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Matthew Brannon, ***Terribly Important*, 2011,** letterpress on paper, 24 × 18".

DESKTOP PICTURE PLANE

JAN TUMLIR ON MATTHEW BRANNON’S “CONCERNING VIETNAM”

MATTHEW BRANNON’S WORK is known for its dark explorations of male—and specifically American male—subjectivity. It is obviously informed by Freudian psychoanalysis, and on this point it is worth noting that Freud was no great fan of America, which he located as the epicenter of modern civilization’s “discontents.” Being American, Brannon is implicated and therefore ambivalent in his approach: The subject under analysis is always him.

Brannon’s work has long been suffused with a lyrical tone, intimate and confessional. He is a highly literate artist and also a literary one, having, between 2007 and 2013, authored seven bona fide novellas, each precisely seventy-two pages long. But his signature medium is printmaking, and he works mainly with letterpress and silk screen, formats that invite the vivid juxtapositions of words and pictures. A characteristic example from 2011 bears jaunty renditions of a keyhole, a fan, a liquor bottle, a glass, and an overflowing ashtray, executed in a sophisticated period style that summons memories of lifestyle magazines from the mid-twentieth century, when illustrators took a measured cue from modern art. Underneath these icons of the high life turning noir are the words TERRIBLY IMPORTANT, which furnish the work’s title, rendered in a large print that lends the overall design the appearance of a poster for a film that, as some smaller words at the bottom indicate, is “written, directed and produced by the same person.” Higher up and to the left is a blurb that reads:

> It would all happen so fast. I knew the moment she walked in that I was hard boiled. Cooked crispy. Pickled. Mashed. That I’d be saying yes when I meant no. That someone was going to get hurt. Lose their life *and* their money. That I’d never finish my novel. Never go to the top of the Empire State Building. I knew that we were in this together and that we already knew the ending.

This language issues from an *I* that automatically points toward the artist himself, yet it is also generic, no less stylized than the accompanying imagery. In Brannon’s oeuvre, outsize ambitions lead inexorably toward corruption, the exposure of inherent and unconquerable weaknesses, premonitions of disaster, and a suffocating atmosphere of anxiety and anguish. The narrative through line is at once profoundly personal and diffuse. The novel that remains unfinished in the above citation is, of course, the Great American Novel—the book that would deliver the last word, in an American style, on the American type. Perhaps its conclusion is now closer than ever.

For the past five years or so, Brannon has been preoccupied with a project on the Vietnam War that signals a notable shift in both the focus and the scope of his

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Matthew Brannon, *Bell AH-1S Cobra, Gunner's Seat*, 2018, silk screen, acrylic, enamel, and ink on paper, 66½ × 51½".

practice. It should be stressed that this was conceived as a *research* project. While literature has always informed Brannon's output, his reading was, in the past, largely confined to fiction, and for pleasure. He has since turned to a very different order of writing, all of it pertaining to the conflict in Southeast Asia in which the US was embroiled for twenty years, from 1955 to 1975, and across five presidential administrations. By his own estimation, he has, to date, read some forty thousand pages of war reportage, correspondence, and analysis, as well as the journals, memoirs, and biographies of key players. Rather than relying on the imaginary impressions of the "hard boiled" protagonists who infused his earlier work, Brannon has assembled a trove of content with at least a claim to historical accuracy.

This is an exercise in data mining and in fact-finding. The outcome is "Concerning Vietnam," 2016–, an ongoing series of more than seventy-five prints (the largest planned will be 115 by 103 inches) that trace the vectors of power as they pass from the top to the bottom of the command chain. From the desktops of presidents seemingly captured during key policy meetings to helicopter interiors strewn with the identifying bric-a-brac of their pilots, Brannon brings us to the front-row seats of the conflict—even if, significantly, this seat is always inside, never out in the so-called theater of war. From Operation Rolling Thunder to the My Lai massacre, the explosion of on-the-ground savagery that was triggered by a series of outwardly rational calculations from on high here remains resolutely offstage and offscreen. For instance, the only sign of the ravaged fields and flesh that resulted from our military's liberal use of Agent Orange is a calling card from Dow Chemical, one of the corporations responsible for the herbicide's production, on Kennedy's Oval Office table (*Oval Office, November 1961*, 2017), or else the gradient of the sky, from clear blue above to toxic brown below, glimpsed from an airborne cockpit (*Bell AH-1S Cobra, Gunner's Seat*, 2018). In Freudian terms, this consistent turning away from the "action" would be called *repression* or *sublimation*. But this strategy by no means elides the trauma of the war; rather, it reduces the events to a

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Intimated rather than declared is the sense, in the end irrefutable, that there is very little in our civilian world that was not developed through stages of research during wartime.

