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# Illuminating Perception: Explorations of Light and Shadow by Mac Adams

Mac Adams

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# ***Illuminating Perception***

## *Illuminating Perception*

### *Explorations of Light and Shadow by Mac Adams*

The art of Mac Adams uses photography, sculpture, and installations.

His sculpture *The Moth* is in the permanent Art on Campus Collection with its site specific installation outside Coover Hall and the Department of Computer Engineering. The Moth is an organic form that interacts with the natural surroundings. As the focal point of the sculpture, the image of the moth is created through the negative forms of three marble slabs. The viewer has to find the optimum spatial position for the shape of a moth trapped in the square to visually form. The void of a moth is designed to respond to varying light conditions. Each of the three forms exist as independent structures and only connect when the viewer is in the optimum position.

The sculptures by Mac Adams play elaborate games with shadow and light. The concept of parts converging to make a whole intrigues Adams, and through his sculpture he explores the idea of shadows as units or cells within a larger sculpture. This exhibition combines the shadow sculpture of Mac Adams with additional explorations of light through photographic representations. His art challenges our visual literacy as the presence of light among seemingly unrelated objects generates another layer to the visual message. The juxtaposition of materials and direct light make the abstract appear concrete, thus challenging the viewer to look at the sculpture in many different ways.

Mac Adams was born in 1943 in Brynmawr South Wales, Great Britain. He attended Cardiff College of Art followed by Rutgers University where he received his MFA. He is now a Distinguished Teaching Professor at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, New York. Mac Adams' international reputation has grown over the last 30 years. He has had over 60 solo exhibitions internationally. His art is in the collections of numerous institutions including Musee National d'art Modern, Center Pompidou, Paris, France, Microsoft Corporation, Harvard University, The Getty Museum of Art in Los Angeles, California and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He has completed over 14 public art commissions in the U.S. and Europe, the most notable of these is the *Korean War Memorial*, 1991 located in Battery Park, New York City which was the first major Memorial dedicated to the Korean War in the United States.

Mac Adams is represented by Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York City and GB Agency in Paris, France. His web site is [macadamsstudio.com](http://macadamsstudio.com).

*This exhibition is on loan courtesy of the artist and the Elizabeth Dee Gallery N.Y.C., and is organized by University Museums with support from the College of Engineering, Jim and Kathy Melsa, Al and Ann Jennings, Dirk and Cindy Scholten, the College of Design, and the University Museums Membership.*

Cover image: *Cat and Mouse* by Mac Adams, 1999

# Introduction

Doug Jacobson, University Professor, Electrical and Computer Engineering

When I agreed to be the department lead for the Coover Hall building addition project I was expecting to interact with architects, engineers, and contractors. I did not realize I would also be involved in helping to pick an artist and the public artwork for the building. I thought public artwork just “showed” up with the building. After all I’m a computer engineer and what did I know about public art.

The Art in State Buildings committee quickly decided that we wanted artwork that involved movement and would require the spectator to be active. We looked through portfolios from many different artists and what attracted me to the work of Mac Adams was the way he used light and shadows to create art from what looked like nothing. The viewer had to be involved to “see” the real meaning of the art.

During his first visit to campus to view the site and to get ideas of what the final artwork would look like I had an opportunity to have lunch with Adams. He was asking the group to tell him stories about the department and about electrical and computer engineering. I told him a story of how the term debugging came about when they found a moth in a piece of equipment which caused it to fail. At the time I did not think the story was very relevant to public art, it was just something I found interesting.

I was very surprised when I saw the sketches of the proposed artwork and there was a moth created from three pieces of stone. What made it even more interesting was that you could only see the moth from two vantage points, just like finding a bug, finding the moth required that you look for it.

I can still remember the day the large truck pulled up with the moth. We first had to wait for a bigger crane to arrive because no one realized *The Moth* was so big. At first I found it hard to believe the three large marble pieces created a moth. Even as the first couple of pieces were put in place it was hard to visualize. It was only after the final piece of marble was put in place that the moth appeared. It was also interesting that Adams chose to place the artwork such that the proper viewing locations (where you see the moth) were at an angle from the front door. Therefore you cannot see the moth from the entrance to the building, but instead you have to look for it.

Even to this day it is fun to ask people what they see and then why a moth is in front of an engineering building. I still enjoy seeing the moth appear when I walk by and knowing that there is a story behind the artwork.



