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McDermott & McGough Are Building a Time Machine for New York's Art Elite

by Rachel Tashjian

At Carnegie Hill's Burden Mansion earlier this week, artist **Peter McGough**—one half of the time-bending visual-arts collaborative McDermott & McGough—sauntered wide-eyed up the house's marble staircase, which coils in a sumptuous oval for three stories and is topped with a mural by French artist Hector d'Espouy that embers around a ritzy Tiffany stain-glass window.

"If I went to school here," McGough said, "I would go home and set my house on fire."

Currently, the 1905 Beaux-Arts mansion indeed serves as a private girls' school, but come Monday, the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) will transform the space into a roaring jazz-age ball, set in 1928, at the behest of McGough and **David McDermott**, who are being honored by the museum's young patrons.

"All of our work has been about history and time," said McGough, who was dressed in his signature natty blazer and bowtie, hair perfectly in place. Throughout our conversation, the sleepy-eyed head of a longhaired chihuahua named Queenie, a gift from his friend **Stella Schnabel**, occasionally emerged like a periscope from a tote bag on his shoulder. "All time existing at the same time, the march into the future over a cliff—which is what's happening to the planet. We're all speeding up—to what?"



BY CHIARA MARINAI

Artist Peter McGough and Queenie.

McDermott & McGough are perhaps best known for their time continuum-collapsing experiment in the mid-80s, when, among contemporaries like Jean-Michel Basquiat and **Keith Haring**, they restored a 19th-century townhouse on Manhattan's Avenue C and lived there as turn-of-the-century gentlemen. "We took out the plumbing; there was no heating except the fireplaces. And we had a kitchen we made, from 1900," he explained. "It's all about time experimentation. When we would dress in the past, it was all about an art experience—a living work, I guess you could call it, and then the paintings were about our ideas. And our photographs were actually photographing our life, the time experiment. . . . We were frozen in time like a photograph."

Whereas many artists experiment with the styles of earlier periods, it was the totality of McDermott & McDough's early work that made it so provocative. "It was really a part of [McDermott's] artistic expression—they really were time experiments. That's how he thought of them," McGough said. "And they failed! We had horses, carriages, saddles made, clothes copied perfectly, hand-sewn. A 1913 Model T Ford was our car. A 1932 Graham-Paige, a 1926 Model T truck for the farm. We lived in an 18th-century house, perfect dream, never modernized, the bathroom was an outhouse which was Greek Revival. On a stream, the barns—everything was intact. Everything had to be of that period. And then we lost it all in the crash of '87—Black Monday." This meant it failed, McGough claims—and yet the timing of the crash gives it a kind of cosmic historic accuracy.

The gala, then, is not simply a celebration, but one of their works. The mansion will be fitted with late-20s ephemera, to McDermott & McGough's infamously exacting standards. At the entrance, a 1929 Ford Phaeton—the latest model, as it were—will greet guests, and a paper moon hand-painted by McGough will replace the humdrum step-and-repeat red carpet. An ice sculpture—which McGough requested spell “1928” or depict a melting polar bear to evoke global warming—will sit in the front hall next to an immense flower horseshoe. At the top of the staircase, **Dandy Wellington**, a hot jazz quintet whom McGough met when both were included on the book *I Am Dandy*, will perform with a Josephine Baker-esque dancer, as period whiskey and gin cocktails are served. Works by artists including **Lindsey Adelman**, **Andrew Brischler**, and **James J. Williams III** will hang in the ballroom, and a painting by McDermott & McGough will hang over a vintage bar cart—“Over the bar, like it's a painting of a naked lady with a parrot,” McGough joked.

Vito Schnabel, a longtime supporter, will toast the duo, and MAD will then present the pair with a loving cup inscribed with McDermott's maxim: “I've seen the future, and I'm not going.”

Guests will then dine on mid-18th century Limoges china, using period flatware, all flown in from California. Cigarette girls will tout cosmetics for guests who need to powder their noses, and Phillips Contemporary's August Uribe will auction off the artworks on display, in support of the museum.

Nick Carraway was wrong: you can repeat the past, it just ain't cheap.

“You're supposed to create magic in the world,” McGough said. “Otherwise, you're born and dead, with events: birthdays, with *pizza*.”

The year is a particularly important vessel for the evening's message. “We dated the event after the song ‘Let's Misbehave’—it's one of McDermott's signature songs—‘If you would just be sweet and only read your fate, dear, it would be the great event of 1928, dear.’ So he picked that date when, before the 1929 crash, it was all building up to this utopia. And then it fell apart. It was the end of that dream.”

Glitzy Manhattan benefits are usually in the service—however ostensibly—of some social cause, and yet McDermott & McGough's seems particularly portentous, an existential query wrapped in a luxurious affair. “Instead of getting some, you know, *harpist*, who's in a blue polyester gown from the 70s—although that would be pretty great, too—I wanted people to realize that the clock is ticking.”

McGough is now more relaxed in his approach to the present era; his immaculate 30s-era apartment has an iPod (though he pipes it through a 30s AM radio) and modern kitchen, and the sartorial leanings of the past decade mean many a young Brooklynite appear to share his aesthetic, though his shoes hit the pavement with a pleasant, anachronistic clack. His manner is open and warm, happy to indulge in self-deprecation about the premise of his work: “I used to wear a butcher's uniform from France—the little blue check, double-breasted,” he explained. “I'd wear it with a shirt and collar and my shoes. And everyone thought I was so fancily dressed. And once I was walking down the street in Paris, and a *butcher* comes by with *blood* all over his—and I'm with a little umbrella and a straw hat!”

McDermott, on the other hand, is methodical, even monastic. He has no phone, television, or computer. (“He really thought that he was going to be transported back in time,” McGough said. “He really thought that it was going to happen, as an experiment.”) And he has long lived in Dublin, which means ensuring his presence at the gala has been a challenge. “We're working on it. He's quite eccentric,” McGough explained. “He used to travel only by steamship—he didn't used to fly. But [once] he missed the boat. He literally missed the boat.”

But the pair's zealotry is what gives their work its power. “I want to be swept away in the artist's vision,” McGough said. “I want to be submerged. And removed from my tedious, petty thoughts, arguments. I want to be knocked off my feet. That's what it is about. And it has to be *perfect*.”