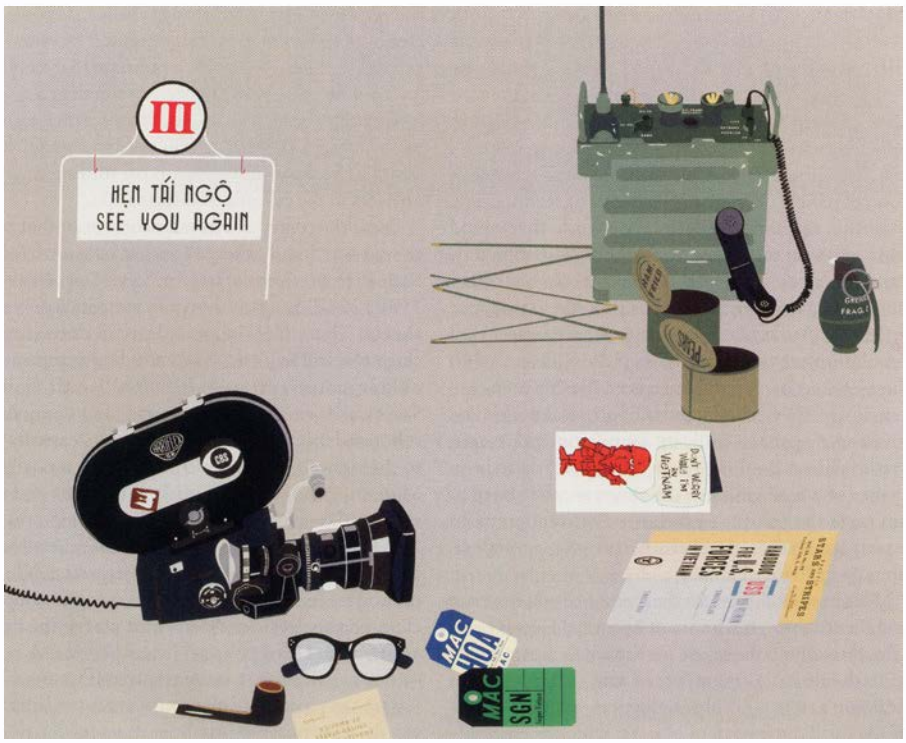
This page: **Matthew Brannon, *Bell UH-1D Iroquois, Cockpit (II)*, 2018,** silk screen, acrylic, enamel, and ink on paper, 67 × 103".

Opposite page, top: **Matthew Brannon, *Oval Office, November 1961*, 2017,** silk screen, acrylic, enamel, and ink on paper, 52 × 66".

Opposite page, bottom: **Matthew Brannon, *War Correspondent, Saigon 1968*, 2017,** silk screen, acrylic, enamel, and ink on paper, 52 × 64".

picture-puzzle assortment of pervasive peripheral cues. Even the most seemingly anodyne details are inflected with sinister import—take the roll of Life Savers mints perched above the gunner’s cyclic control stick in the aircraft mentioned above. The relation of its breath-freshening promise to the systematic despoliation of greenery carried out below by the American forces is brutally ironic.