*The Moth (detail)* by Mac Adams, 2008

Commissioner by University Museums. An Art in State Buildings Project for Coover Hall.

In the Art on Campus Collection, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. U2008.539abc

Image © University Museums, 2013.



*The Moth* by Mac Adams, 2008  
Commissioned by University Museums.  
An Art in State Buildings Project for Coover Hall.  
In the Art on Campus Collection, University Museums,  
Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. U2008.539abc  
Images by Bob Elbert.  
Images © University Museums, 2013.



## Mac Adams: Illuminating Perception

Emily Morgan, guest essayist

Artist Mac Adams has demonstrated throughout his long career a subtle understanding of the demands art places on its viewers. A painting may require us to stand in a particular spot, to look up or down at a particular angle. To understand one sculpture we must walk all the way around it; another should be viewed only from one side. For millennia, artists have experimented with the relationship between the viewer and the work of art, toying with viewers' perceptions—tricking their eyes, playing against their expectations. Ancient Roman mosaicists delighted in creating *trompe l'oeil* effects: walls apparently covered in creeping vine; banquet floors littered with images of discarded food, complete with shadows. The Italian Baroque sculptor and architect Gianlorenzo Bernini made it a regular practice to manipulate his viewers' perceptions and expectations, creating staircases that appear much longer than they really are, inserting hidden windows, even including

sculpted "viewers" in his installations to demonstrate to his flesh-and-blood audiences the proper way to appreciate his art.

One of the great innovations of Modernism was the discovery that such perceptual games could be more than just trade secrets; perception could become the very subject of a work of art. Georges Seurat painted with dots of pure color, his paintings themselves becoming demonstrations of how the viewer's own eye and brain "create" the color green, for instance, from closely-placed dots of blue and yellow. Paul Cezanne attempted to determine just how little visual information was necessary for a viewer to see a mountain or a basket of apples where really he had offered only dashes of paint on a canvas. Pablo Picasso offered assemblages incorporating just a gracefully curved line here, a cylindrical recess there, and demonstrating that even with so little information viewers could be depended upon to see a guitar. Postmodernism, by extension, came



*Port Authority*  
by Mac Adams, 1975



to recognize how unreliable perception can be: how specific to a particular culture or to a single person, how reliant on experience and identity. Behind the individual eye resides the singular individual. The artist may manipulate the viewer, may try to make particular demands or communicate particular ideas, but full and open communication between art and audience is no guarantee.

The art of Mac Adams not only takes into account the sometimes-unreliable relationship between the viewer and the work of art, it makes its home in this perceptual gap. Across the broad range of his productions—which include photographic sequences and still lifes, sculptures and installations on a variety of scales, and works of public art—Adams demands that the viewer step in and step up, meeting the work halfway and saying aloud what the piece has left unsaid. Since the 1970s, Adams's work has been concerned, at least to some degree, with the act of perception:

how the viewer “reads” a work of art or, indeed, any situation he or she enters, using sensory evidence to construct an understanding of what has happened, is happening, or is about to happen. Like the raconteurs of Wales, Adams's childhood home—indeed, like all good storytellers—Adams places a great deal of responsibility on his audience, offering shards of information and allowing viewers to arrive, whether gradually or suddenly, at an understanding of their significance. His work is not interactive in the popular sense; one doesn't climb inside it and walk around, for instance. But because it so often takes as its subject the very act of perception, in a fundamental way his art needs the audience in order to be art, rather like the proverbial tree falling in the forest needs the presence of a listening ear in order to make a sound.

In the early- to mid-1970s, scholars and curators began to include Adams's work in exhibitions drawn from a new art movement they termed Narrative Art.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to see why, as Adams's interest not only in storytelling but in the structure of story has appeared in his work almost from the start of his career. Take, for instance, the 1972 diptych *Circumstantial Evidence*, from his early *Mysteries* series. Like all the *Mysteries*, it incorporates multiple photographs, depending on the viewer to read them as a sequence and thus to apply a logic to their arrangement, to understand them as a narrative. In one image we see a spilled cup of milk and an overturned houseplant; in the other, a lounging cat. A simple explanation comes to mind: mischievous cat wreaks havoc. But this explanation exists entirely in the viewer's mind, not in the images themselves. Also, as Adams's title makes clear, the simplest explanation is not necessarily the right one. It could be right, but it doesn't have to be. To construct the narrative we

must infer the relationship between the images, and in inference there is room for error, room for doubt. In the space between the two pictures, the narrative unfolds; but in the space between the two pictures, too, anything can happen. In perceiving the narrative, the viewer simultaneously perceives its narrowness, its potential inaccuracy. The viewer participates, in the same instant, in the act of both completing the work of art and demonstrating its incompleteness.

