17 feet in some areas. Though not visible at first, this initial cluster is mirrored by its inverse, an additional set of corralled sculptures that face the back of the studio. Each segment stands tall with idiosyncratic character and shifting topographies. Though static, the work appears to be in transition, suspended between conditions. Some forms seem to float up off of the terrazzo flooring, implying a buoyancy to their mass, while others sit burdensome on the ground.

Running the length of the studio, each row of seemingly malleable sculptures is contained by a bracket of weathered timber beams. At human scale, these beams provide some relational understanding of the magnitude of the plaster forms they cradle. As viewers round the corner of the first sculptural formation, they enter into the grotto-esque belly of *Aperture*. This informative interior space is in stark contrast with the work's exterior, providing insight into material and construction through a display of highly textured surfaces and rectilinear architectural supports. This is the first time McMahon has provided visual access to the inside of his architectonic structures, giving visitors an opportunity to break down material assumptions and build a deeper understanding of the laborious

process essential to realizing these sculptures. The textured surface of the interior corridor blankets some of the ornamental elements of the studio, celebrating the building's distinctive character by incorporating them into the cast mold. This is most clearly seen in the steel cross-bracing and lateral I-beams which protrude from under the sculpture's skin along the south-facing wall.

Within these recesses, *Aperture's* dependency on the building's structure is declared. McMahon utilizes the physicality of the space to his advantage, expanding out from the central mezzanine to create a confined enclosure. In doing so, McMahon fuses the building and the work together to completely transform one's experience and understanding of the space. At some junctures, it is hard to distinguish which came first: the structural support of the studio or the sculpture. The building thus becomes a critical framing component of the work's construction, tethering the exhibition in space and time. By imposing a sculptural formation that melds itself into the core architecture, McMahon reveals its impermanence to the viewer—an astonishing realization considering the spectacle of its fabrication. It is here that *Aperture* disrupts preconceived notions of art's relationship to longevity and establishes visitors as sole witnesses to this ephemeral work.

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EMILY KELLY
MADART STUDIO DIRECTOR



ABOVE: APERTURE'S EXPOSED INTERIOR CAVITY



ABOVE:
REAR INSTALLATION VIEW OF APERTURE

IN CONVERSATION WITH IAN MCMAHON

IN APERTURE, YOU EXPOSE THE INTERNAL SUPPORT STRUCTURES OF YOUR WORK FOR THE FIRST TIME, WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT TO YOU?

The visual impact of my complex engineering process and the richness of its residual material effect is something I have reflected on since my very earliest artworks. I've spent prolonged periods of time inside these recent inflated works in order to create them, and through that laborious process I became quite excited by the sense of being in such a dynamic space. Inside each inflation, is an angular labyrinth of vaulted arches in which my own haptic sense of space and self is heightened. It feels comparable to my experiences entering mosques in Turkey or cenotes in Mexico or the glorious refraction of light through grand cathedrals in Rome but this also is a space I know every inch of and know precisely how to move my body through. I wanted to present this sensation as much as possible to my audience. MadArt Studio provided just the right venue to do that. The elevated office divides and restricts the height through the middle of the studio. This gave me an architectural feature to work with as a starting point and helped justify splitting my previously unified masses

of billowing forms in two, allowing each half to insert itself into the unrestricted verticality on either side of the office. The resulting natural corridor became an opportunity to expose all of this exciting material and accompanying content, which previously was just not accessible to a viewer in any practical manner. It's from this enhanced perspective that the residues of my actions and extreme theatrical construction can be highlighted and celebrated.

YOUR WORKS ARE EXTREME ACTS OF LABOR AND MATERIAL TRANSFORMATION, WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS IN YOUR PRACTICE?

I like the risk/reward potential when flirting with failure. My background in clay gave me an acute awareness of how important risk taking can be in making art. Clay can often be a frustrating and unforgiving material while simultaneously leading you to places that feel as though it is an innate extension of your body. Accepting and inviting failure through physical acts of a material transformation eventually became a fruitful and addictive place.

My life-long participation in BMX and skateboarding has also contributed to my drive for the extreme. Within this arena, I first found the thrill and satisfaction of pushing my body

and mind to attempt something that initially felt unachievable. The chemical spill that occurs when moving through untethered space and landing a new trick in a form you previously thought just out of reach is absolutely phenomenal. Those early years building large forms and ramps designed to help move a body through space was my first introduction to construction and monumental in developing my current sculptural pursuits.

My artworks continue to push up against the limits of the materials I choose to work with and the limits of myself. What is possible? Can I do it? Will the material perform as hoped? These questions are my foundation. In each work, the fear of failure in a public setting is offset by the potential thrill of overcoming the myriad of challenges that each piece presents.

YOU'VE REFERENCED YOUR WORK AS BEING SITUATED BETWEEN CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION, CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THIS?

I don't see these works only through their material presence but also as an equally important orchestration of acts, a form of sculptural theater framed by the architecture in which they reside. I make site work; the location provides formal conditions critical to fueling the final design and also becomes the stage on which the

piece comes to life, briefly exists, and eventually must be destroyed. Each space also determines all aspects of construction and deconstruction, specifying its life span and framing its content.