As is standard practice for Brannon, no humans are depicted in “Concerning Vietnam,” and no nature either, unless, like the burning sky observed above, it has been aggressively altered via human intervention. We confront only man-made things, a system of objects that extends from government-issue equipment to store-bought goods. All are interconnected; the entire array of consumer products featured in these prints appears under the dark sign of armed combat. Liquor and tobacco are ubiquitous, their stress-relieving and anesthetic properties applied to a more localized pain. The same is true of the prepackaged snack foods, over-the-counter pharmaceuticals, mass-entertainment items, personal accessories, and tourist souvenirs that regularly appear: All are exposed both as agents in a comprehensive campaign of psychic cover-up and, ominously, as products of the very same forces whose more explicitly malevolent outcomes they seek to displace. A print titled *War Correspondent, Saigon 1968*, 2017, showcases two tins of preserved food (labeled, army-surplus style, simply PEARS and HAM-FRIED) right beside a grenade. These three objects, presented in various tints of a common khaki hue, indicate that preservatives and explosives were developed in tandem. Likewise, the still and moving-image cameras that are scattered throughout the series are insistently linked to submachine guns and fuselage-mounted artillery, reminding us that technical optics and military ballistics evolved together. The emergence of the 1960s antiwar counterculture is itself implicated as a subsidiary outgrowth of the military-industrial complex, as is suggested by the presence of the Beatles’ album *Revolver* (1966), jutting out from the corner of another helicopter-cockpit view (*Bell UH-1D Iroquois, Cockpit [II]*, 2018). Brannon redirects the record’s self-reflexive title toward the aircraft’s turning blades, and the album’s notoriously “trippy” acoustic design finds its basis in the helmet with a mounted headset that appears in the print’s opposite corner: One of stereophonic sound’s first uses was in the alternating left-right pings that drew pilots toward their enemy targets. In illustrating these connections, Brannon shows a remarkably light touch, one that precisely counterbalances the heaviness of his material. Intimated rather than declared is the sense, in the end irrefutable, that there is very little in our civilian world that was not developed through stages of research during wartime.



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Left: **View of “Matthew Brannon: Concerning Vietnam,” 2018**, Casey Kaplan, New York. From left: *Éphémère (Walking Out/ Walking In to War)*, 2018; *War Correspondent, Laotian Border 1971*, 2018. Photo: Jason Wyche.

Opposite page: **Matthew Brannon, *Air Force One, November 1963*, 2017**, silk screen, acrylic enamel, and ink on paper, 67 × 103½".

The push-pull between the fantasy of omnipotence and the stubborn resistance of historical facts is operative throughout the series.

Brannon likewise implicates the panoply of telephones, intercom consoles, radios, and television sets that grace the offices of high command—the sleek, commodified redesign of communication technologies belies their original testing on the battlefield. They serve as surreptitious links to the present: It was during the Vietnam War that our current, globally interlaced information network began to take shape. The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), implemented by the Department of Defense in the conflict’s dog days, was the prototype for the internet. Again, Brannon only hints at the connection, sotto voce. The meticulously rendered forms of the buttons, switches, wires, plugs, microphones, loudspeakers, and screens that make up the countless control panels on view are redolent of technocratic fetishism, signaling the desire for a world that would bend, without resistance, to one’s touch. Ultimately, Brannon’s prints constitute not merely historical sets, such as we might enter as pretend actors, but *interfaces* that beg comparison to the scenario-based simulations of video games. As if the contours of all these various items had been traced directly on paper, actual size, they evince a sense of physical proximity, inviting our reach and, by extension, their own manipulation. In this “game,” however, there is no chance of winning; rather, the player is condemned to navigate the fallout of failure. The items remain utterly intractable, parts of a *nature morte* compositionally fixed for all time.

This push-pull between the fantasy of omnipotence and the stubborn resistance of historical facts is operative throughout the series, perhaps most frustratingly so in the floating fragments of text. A hallmark of Brannon’s style is graphic reduction, a squeezing out of the third dimension of objects, which are forcibly thinned to conform to the shallow planes on which they sit. Conversely, already-flat words undergo a kind of thickening. The freely imagined language featured in prior works is curtailed in favor of extant documents, ranging from presidential memos and diplomatic correspondence to newspaper clippings and glossy magazine covers. These linguistic artifacts may cut directly to the political motives for the war, but we never arrive at “straight talk.” Throughout, conflicting ideologies are represented by competing typographic designs, which emphasize that Brannon’s style is not just a period-specific reference but also a mobilizing aesthetic decision. It constitutes a kind of prompt, urging us to “get on the same page” as the artist, who long ago gave up on finding any final answers in the cascade of information.