In the remainder of the *Mysteries* series, Adams raised the stakes of this interaction by using human participants. These artworks reflect Adams's interest in pulp crime drama and crime scene photography, particularly in the way the viewer/investigator uses the available evidence in the scene to reconstruct the narrative of the crime. At the same time, however, the *Mysteries* enact a critique of these traditions, demonstrating the inability of rationalism to comprehend the entirety of the crime, to grasp the interpersonal dynamics, to understand—much less to explain—the human passions involved. In the leftmost image of Adams's 1975 diptych *Port Authority*, an androgynous hand wearing a bracelet and ring appears at the left side of the frame, offering a cigarette to a woman in a patterned dress. She appears guarded, reluctant to take it. In the image on the right, a figure kneels next to the open door of a bus station locker, stuffing a piece of cloth, patterned identically to the woman's dress, into a leather satchel. The figure wears a plaid shirt and the same distinctive bracelet and ring that we see in the image on the left. A narrative comes to mind: man seduces woman, man kills woman, man hides evidence. Again, the narrative exists almost entirely in the space between the two photographs, a space Adams himself has termed the "narrative void."<sup>2</sup> But in this space there is also so much room for play: how did he win her over after that initial



Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) *Guitar*. Paris, after March 1914. Sheet metal and wire, 30 1/2 x 13 3/4 x 7 5/8" (77.5 x 35 x 19.3 cm). Gift of the artist. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2013 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

reluctance? How did he kill her? Is she really dead? Did they know each other beforehand? What changes if we read the images from right to left, rather than left to right—is the dress a gift, brought back from a long journey? And who says it's a man?—even in the image on the right there's an androgyny about the figure. By constructing the pairing, Adams coaxes the viewer into participation, into creating the "logical" narrative that unites the disparate images; but at the same time, he reveals the limits of logic. He also makes us aware of just how prevalent is our tendency to



*Bart/Mickey* by Mac Adams, 1996.

inference, how much of what we think we know of life in general is actually inferred.

Many of Adams's works incorporate shadows as key aspects of the composition, charged with bearing much of the burden of meaning. In *East/West Buddha*, for instance, a pair of graceful towers, made of metal disks and variously-shaped stones, rise above twin platforms. When the light is right in strength and in angle, the shadows of these towers fall on their platforms and resolve into figures of meditating Buddhas. In other sculptures, piles of hay or flowers or fruit cast shadows representing frolicking and sleeping animals. Much like Adams's earlier *Mysteries*, which incorporated multiple photographs in a sequential or syntactical relationship, the shadow pieces rely for their power in part on the dialogue that develops between the sculptures proper and the shadows they cast, and on the distance—the

void—between object and shadow. The shadow becomes, among other things, a visual reminder of the potentially-far-reaching effects of an action: something happens over here, but we see the result over there.

We are used to the shadow being “informative,” as art historian Michael Baxandall puts it. Whether we realize it or not, we use cast shadows to inform ourselves about the shapes, sizes, and positions of the objects casting them.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Baxandall notes, we don't really pay attention to shadows.<sup>4</sup> Adams's work, however, inverts the terms of this association, making the relationship of the sculpture to its shadow conceptual, rather than practical. We learn virtually nothing from their shadows about the sizes and shapes of the objects themselves, but we do pay the shadows a great deal of attention. Indeed, to perceive the shadow as both shadow

and as image in its own right turns out to be a uniquely human characteristic; much to the chagrin of scientists studying the potential of artificial intelligence, machines tend to see shadows as solid objects.<sup>5</sup>

Adams has pointed out that to recognize and understand the significance of the shadows in *Bart/Mickey* (in which the shadows of apparently random arrangements of mundane objects resolve into images of Bart Simpson and Mickey Mouse) depends on memory and cultural experience, on the viewer's own assimilation of information from popular culture into his or her overall memory-experience of the world.<sup>6</sup> Like Picasso with his guitar, Adams demonstrates that, given a circular shape with a pair of half-circle appendages, we can be relied upon to arrive at "Mickey Mouse" with astonishing—even dismaying—regularity. But to see the image of a guitar in Picasso's work in 1907 would have required prior exposure to an actual guitar; to see the image of Mickey Mouse in Adams's work in 2013 simply requires prior exposure to another image of Mickey Mouse—who came into being, after all, as a picture. Picasso offered an image of an object; Adams offers an image of an image.

