

INTERVIEWS

RITA McBRIDE

February 13, 2018 • As told to Alex Bacon



Rita McBride, *Particulates*, 2017, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Dia:Chelsea, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

Since the 1980s, Rita McBride has examined the ramifications of modernism's legacy for society, in everything from urban planning to the aesthetics of space. Her present project at Dia:Chelsea in New York, Particulates, 2017, involves a science fiction–inflected use of lasers to explore questions as wide-ranging as the proliferation of security barriers and the nuances of bodily experience in contemporary times. The installation is on view until June 2, 2018.

I STARTED EXPLORING THE IDEAS in the installation at Dia:Chelsea while participating in the Liverpool Biennial in the summer of 2016. Liverpool posed a particular lure for me as a science fiction fan, because of its amazing sci-fi archive and the two wormhole sightings reported there in the 1970s. It was kind of a no-brainer to go there for time travel in this instance, especially given Liverpool's dark history.

When we installed the sixteen green lasers in the form of a circular hyperboloid in Liverpool, I was mainly surprised to see just how thick the air had become in the Toxteth Reservoir. I really didn't expect that. This thick, full universe of particulates was the beginning for the Dia commission. We started with the possibility of introducing specific particulates into the space on West Twenty-Second Street.

Alexander and Bonin

Hoping for highly reactive compounds that, when introduced to each other and to water, would start some universal magic, we talked to a few physicists and did some homework, but in the end, we had the great fortune of finding a lot of marble dust floating around in the Dia building, which had previously been the Alcamo Marble Works. Marble dust is highly reflective, and when we installed the sixteen green lasers it was magical, mesmerizing, and alive. As an artist, I rarely have the feeling that, wow, this thing is bigger than me—not in the sense that it's 170 feet long, but that every decision made seemed predetermined and inevitable. That was super exciting; it had a life of its own, it was doing its own thing.

Once we set up the lasers at Dia, we had to find solutions for inherent public safety concerns. I had made barrier structures before, so it was not uninteresting for me to reconsider them again in this context. I've definitely been thinking a lot lately about forms of security, which are becoming more and more prevalent—crowd control barriers, in particular. There is an enormous variety in the materials and design; some are heavy, some are light, some are plastic, some are carbon, etc., but there is a standardized intention in them all that fits with my longtime investigation of modernism and its tendency toward standardization and repetition. The barriers that we produced using carbon-fiber sheets for Dia are based on the ones that, say, line the streets during the New York City Marathon. I pushed their aesthetics toward the Victorian and also installed them with little cul-de-sacs. So, in a way, I'm using them to pull people toward different views of the installation. I wanted to encourage movement, because the tendency was to walk into the space and freeze in astonished disbelief. I realized I was going to have to create a way of moving through the space. The solution came pretty intuitively. It's dictated by the senses. In the middle section of the hyperboloid, the radius is much thinner, so you can get closer to the lasers, for example.

I like that the hyperboloid at Dia is visually such a stable structure. That fits with the genre stereotypes of time travel as demanding a fixed and predictable entrance and a determined exit point so you don't get caught somewhere you don't want to be. But it's just geometry, actually, and it's a beautiful one! Because it changes, it expands and contracts symmetrically to fit the particular dimensions of the moment. In geometry, the exact name of this shape is the "hyperboloid of revolution," which implies a lot of rotating and twisting. To have these two opposite revolving ends and one axis is both graphic and spatial. It's really incredible—simultaneously voluminous and extraordinarily graphic.

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