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2015

INTERVIEW

ONLINE

Who's Watching?

*A Conversation between Mac Adams and Catherine Bernard
January 2015*

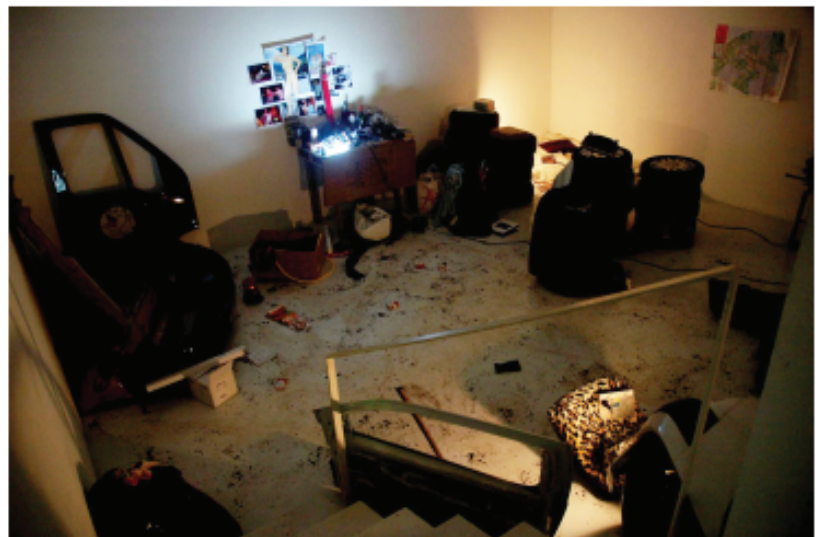
It is not difficult to deceive the first time, for the deceived possesses no antibodies; unvaccinated by suspicion, she overlooks latenesses, accepts absurd excuses, permits the flimsiest patchings to repair great rents in the quotidian.

John Updike, *Couples*, 1968.

The work of Mac Adams spans three decades and several mediums: photography, sculpture and installations. Early in his career, the artist established a clear line of conduct: to make objects or images that include narratives and thus to create a link with his audience through storytelling. Adams links this aspect of his work to the Welsh tradition of folktales and storytelling, mixed with Agatha Christie murder stories that he remembers from growing up. This combination itself speaks of a mixture of pop and traditional cultures, a trait recurrent in Adams' work.

The current work is in line with the importance of the narrative, at the same time that it dwells in the complexities of the storytelling process, a process through which the artist carefully leaves the image open to a number of possible interpretations. Mac Adams also privileges a cinematic approach—obvious for example in the use of diptychs or triptychs-- that at times unfolds in unfinished narratives or breaks down their linearity into fragments that become keys to understand the work as a continuous dialogue between the different actors: artist, audience and story.

Recent installations convey a recurrent obsession in his work: the desire to reveal coupled to that of being a voyeur. This is particularly evident in *Looking Through Blue* (1982-2010) or *Searching for Lola Ramona* (2007), a title straight out of a pulp magazine. This aspect runs through most of the work, including the photographs and often blurs the boundaries between elegant fiction and tabloids junk.



*Searching for Lola Ramona 2007.
Installation, mixed media. Courtesy gb agency. Paris.*

The artist often acts as a tongue-in-cheek strategist, who sets up a visual dispositive in the form of an entrapment. While he remains outside, he invites us to watch—surreptitiously—which gives off a deliberate and faint smell of perversity.



Thinking of Nabokov, 2010.
Pigment print on Archival paper.

In previous interviews, Mac Adams spoke of his photography as taking place in a "narrative void". A space or a suspended moment --a void-- indeed exists between image and meaning. In some cases, the juxtaposition of unlikely images or objects creates an opaque meaning, as in for example, the image of a woman tattooed shoulder on which the perfectly patterned wings of a butterfly come to rest (*Thinking of Nabokov I*, 2009) In other cases, a disjunction takes place between what is shown and what could be imagined.

Most Adams photographs resist the seduction of large spectacular displays and stage instead intimate and, at times, suffocating fragments of reality.

Everything however remains subtle and mild-mannered, like a scene in an Alfred Hitchcock movie, with clues that create possible storylines that however may never exist. These clues signal possible meanings and are given with parsimony, demanding that the viewer retrace a series of events without any certainty to what is to be found. The staging of objects in the photograph or the installations points to something that is only a pretext to lure the spectator into a place where nothing is certain.

CB: In *Postmodern Tragedies*, (a series started in 1982) the oddity of the scenes comes from the use of unlikely objects --the kettle, the toaster, a coffee pot for examples-- that function as mirrors/witnesses of murder scenes. In other series, images created from shadows or fragmented objects also evoke the Hitchcock's world of deception and terror as for example in *Rear Window* or *North by Northwest*. Do you feel a kinship with the aesthetic of Hitchcock's films?



