

BOMB

Laser Work: Rita McBride Interviewed by John Reed

Art in the dark.



Rita McBride, *Particulates*, 2017. Installation view. Dia:Chelsea, 541 West 22nd Street, New York.
© Rita McBride. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

Rita McBride's work inspires quiet awe and formal glee. Her installations are wry, architectural, archeological, and compositionally astute. In this universe, she is an artist, but in some not-too-vibrationally distant multi-verse, she is a superhero, with the origin story of an engineer gone mad. Over the course of several conversations and emails, she and I chatted about the direction of her work, and her current laser and marble-dust installation, *Particulates*, on view at Dia:Chelsea until early June. *Particulates* takes up the thematic shape of the hyperboloid, which McBride first adopted in the 1990s, and has employed, for example, in *Mae West* (2011), a 170-foot public sculpture that now towers in Munich-Bogenhausen. The hyperboloid also took form in *Portals*, installed at the Victorian-era Toxteth Reservoir for the 2016 Liverpool Biennial.

—John Reed

Alexander and Bonin

John Reed

I'm wondering if you can talk about how *Particulates* relates to *Portals*?

Rita McBride

The lasers are the same. The geometric structure is the same. It is a hyperboloid which I started using in 1990 for load-bearing works of mine, simply because it's thought to be the most stable structure for buildings and for towers. But with lasers I don't have to worry about gravity, and in both these cases I am happy to use the straight beams of light to make variable curves in variable dimensions. The shape grows in every direction. The geometry is the same, but the dimensions are determined by the space. I tried to incorporate what I learned in Liverpool.

JR

What did you learn?

RM

I was approaching *Portals* from the point of view of the Liverpool



Particulates, 2017

Biennial, which was event-driven and city-specific. As a science-fiction enthusiast, I was attracted to two wormhole events reported on Bold Street, something I learned about while touring Liverpool with the other biennial invitees. We had visited several war museums, a slave trade museum, and a neighborhood suffering the effects of the "managed ruin" policies of Thatcher; I had to go back to the hotel. I couldn't continue the tour. I thought to myself, "The people of Liverpool need a way out of this cruel dark history." I reacted intuitively and proposed a "wormhole." When I finally spent time with the piece, it wasn't the shape or the politically charged historic water-reservoir venue that impressed me: the interesting thing was what I could see with the lasers. A kind of universal goo that I didn't really anticipate, and which became mesmerizing as it collided with the wet environment of the cistern. *Particulates* was approached with actual particulates in mind. The emphasis was much more on trying to profile the universal goo I had seen. Luckily, the Chelsea:Dia venue had quite a lot of its own marble dust floating around. The building was formerly a marble-cutting facility. So there is a baseline of highly reflective marble dust there. And that worked with the water element I introduced, which was something I learned from Liverpool.

Alexander and Bonin

JR

Somewhere, in an interview, you talked about a repulsion for materials—that repulsion could be a motivation in choosing a medium. Did you think about that in working with the lasers?

RM

I did from a practical angle: the burden of material and the burden of gravity and shipping and these kinds of practicalities. And realizing that light, these transportable lasers, can define space so well. And then the “universal glow” that I enjoy so much.

JR

When a viewer walks into *Particulates* at Dia:Chelsea, the first thing she or he sees is a sign warning that the lasers inside are radioactive. So I have to ask: How radioactive are they?

RM

They’re certainly not dangerous levels or else they would not have allowed us to use them. I was surprised myself when that sign went up: it’s highly controlled here in the U.S. Much more controlled than in the UK. It didn’t come up in Liverpool. I went, “Wait a minute.” I thought the only thing we had to do was to keep people six feet away from the lasers. I was shocked.

JR

I did get a little lost at the time-travel element to *Particulates*. Is the answer to the time in that book that you edited years ago? *Futureways*?

RM

Yeah, I’m really into science fiction. The literary device of time travel is now almost kitsch, so overused, so convenient for allowing us to imagine and critically understand what’s going on now or like in this moment. I’m always interested in things that are losing their original function. Time travel is so overused it seems to have lost its severity, let’s say, or plausibility. And it’s at this moment where it is still intact as a recognizable literary device, but has a possibility to become something else that I am interested in. Looking for these shifts in time, where things are liberated from one function and then can be reconsidered aesthetically, or critically, or socially—that’s pretty much a motivation for all of my works.

JR

How did you come to the color of the laser?

RM

I didn’t think much about it, I have to say. But now that I’m into lasers, I’m exploring other color lasers. I could give you some fictional answer, but really it was practical. I am going to explore other colors. Like red.

