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Mark Leckey, No Longer Art's Wunderkind, Is Now Its Wizard

By ROBIN POGREBIN | OCT. 23, 2016

The British artist Mark Leckey inside his installation "GreenScreenRefrigerator," in "Containers and Their Drivers," an exhibition of his work at MoMA PS1 in Queens. Credit: Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

LONDON — Arrange to visit the British artist Mark Leckey at his home on gritty Caledonian Road here and he confirms in an email: "I'll put the kettle on."

Climb the steps to his modest flat and you find him surrounded by crayon drawings and plastic sippy cups.

Has Mark Leckey been domesticated?

Can this guy making tea in the kitchen be the art provocateur made famous by his 1999 short film "Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore," which traced British dance subcultures through sampled VHS footage? The quirky guy whose massive inflatable "Felix the Cat" sculpture captivated crowds at Frieze London last year?

True, his long hair, piratelike beard and single pearl-drop earring still evoke the bad-boy drifter he once was, growing up across the Mersey from Liverpool, intrigued by the Northern soul scene of the 1960s, which was made up of R&B and Motown, flare pants and dance marathons both languid and manic.

But Mr. Leckey has recently married (Lizzie Carey-Thomas, the head of programs at Serpentine Galleries); had a daughter, April (now 3½); and entered middle age (he's 52 and that beard shows flecks of gray). All this makes him more conscious of paying the bills and no longer the wunderkind who eight years ago won the Turner Prize, for British artists under 50.

The Tate, which administers the award, said that Mr. Leckey's exploration of sound, performance and sculpture "celebrates the imagination of the individual, and our potential to inhabit, reclaim or animate an idea, a space, or an object." (He had already met Ms. Carey-Thomas, then the lead curator of the Turner Prize, and she recused herself.)

Now that he is, for better or worse, in the pantheon of prominent artists, Mr. Leckey has had license to — as he put it — "swagger around a bit" at the recent Frieze art fair. And the scope of that career is currently on view at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City, Queens, in a survey that opened on Sunday.

An installation view of "UniAddDumThs" (2016). Credit: Pablo Enriquez (photo); via the artist and MoMA PS1

"Art is changing — I don't know if what I'm doing feels like it belongs to an older era, one older white man having a show," Mr. Leckey said, standing by the sink throughout an interview. "The idea of celebrated artists is being rightly questioned. So to do a show like this, though it comes with all this excitement and energy, at the same time, it might already be — not archaic — but belong to the past."

The show, "Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers," does deal in memory, most obviously in Mr. Leckey's full-scale reproduction of a highway overpass that figured prominently as a hangout in his youth. The large-scale installation on the third floor, "Dream English Kid 1964-1999 AD," also refers to his former home on Windmill Street in London with videos, a model, wall paintings and an actual door from the apartment.

"It's the projection of someone's interior," said Peter Eleey, associate director of exhibitions and programs at MoMA PS1, who organized the show with Stuart Comer, MoMA's chief media and performance art curator. "They're all things Mark has encountered. They're not made up. In some cases, they're found objects."

But while the exhibition, which runs through March 5, examines his work since the 1990s, Mr. Leckey is not only looking backward. Recent pieces include the talking "GreenScreenRefrigerator" (2010-16), a suite of Samsung products anchored by a sleek black refrigerator that is accompanied by a performance and film which, according to the wall text, "probes the inner life of the home appliance."

Mr. Eleey describes Mr. Leckey as sitting "on the cusp of the transition from analog to digital, which allows us to look at the effect of technology in a way that's grounded in a deeper time.

"He's someone who feels very corrupted by advertising and television and popular culture," Mr. Eleey added, "who goes back to these things that have held some outsized power for him."

Mr. Comer said that aspects of the show have a "dark humor," while other moments "feel quite sinister, foreboding." He described the highway overpass, for example, as "a ruin."

Mark Leckey, background, inside the unfinished installation “Dream English Kid 1964-1999 AD.”
Credit: Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

“It’s not a symbol of an optimistic future,” Mr. Comer said. “It’s more like a dead end.”

Mr. Leckey lit the overpass with motorway sodium street lamps to create a sickly, yellow glow. “When I was younger, I would take magic mushrooms,” he said. “Everything would go orange.

“I want people, when they come into the space, to feel both polluted and that they’ve moved into this altered state,” he continued, “a state that’s akin to what music does, where you get lost.”

Mr. Leckey grew up in Ellesmere Port in North West England, an industrial town of carmakers and oil refineries. “It’s what they call an overspill area,” he said. “When I left school, the North started its slow decline.”

Both his parents worked in the department store Littlewoods — his father in sales, his mother as a secretary. Mr. Leckey grew up getting into trouble, leaving school at 15.

But young Mark could draw. He favored huge battle scenes — “the epic ones, very detailed,” he said, describing them as “autistic in that kind of very repetitive, obsessive detailing.”

His mother’s second husband encouraged him to go to art school, Mr. Leckey recalled, “‘instead of heading where you’ve been heading.’”

But art school emphasized critical theory, which Mr. Leckey found frustrating. “I still think it was an experiment that went badly wrong,” he said, “being asked to understand Derrida, just because you can draw. And bad art arises from it.”

He finished with a poor grade and wandered London before spending four years in the United States with no green card — in San Francisco, where he worked as a cook and did some web design; in Las Vegas, where he worked on websites for big casinos; and in New York with the art dealer Gavin Brown.

“You had this man who seemed to embody possibilities in art,” Mr. Brown said. “He’s less of an artist than a curious member of our species.”

When Emma Dexter, then director of exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, was planning a show about music videos, Mr. Brown suggested she speak with Mr. Leckey, whose proposal became the “Fiorucci” film, featuring images of British nightclubs from the 1970s to the ’90s.

An installation view of "Felix the Cat" (2013). Credit: Pablo Enriquez (photo); via the artist and MoMA PS1

"It took me three years to make and I really didn't realize it was anything until the night of the opening," Mr. Leckey recalled. "People liked it."

The success came with expectations, raised even further by the Turner Prize; this year he was a finalist for the Hugo Boss Prize, which went to Anicka Yi. But Mr. Leckey said that he wasn't complaining. "After 'Fiorucci,' I was in the art world proper," he said. "I have to make things and not disappoint people. It's not a bad pressure."

Those who have followed Mr. Leckey over the years say his work has deepened. "As he's grown into middle age, perhaps he's become more of a wizard than a warrior," Mr. Brown said. "He's trying to understand some profound things, which in another time could have been described as magic — the internet and how it is a reflection of our imagination."

While Mr. Leckey is often referred to as a video artist, his work defies easy categorization, as the MoMA PS1 show attests. Over here is a sculptural Minotaur head; there, videos of his mock-pedagogical speeches; elsewhere, a shiny chrome snare drum.

Even Mr. Leckey declined to say how he would describe himself. "I don't like to," he said. "I've tried my best to not be known."