When viewing Adams's shadow sculptures and photographs, one is perhaps less aware of his or her own participation in the construction of a narrative than when experiencing the *Mysteries*, but the syntactical relationship between the sculptures and their shadows is still much like that between the photographs in his series. Take, for instance, *The Parrot*, from the *Empty Spaces* series. In the work—which, like several in this series, exists solely as a photograph—a stiffened rag hangs through the spokes of a suspended bicycle wheel. On the floor below, the cast shadows of the two hanging objects resolve into

an image of a parrot perched on a branch. The bicycle wheel calls to mind immediately Marcel Duchamp's 1913 *Bicycle Wheel*, the first of his Readymade sculptures. Duchamp became famous for these objects, items from everyday life—the bicycle wheel, a snow shovel, a urinal, a bottle-drying rack—which he found or purchased and then presented to his audiences as art, highlighting their unintentional beauty and calling attention to the role of the artist as a figure who holds a distorting mirror up to society. He offered



Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) *Bicycle Wheel*. New York, 1951 (third version, after lost original of 1913). Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY © Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2013

*The Parrot* by Mac Adams, 1995





*Illuminating Perception: Explorations of Light and Shadow by Mac Adams*  
Exhibition at the Christian Petersen Art Museum, Morrill Hall, Iowa State  
University, Ames, Iowa from October 24, 2013 to May 9, 2014.



the products of capitalism back to capitalist society unchecked and unchanged; but in this parroting, he revealed the nuances in the everyday, much like the repetition of our own words back to us may reveal both their unintentional idiocy and their unintentional lyricism. Adams references Duchamp's work and also Duchamp's role as a kind of sardonic parrot of society. At the same time, Adams also laughs at himself for parroting Duchamp in turn, for repeating Duchamp's repetition. Adams's photograph is simultaneously very funny and a poignant reflection. In parroting the parrot, Adams expands the concept of the Readymade to admit elements of the lyrical and elegiac. In parroting the parrot, Adams also mourns him.

Adams's shadow works often comment in trenchant ways on discomfiting political or social situations. *Civil War*, from the *Islands* series, incorporates a glass tabletop bearing a still life of rice, eggs, and loaves of French bread, among other things. The cast shadow below reveals a pair of silhouetted human faces, confronting one another at an impasse. On the tabletop, rice, the staple of Asia, competes for space with bread, the staple of the West, while below the warriors stand deadlocked. The reference to the ravages of colonialism in general, and to the legacy of war left by colonialism in Southeast Asia in particular, is inescapable. But the message is thought-provoking, not overwhelming. While the work disconcerts and even indicts the viewer, it does so in a contained manner, on a human scale. Even in his larger works of public art, when a shadow looms large in size, it does so not in a foreboding sense—like the shadow of a killer in a film—but rather in an inescapable or inevitable sense, as a reminder of the mystery that still inheres in the human condition. Adams's *Serpent Bearer*, for instance, materializes on summer middays in its Montclair, NJ location, beneath a large work of

seemingly abstract sculpture, as a fleeting reminder of how oriented we once were to the sky and to the earth and even to the elemental within our own humanity. Adams's *Mustangs at Noon*, appearing on the face of the San Antonio Convention Center and growing from 3 feet to almost 60 feet at midday, serve not as a warning or a threat but a reminder of the wildness of the American past and an imposition, on this massive man-made structure, of the cyclicity of natural time.

The ancient Greeks believed the first work of art was created by a woman who traced her sleeping lover's shadow on a wall, preserving his image because the following day he would depart from her and not return. Dante wrote in the *Divine Comedy* that as he passed through the worlds of punishment only he, of all those he met, cast a shadow. In the German story of Peter Schlemihl, the hero sold his shadow to the devil for an endless bag of money, but was shunned and reviled for his lack of a shadow by all those who encountered him thereafter.<sup>7</sup> In Plato's allegory of the Cave, shadows constitute a pale and watery imitation of all that is important and real—but Plato is in the minority here. For Dante, for the Greek maiden, for Peter Schlemihl, the shadow is what makes us real; the shadow proves we are alive. In viewing a painting we hunger for shadows; they ground a work of art, they bring it alive, though they are at the same time supposed to linger in the background of our consciousness, unperceived and unrecognized. The danger in addressing shadows directly, writes Baxandall, "is that as soon as we are addressing shadow we are liable to denature it . . . . It becomes something other than the shadow of usual experience simply by being addressed as itself."<sup>8</sup> Adams's shadow works not only address the shadow as itself, they force it to speak for itself, to justify itself, even to begin a dialogue with the object that casts it.