Interrogation, 1987.

MA: Very much so. For me it's all about collisions, the collision of ideas and forms creating new forms. It seems to me that the history of contemporary 20th century art is a study in collisions, by this I mean art appears to be a repository of new ideas and disciplines brought under the umbrella of art and accepted, a constant revisionist approach. All extending consciousness and understanding. I recently came across a small painting by a prisoner in Guantanamo around 2012, it's really remarkable. It is a still life of a chrome vase with a plant in it. Reflected in the surface is the artist/prisoner in his cell. It is an extraordinary image that echoes *Interrogation*, fiction becoming reality.



*Painting by a prisoner in Guantanamo prison.
Date unknown.*

CB: It certainly looks like an amazing collision, especially given the title of your image! Beyond the similarity of the formal aspects however, the reflection in the Guantanamo painting takes place in a particular time and place that anchor the image into a specific political/historical frame. The fiction here is replaced by an acute reality, that of the prison cell, a reality which in turn is staged through the eye of the artist, a process not unlike the one you apply to *Interrogation*. The vantage point (the voyeur/the prisoner) is what determines the meaning of these images. What they have in common is: **who's watching?**

CB: What about the *MacGuffin*, an essential component in Hitchcock's films, that in fact doesn't necessarily exist nor bear any relevance with the narrative? Do you connect it with your own work or process?

MA: The concept of the MacGuffin is a very important device for me. As I understand the MacGuffin, it's the engine that drives the narrative. Very often it can be ambiguous, completely undefined, generic or open to interpretation. I adopted a similar strategy by using a changing sculptural device, such as bubbles in a bath, a moving curtain in a room, a tablecloth pulled off a table. These too became central devices driving the narrative and involving the viewer in the plot. This mixture of real time events, running water, the smell of perfume, etc. brought the fictional aspect into the moment, suspending disbelief.

CB: You have used the phrase "The Narrative Void" in the titles of an exhibition, a book and a conference you gave at the Sorbonne in December 2009. How is the notion of a "void" to be understood in your work?

MA: This term comes from the world of the cinema. It refers to the space between the images/frames. It's in that space that the narrative resides, it's a metaphor for the audience cognition. The empty

space between objects has always been a fascination to me and how one can manage and design with this. The Japanese calls it MA. Ma in Japanese means space or pause, its the space between things or sounds, it can be both spatial or temporal. A crime scene is the only place where the quotidian can become electrified in fractions of a second.

CB: References to the film noir genre abound in your work through the themes as well as the way images of murder scenes are cropped and edited. Do you have a particular interest in this genre?

MA: I did not set out with an intentional interest in that subject. It kind of found me. My philosophical and formal interests as an artist seem to have intersected with it. As a teacher, I believe and I encourage my students not to preconceive an idea, take what presently interests you and let that idea take you on an adventure, its much more fun and unpredictable.