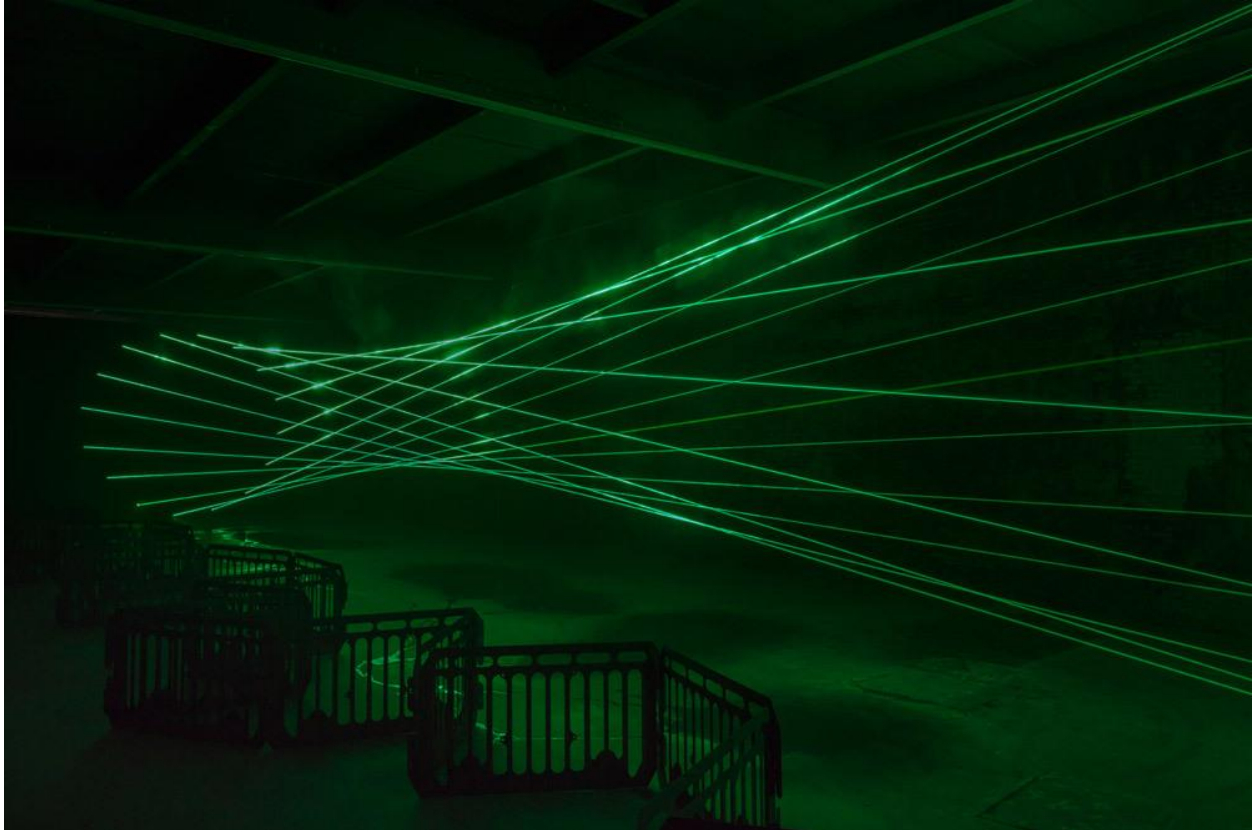
JR

I drew a loose line to the neon pieces you were working on around 2010. The lasers are kind of like primal neon. You know?

Alexander and Bonin

RM

I hadn't made that connection. The pink-red ones? So you mean the architectural profiles from Pompeii? I don't know. I have to think about that.



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JR

In an interview in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, you said, “I look for skies and spaces.” I was thinking about the lasers in space and the outline of the architectural elements. Science and art both address questions and understanding beyond the limits of language: science tends to be more external, while art tends to be more internal. I feel like some of your work is trying to find the place where those two areas meet.

RM

It's a nice articulation. I'm not so conscious of it. But, yeah, absolutely. I guess I agree with it, yes.

JR

I think you talked a little bit, somewhere, about your—I don't know if it was a rejection—hesitation about “narcissism” in contemporary art. It does feel like you are consciously moving away from a personal mythology.

RM

Yes, I have always been that way.

Alexander and Bonin

JR

I think about your work more in the compass of research and chance.

RM

My process is not dogmatic. I'm interested in chance when it occurs in research, and I am interested in research by chance.

JR

In 2013, there's that moment where you're working with the Tiffany glass piece, and a construction crew for a new public school building in Queens found Tiffany glass pieces for you to use. It was reported in the *New York Times* that you hadn't known where you were going to find the materials: shards of Tiffany glass. And that seemed to speak to that exhilarating moment when architecture and architectural design become art.

RM

I was going to buy Tiffany shards on eBay. I didn't expect to find a huge amount of material on site, even though it was the old glass studios of Tiffany. I should have figured that out. In the end, the search for the material became archaeological. And that really informed the process. What was the value of the material, and who owned that material? These were fragments of decoration—Tiffany being highly decorative—becoming archaeologically relevant as shards and fragments to incorporate in a mosaic window. And then I had trouble with questions like: Do I choose the green ones or the yellow ones? As luck would have it, Tiffany collectors became very interested in the shards and offered to have a look at all of them in the hope of finding a rare fragment. This slowed the artistic process quite a bit while they archived each shard—cleaning, and numbering, and sorting them by color. But then I couldn't figure out: Do I want yellow here, or green, here or red there? I was trying to find a methodology for that. I don't know how to make color decisions without a reason.

JR

The process invested a whole different consciousness into the material, which seems like another connection between science and art, and brings me to my last question. In some areas in physics and quantum physics—string theory, for example—there are current theories that can't be tested and have as a result become, arguably, art. When I look at *Particulates*, it very much reminds me of that: of these beautiful, beautiful theories that may, in the end, be art and not science.

RM

I want to go back to a time before hard lines and divisions, when art and science were joined in alchemy because when an idea transcends any category there is a confluence of elements that are far beyond anything tangible. When I look at *Particulates*, I am in awe that something like this materialized from limited designs and capacities. I was only bringing a possibility into the perception of a particular community. It obviously transcends itself. This should happen in science, right?

Rita McBride: *Particulates* is on view at Dia:Chelsea until June 2.