Although *The Moth*, Adams's stone sculpture on the campus of Iowa State University, incorporates no shaped shadow like some of his other works, it likewise reclaims something threatening or misunderstood—something repulsive, even—and reappropriates it for the light. Like all Adams's art, it requires some involvement, some effort from the viewer that forces it to reveal its mysteries and resolve into an image. Adams designed the sculpture after discussions with the electrical and computer engineering faculty who occupy the building that provides its backdrop. They told Adams about the development of the term “bug” to describe a computer malfunction: in early computers, which occupied entire rooms, problems sometimes resulted from errant insects—the first of which is said to have been a moth—crawling or flying into the wiring. Each of the three large slabs of marble of which the sculpture is comprised has an abstract shape, with some straight edges and some curvilinear edges. Walking around the sculpture, the viewer realizes that at certain angles it is possible to perceive the negative shape or negative silhouette of a moth, the outline of its body formed from the

curvilinear edges of the three blocks. Again, Adams incorporates multiple elements—here, three marble blocks—and again the viewer must, by walking around or past the sculpture and perceiving it from multiple points in space, do the work of finding the image and thus creating, for him- or herself, the work of art. We tend to think of moths as repulsive nighttime pests, circling our porchlights endlessly and idiotically, mistaking them for the moon. Indeed, the story that inspired Adams's sculpture involved the moth as a pest, an interference. But as the viewer circumambulates Adams's sculpture, the moth appears almost suddenly, as a kind of revelation. The viewer, by positioning him- or herself in space, becomes physically involved in the act of creating the insect. As such, it becomes possible to perceive the moth as something new, not as a horror but as a wonderment: a creature of beauty and mystery, restored to a world in which there are no porchlights to be fooled by, only the heavenly bodies.

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1. See Alexandre Quoi, “Mac Adams or Narrative Photography,” in Mac Adams, *The Narrative Void* (Chalon-sur-Saône, France: Musée Nicéphore Niépce, 2011), 56-58.
  2. Mac Adams, “The Narrative Void,” in *The Narrative Void*, 6.
  3. Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1995), 72-73.
  4. Baxandall, 128.
  5. See Baxandall, 42-43.
  6. Mac Adams, email to the author, 16 August 2013.
  7. See Victor Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, translated by Anne-Marie Glasheen (London: Reaktion, 1997), esp. 11-46; E.H. Gombrich, *Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art* (London: National Gallery Press/ Yale University Press), 16-26.
  8. Baxandall, 145.



**Emily Morgan** is a Lecturer in Art History at Iowa State University. She is the author of *Street Life in London: Context and Commentary* (MuseumsEtc., forthcoming). Morgan received her MA and Ph.D. in Art History from the University of Arizona, with a concentration in the history of photography. Her research has focused on photography and social exploration, photographic imagery of conflict and war, and photographic modernism, among other topics.



*Moth* by Mac Adams, 1995

# illuminating Perception

## Checklist



### **New York Korean War Memorial Model**

1990  
19 x 12 x 8 inches  
Plexiglass and mixed media

### **New York Korean War Memorial**

1990  
34 x 25 inches  
Drawing



### **Meditation Model**

1996  
42 x 33 x 14 inches  
Steel and rocks

*Meditation* located at Louis Pasteur University,  
Strasbourg, France. Photo by Klaus Strober.

### **East West Buddha**

2005  
2 - 6 ft steel plates  
Steel insert and rocks



### **Cat and Mouse**

1999  
36 x 24 x 60 inches  
Steel, foam rubber, stone, plexiglass  
Collection of Judith Hudson,  
New York.



### **Knife Swallower**

1987  
72 x 18 inches  
Steel and plexiglass

### **Knife Juggler**

1987  
72 x 18 inches  
Steel



### **Portrait of Karl Marx**

1990  
80 x 36 inches  
Aluminum with rock



### **Bart/Mickey**

1996  
44 x 24 x 28 inches  
Mixed media



### **Death of Marat**

1991  
44 x 29 x 24 inches  
Steel structure with knife and  
plastic fruits



Selected Photographs: **Empty Spaces** Series and **Islands** Series  
All works of art on loan from the artist unless otherwise noted.