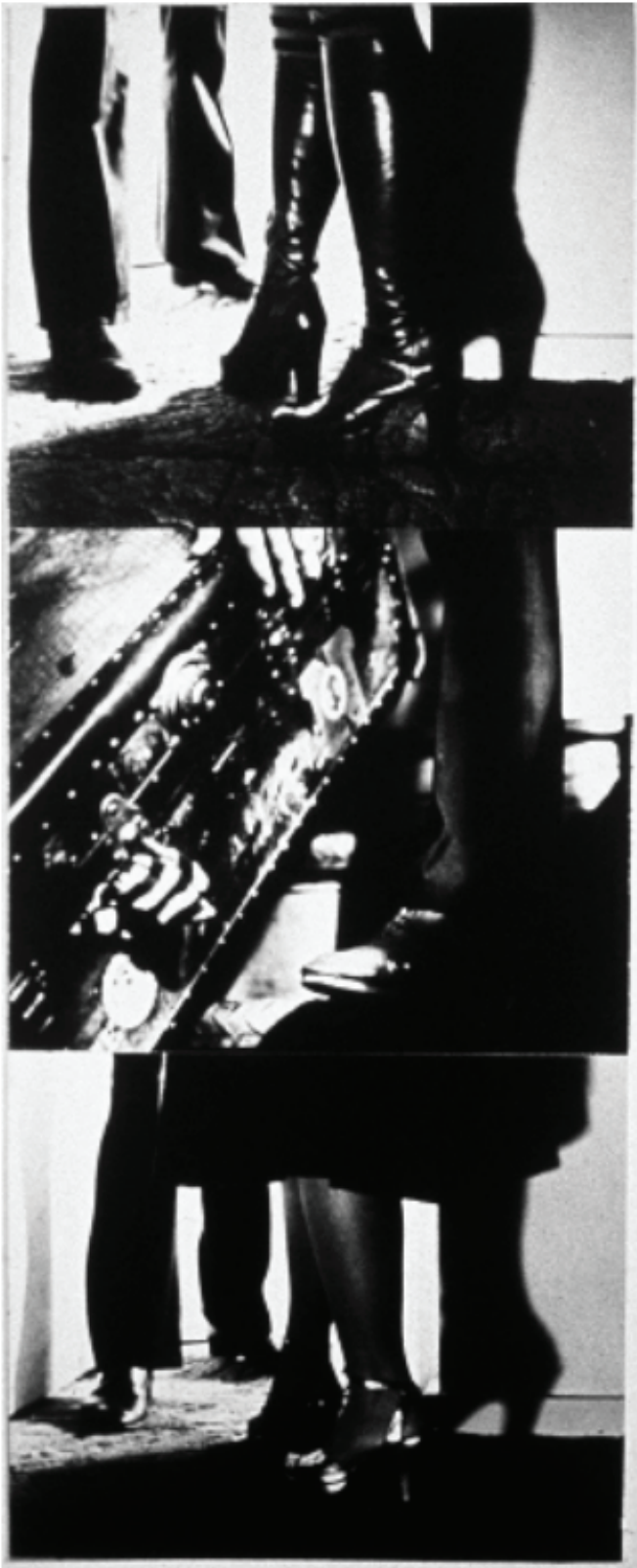
CB: The diptych or triptych formats that you use in *Half Truths* --a series started in 2004-- and also in an earlier series of the 1970s, *Mysteries*, relate the structure to that to a cinematographic sequence. Is the space between the panels a way to interrupt the plot and create this empty space, suspended time?

MA: Yes, I am always amazed when one deconstructs an image to show how many other narratives occur. In the case of *Half Truths*, complete paradoxes. I purposely designed situations that had contrary meanings when they were cropped and analyzed.

CB: In 1973 with your first series of black and white photographs: *Mysteries*, you started to develop the themes of murder and crime, ones that have recurred throughout your career. Indeed the idea of series itself relates to that of serial murders. How did this come about?



Half Truths, 2004.
Silver gelatin print. Each panel approx. 30 x 40 inches.



*Shoes, 1976.
Silver Gelatin print. 90 x 40 inches.*

MA: Like artists of my generation referring to the early 1970's, I investigated semiotics and structuralism as a new direction in my practice. However, most of the work being done was highly theoretical and abstract. I did not want to go in that direction. Being interested in popular culture I wanted more accessibility. Reading Barthes, it occurred to me that the role of the semiotician was very much like that of a detective. The crime scene is a surrogate text operating in coded language.

CB: There is indeed an obvious connection in your work with semiotics. But often what you describe with the camera is really not what it seems to be or what it is. This difference between the object and their reading create a space -a difference between signifier and signified- and it seems that your work is rooted in a sort of interstitial moment?

MA: Yes, I was very taken in the late 60's with Frank Stella's quote about his minimal stripe paintings "what you see is what you get" this minimal pragmatic objectivity seemed very American to me. I wanted the minimalist aspect but not materialism, I decided my approach would be "what you saw is not what you are getting" a possibly more subversive, metaphysical, subtext. I try to design my pictures so they live with the times. By this I mean they still have relevance in the current zeitgeist. I give you an example: I recently did an exhibition of the early Mysteries at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York. What is modern and relevant to different generations is not what they are wearing or any of these superficial things but the spirit of the work and what are the fundamental core issues it is addressing.

In the case of these works they are all about doubt and uncertainty. They were done in the 1970's when the prevailing social and political climate was very uncertain. The Vietnam War was winding down, unemployment was very high, it looked like New York City could go bankrupt, etc.

Today we have the Iraq war ending and another one starting; unemployment is high, and there is a distrust of government and the banking system. A tremendous uncertainty prevails. I think David Company said it in his essay "Nine things I learnt from the art of Mac Adams": This was an essay written for my 2013 show at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York.

There is no denying the period detail of Mac Adams's photographs the clothes, the objects, the décor, the chairs and tables. But the concerns with perception, seduction, privacy, looking, pleasure, evidence, artifice and knowledge they are timeless, they abide. They belong to every era and we are free to claim them as our own.



CB: Recent installations such as *Blackmail* (2012) at the New York Independents (reviewed by Roberta Smith in the NY Times), or *Illuminated Perception* in Iowa at the Christen Peterson Museum of Art in Iowa (2013-14) bring up the diversity of mediums that you have used through your career. At the same time, I believe that there is a performance component that runs through most of your works whether it is photography, installation or even sculpture and is most visible in large scale installations such as 'The Pool' staged in in Cardiff Arts center in 1979.



