

Morgan, Nicholas Chittenden, "Matthew Brannon, Casey Kaplan," Artforum.com, Critics' Picks, September 2015

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Matthew Brannon

CASEY KAPLAN

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In Matthew Brannon's latest output, candy-colored arrangements of objects and text—a wedding cake, a pack of Lucky Strikes, a bottle of vanilla extract—address the Vietnam War with a decorative aestheticism. This strategy may feel absurd, but Brannon deliberately avoids picturing scenes of violence, instead focusing on commodities, from a shuttlecock to a bottle of Heinz ketchup. These assemblages suppress violence almost to the point of invisibility, evoking a wartime America proceeding as if in an unaltered peacetime. In *First Base* (all works 2015), what initially seems a straightforward still life comprised of recreational equipment—a playing card, a World's Fair souvenir, a record—is complicated by the fact that the record is a single of Barry McGuire's 1965 protest song *Eve of Destruction*.



Matthew Brannon, *First Base*, 2015, paint, letterpress, and serigraph on paper, 24 x 18".

Leisure time and conflict are threaded through each other, and war mostly comes through indirect signifiers—world maps and international brand names that place the particularly "American" iconography within a larger context of global politics—or through civic imagery that has been so diluted as to be almost meaningless, as in an advertisement-like view of Washington's monuments (Camelot). Clues to this latent violence abound. In *Ready or Not*, Brannon places a historically accurate draft notice, carefully reproduced via letterpress, among comparatively carefree detritus (a Peanuts greeting card, a box of Corn Flakes).

Concentrating on the conflict at home rather than on scenes of violence means that the images can also be funny. Three pictures of 1960s interiors, for example, are so pitch-perfectly bourgeois it's easy to laugh: a rubber duck in the corner of a doctor's office, a modish Braun radio. This comedic, almost satirical aspect offsets some of the nostalgia that underlies the abundance of domestically coded objects: If history is experienced through sentimental recollection in Brannon's spare montages, farce can also subject that sentiment to critical reevaluation.