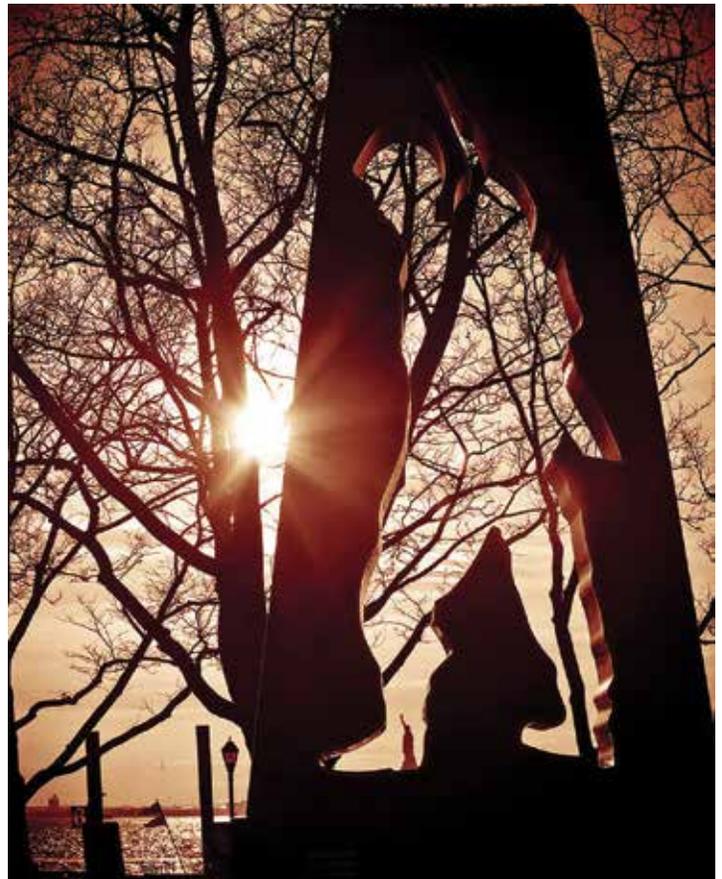
# Mac Adams

## Chronology

- 1943** Born Brynmawr South Wales, Great Britain
- 1966** Graduates from Cardiff College of Art, Cardiff, South Wales, UK
- 1969** Receives MFA from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey
- 1976, 1980, 1982** Awarded National Endowment Fellowship for the Arts
- 1981** Awarded a DAAD Fellowship from the German Government. Lives in Berlin.
- 1988** Begins teaching in the Visual Arts Department, SUNY College at Old Westbury
- 1988** Awarded New York State Fellowship for the Arts (Sculpture)
- 1990** Becomes a United States Citizen
- 1991** Commission and installation of the *New York Korean War Memorial*, Battery Park, New York City, NY, the first major memorial dedicated to the Korean War in the United States
- 2003** Appointed Full Professor at SUNY College at Old Westbury
- 2008** Commissioned by Iowa State University to create *The Moth* for Coover Hall, an Iowa Art in State Buildings project
- 2009** Awarded Distinguished Teaching Professor, State University of New York
- 2013** Received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award

*The New York Korean War Veterans Memorial* by Mac Adams, 1991  
Located in Battery Park, New York City, N.Y.  
Photo by Jeremy Pollack.

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## **The Other Still Life**

Mac Adams, artist

**D**id you know a roll of paper, a coffee cup, a container of glass - plus and a cup with a tea bag when lit from above makes an almost perfect shadow of Mickey Mouse?

Did you know a slice of cheese, a bunch of grapes, two apples, A banana, and a knife, when lit from the side, makes a shadow That resembles the murder of Jean Marat?

Observing these and other minor phenomena has made me Aware of how the most mundane groupings of object can Reveal intimate musings in the shadows they project, revealing more about the person who is observing them than the objects themselves. These temporal, Rorschach like images, called shadows invite both speculation and meditation, evoking a presence both fearful and humorous.

**More information at [www.macadamsstudio.com](http://www.macadamsstudio.com)**



*Death of Marat*, by Mac Adams, 1991