MA: I would probably say the performance aspect is after the fact, meaning I am asking the audience to meditate on the residue of a performance, recreating step by step the aftermath of an event, much like a detective would in reconstructing a crime. Its narrative work in reverse like a film going backwards. I was very taken by the 2000 American neo-noir Film *Memento*. Its non-linear narrative deals with memory and perception. I felt after I saw it: I am not crazy after all, I had been thinking of those ideas for almost 30 years but in a still form. I mean still in only as far the audience has to move and not the structure.

*The Pool. Chapter Arts Center, Cardiff, Wales, 1979.
Mixed media. Approx. 20ft diameter.*

CB: Your use of the 3D medium recurs at different times, most recently with the installation projects. A series of early bronze sculptures, titled *Dialogues* (1983-84) were exhibited at gb agency in Paris during summer 2014. They offer a more material approach, also a "un-slick" use of the 3D medium.

MA: I think my interests are ultimately sculptural. It seems almost anachronistic now to speak in painting or sculptural choices when the new technologies have hybridized and mixed it all up. I guess it means I am happier looking at round things than flat things!



*Dialogues 1984.
bonded bronze. Courtesy gb agency, Paris.*

CB: Photography, installations/performances, sculptures present objects, story lines, use of medium that do not have necessarily to get resolved. You cast yourself and the spectator in the role of a witness: who is watching, who in the end is in control of the narrative?

MA: I guess this is where my interest in sculpture comes in, and my preoccupation with open-ended structures non hermetic. My works present hybridizations between literature and sculpture. They are not games in the sense of whodunits more whydunnits. Again I would agree with David Company's observation:

However his photographs are not 'whodunnits'. They're not even 'whydunnits', or 'howdunnits'. All those forms are essentially linear, and explanatory. Adams's scenarios are suspended. They are middles with beginnings or endings. They are more like the tableau vivant or loop. We come in somewhere in the middle and we leave somewhere in the middle, and we must make of it what we can. There is no explanation, no final settling of accounts. No pointing the finger.

CB: In *Mysteries*, also in *Post Modern Tragedies*, the moment depicted occurs just before or after the actual event, which leaves an array of infinite possibilities in the mind of the viewer, who becomes part voyeur, part witness. It is also an uncanny moment, when everything becomes possible and meaning is not there yet. In fact, it is as if you never depict a story.

MA: That's an interesting way of putting it. Each image has the suggestion of a story when that image is placed on the right or left of another image; multiple stories occur in some cases creating very opposite narratives. I have been working recently on a major work called *Loose Threads*, which consists of photographs of old tables from various periods. I am up to about 18 tables. Here I don't think of the narrative at all. I catalogue the images into thematic motifs and it's amazing how this process creates stories I could never come up with. It questions notions of the arbitrary versus the specific. This work is a very important one for me because I don't understand it, yet I have matured as an artist to allow myself to do it. It's about giving up control, it's taken a long time to reach this!



*Loose Threads, 2011.
Mixed media. Musee d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc, Mudam, Luxembourg.*

CB: The series of photographs titled *Islands* (1999), involve images created through the interplay of shadows. I can't help but thinking about Magritte "The Treachery of Images" and the famous "This is not a pipe". A form of calculated chance, and also deception and distance inform a lot of your work.



*Civil War, 1999.
Color pigmented print 12x12 inches.*

MA: Your examples are very interesting; yes they play to that observation and more. The history of still life is about objects as text contained within the frame. *Islands* address what is outside the frame of reference. It always intrigued me when looking at traditional still life painting what was happening under the table the objects were sitting on. These objects I use are implying a whole other world down there. It's like a parallel existence.

CB: Voyeurism, disappearance and revelation are syntactic elements in *Post-Modern Tragedies* and indeed in a lot of your work. The presence of reflective surfaces reproduces the mechanics of the returned gaze, implying a degree of participation from us, the viewers. Are these combined elements setting up a distance from reality, and do they imply the impossibility of reaching reality or truth?

MA: Somewhat, I believe the reflective surface usually is a circular structure, hermetic and narcissistic. I think my use of the reflection is a little like how the evil queen in Snow White uses her mirror; it predicts the future. However, let's not forget this is still fictional story telling.

It's also very much about voyeurism, power, control, obsession, and all unknown to the object of the gaze, like in *"Looking through Blue"*. One could believe it's about collective paranoia. I would like the people who have seen this work to never feel safe when they look into a mirror again. That private moment of one gazing on oneself has been broken unbeknown to that person. It's a terrible violation of privacy. It's something that is happening every day on a global scale. One does not have to think about governmental conspiracies. Just look at Facebook.

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