Given the characteristics of the materials I use and the ways in which they are employed, their immobility is ever present. It's surprising how frequently I am asked about how I moved a sculpture into a space or how I'll move it out. This and the rich content made apparent through the work's condensed lifespan have made me realize how important publicly revealing these phases are. MadArt Studio is an ideal setting for me because it is open to the public throughout the entire process. Many of the custom tools and processes of construction were designed and formatted specifically for this interaction. The typically private time of making art, making the tools to make it, or dealing with its residue is brought directly into the limelight and the work itself performs.

CONSIDERING THE TIME AND ENERGY GIVEN TO EACH OF THE PROJECTS YOU CREATE, HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT ITS IMPERMANENCE?

I'm most interested in manipulating materials at a spectacular scale, making it impossible to construct a work off-site and, in turn, impossible

to move it from the location. But, these pieces are happenings; their physicality is only one aspect of what I am attempting to explore. By presenting a condensed lifespan, I hope to focus attention on all the acts manifested throughout the work's duration. The work, in its totality, is experiential and meant to be consumed in the present, the now. I also see these works as proxies for all that is constructed. The fact that they may exist for only a few months after the extreme effort of making them seems to prompt questions of worth and preservation. But all constructed objects are impermanent; it's just a matter of one's perspective of time. Shouldn't the question of impermanence be raised about all architecture?

Making this impermanence more obvious disrupts our expectations and how we most commonly relate to a work of art or any time-consuming constructive act. I want to challenge these commonplace notions of preservation and physical longevity in art, in exchange for presence. These works are a celebration of action and a reminder that a sensational memory can live far longer than a physical thing. Because each piece can't exist anywhere else or in any other format, they only can really be consumed on site and then taken with someone through their recollection of that experience. I have found that through this, the work continues to exist even more fervently. The work is entrusted to its audience, reliant on them becoming the stewards of its spirit.

YOU CONSIDER SPACE AND MATERIAL AS MAIN COLLABORATING PARTNERS IN YOUR PRACTICE - CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE FORM THIS TAKES AT MADART STUDIO?

I think about collaboration in terms of growth, a partnership that propels me forward. By formatting my interaction with location and material in this way, we create a running dialogue directly influencing how a work evolves. The architectural nuances present in each new location become material in which to respond to, manipulate, and highlight. MadArt Studio proved to be a challenging location for me. It took over a year to land on a final design. It is a complex visual location: a wide array of surfaces, textures, and construction techniques are present throughout.

The biggest challenge came from attempting to address both the architecture of the original building and the renovations added later. I found the office, a newer addition to the space, quite difficult to address in my design. I was most compelled by the original open architecture and had a plethora of ideas for that configuration, however, the large 50-foot rectangle of steel and wood suspended in the middle of the room continually foiled every one of my designs. This total roadblock eventually propelled the final layout of *Aperture*. I realized I could use that

large form to my advantage and finally have an architectural foothold to create a natural divide in an inflated piece. The footprint of the suspended office could define an internal cavity accessible to viewers. This pushed the location of the inflated casts up, forward, and backward, compressing the space between other elements of the architecture and partially masking and mystifying the office. In the inner cavity, the change in ceiling height created by the floor of the office, would imply for a viewer that they might be inside the sculpture and relay that grotto and sanctuary feel I encounter so frequently myself with these inflated works.

In any collaboration it is often over differences or places where you butt heads where the most fruitful developments occur. I loved this about *Aperture*; the part of the space that was most challenging forced a solution, which made the piece work with, rather than just in, the space. Locations are one-time collaborators while materials operate for me more like long-term partners; my experience and growth with many specific materials has been spread out over a much longer timespan. I have been working with this unique plaster for 12 years. This piece, as in others, reflect that journey. Often my studio explorations and my experiences during the construction of previous works provide me with ideas and techniques that propel new work. ❖





IAN MCMAHON received his MFA in Sculpture and Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University and his BFA in Ceramics from the New York State College of Ceramics, Alfred University. He is the recipient of numerous grants and awards including the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship; a New York Foundation of the Arts Artist Fellowship; and the Virginia Groot Foundation Fellowship. From mobile tractor-trailers to abandoned warehouses and galleries, McMahon's work confronts and transforms both unconventional and conventional spaces. His sculptures challenge the permanence of art and place through performative and material-focused temporal constructions. Currently living in Newburgh, New York he is also the co-founder and co-director of the Belfry, an artist-run exhibition venue. McMahon's work has been shown both nationally and internationally at venues including Crane Arts, Philadelphia, PA; The Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, OR; Pierogi Boiler Room, New York, NY; G-Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.; Bemis Center For Contemporary Arts, Omaha, NE; Suyama Space, Seattle, WA; T & H Gallery, Boston, MA; Tang Contemporary, Beijing, China; Practice Gallery, Philadelphia, PA; DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA; among others.

ABOVE:
MCMAHON INSTALLING PLASTIC
MOLDS INTO THEIR SUPPORT
SCAFFOLDING FOR APERTURE

RIGHT:
STREET VIEW OF MADART
DURING APERTURE



**SPECIAL THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING
FOR THEIR FABRICATION AND
INSTALLATION SUPPORT:**

**RICH CARUSO
KEVIN MCMAHON**

**PACIFIC NORTHWEST TIMBERS FOR LOANING
THE EXHIBITION RECLAIMED TIMBERS & LITHO
CRAFT FOR THEIR SUPPORT WITH DEINSTALLATION**

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