Near the center of a monumental print that places the viewer inside the passenger cabin of John F. Kennedy’s presidential jet (*Air Force One, November 1963*, 2017) is a tidy array of sixteen typewritten sheets. These clearly articulate, in date-stamped chronological sequence, the unfolding argument over military intervention on behalf of South Vietnam. Skeptical doves would have found their opinions corroborated by an issue of *Life* magazine, casually lying to the right of this paper trail, open to a portrait of Madame Nhu—the famously imperious and cruel sister-in-law of former South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm. The photograph was taken during a press conference in Beverly Hills, to which Nhu had decamped just a few months prior to the coup that claimed the president’s life, and where she openly accused the US of political incompetence. A bolded quote captions her image: WHOMEVER HAS THE AMERICANS AS ALLIES DOES NOT NEED ENEMIES. Such words, distributed through the mass media, point to the souring of public opinion in regard to the war’s true aims. Yet if the US alliances were murky, at least the nation was clear about its enemies. On the print’s far left, the hawks get their say. Perched atop an armrest is a 1960 book published by the esteemed World War II veteran Maxwell D. Taylor; its title, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, is legible on the spine. A longtime adviser to Kennedy who was finally appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1962, General Taylor was a key architect of the small-scale anti-Communist initiatives that would characterize our military policy in the second half of the twentieth century. In Brannon’s work, these documents are placed at absolute loggerheads. The resulting “quagmire”—to use a term that was in heavy circulation around then—is no less a product of irreconcilable information than of battling fonts and layout schemes.

“Concerning Vietnam” premiered in November 2017 at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles; its New York unveiling followed at Casey Kaplan in May 2018. This month, Brannon will release a book scrupulously indexing nearly all of the work that comprises the series to date. The artist amply demonstrates his compulsion to get the story exactly right. But one persistent question is bound to continue haunting the series: What is our inheritance?

Brannon was born in 1971, two years before the disgraced withdrawal of US troops from the battlefield. One of his earliest memories is of watching the 1975 Saigon airlift, the symbolic beginning of Vietnam’s formal reunification, on the evening news. From this personally adjusted angle, “Concerning Vietnam” might amount to an archaeological excavation of the fraught geopolitical landscape of his youth. The book’s opening pages will include a lengthy interview between Brannon and the historian

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Mark Atwood Lawrence, providing a remarkably comprehensive overview of the Cold War configurations undergirding the Vietnam struggle. Brannon offers this revealing note:

> I remember other kids in my grammar school, perhaps even the teacher, saying that America had never lost a war. Since the mission in Vietnam was never formally a declared “war” and technically remained a “conflict,” it didn’t have to count. This idea of winners and losers seems significant to me, and very much part of the 1980s revision of the Vietnam War that occurred while I was growing up.

One is born into a ready-made world. Reflections such as the one above, which only become available later in life, point to the pre-scripting of our earliest experiences. To describe the recent turn in Brannon’s work, consider the distinction between lyric and epic modes, as a formerly self-centered perspective is now refracted through the world of fathers. Still, the latter subject always brings us back to ourselves, to the origins of our identity, our genetically hardwired predisposition toward triumph or defeat. Brannon’s style carries over our infantile impressions of a world that seems brand-new, but only because we are seeing it for the first time. This is a cynical setup; it quickly becomes weighed down with historical baggage. Just what, in hindsight, should we make of the newness of America in the early ’70s? Brannon’s earliest years coincided with the premature end of the “American Century”: The pullout from Vietnam, Watergate, the oil embargo, the Iranian hostage crisis—these are just a few markers of a decline with which we still contend. The November 2016 election confirmed the nation’s catastrophic course. The central theme here is one of disillusionment: *So that’s what that was!* Paradoxically, Brannon’s obsessive, ruminating return to the landscape of the past has also yielded his most *timely* work. In “Concerning Vietnam,” the artist analyzes the repressed content neurotically reenacted in the long succession of failed wars, disastrous policies, and public schisms perpetuated to this day: the case of America.

The last time the genre of history painting was evoked with any conviction may have been in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh’s 1989 *October* essay on Gerhard Richter’s Baader-Meinhof paintings. Likewise, Brannon’s “Concerning Vietnam” has credibly met the genre’s monumental demand—that the artist speak not only *of*, but also *through*, a country and its people. Furthermore, Brannon channels this demand through what he describes as a “third tier” medium, one that reflects the state of the nation. Printmaking, an aesthetic choice, and a modest one, takes on a tactical purpose. Avoid heroic bluster and proceed with caution—this is a note to self, and to everyone else. □

JAN TUMLIR IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO *ARTFORUM*. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)