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frieze



Matthew Brannon Goes to War

An ambitious new body of work
tackles the central trauma of the American
20th century: the Vietnam War
by George Pendle

There's a copy of the *New York Times* on a table in Matthew Brannon's studio. It's folded open to a story about Barack Obama visiting Laos, the first US president to do so. 'Did you know more bombs were dropped on Laos than on any country in history?' Brannon asks. 'And yet Americans know so little about it.'

Brannon has recently come to know a lot about it. A huge amount, in fact. And he continues to learn more each day, since he's in the midst of a seemingly boundless project that focuses on the Vietnam War. 'Concerning Vietnam' has seen him interview suspicious veterans, visit obscure mid-western artillery museums, dig through reams of declassified documents and devour innumerable books and essays on the subject. Over the past year, this obsession has poured out into his artworks.

It all appears to be a radical departure from the work for which Brannon is best known: elegant, mid-century-modern-style screen prints, often of luxury consumer items, which are undercut and transfigured by disquietingly acerbic captions. The precise and playful maliciousness of these works, their economy of style and structure, seems quite at odds with tackling a subject of such grim seriousness and hydra-headed complexity as the conflict in Vietnam. So, why has Brannon gone to war?

'It wasn't that I chose Vietnam as a subject,' says the artist. 'In fact, when I first became interested, the last thing I thought I was going to do was make an art project out of it.' Brannon found himself being drawn to the topic when his wife was diagnosed with cancer. Her chemotherapy and radiation treatments saw him shuttling between hospitals and home. As his art practice went into deep freeze, he began reading about Vietnam – for reasons he can't quite explain – and, in the midst of his own personal trauma, he found distraction, fascination and ballast in the central trauma of the American 20th century.

'When you're reading about Vietnam, especially when you're reading from the perspective of veterans, they always talk about the discord of being in this horrifically stressful, frightening, violent landscape and then the otherworldliness of being back in the US. And, in some way, I had a sympathy for that, spending most of my time in hospitals and then trying to work out what to do with my time when I was out of them.' It wasn't

until he'd read thousands of pages, and his wife's cancer had receded, that he decided to try and make art about it.

Concerning Vietnam; Oval Office November 1963 (Kennedy) (2016) shows a Bloody Mary cocktail sitting atop a book, copies of *Life* and *Time* magazine stacked neatly on top of each other, a green map, two telephones, a cigar, a large model sailing ship and various letters strewn around a teal backdrop. The disparate objects make it seem like a painting from Brannon's past, but then you notice what it's lacking: a caption. In the past, the artist's captions acted as what he has called 'an irritant'. The screen prints drew you in with their illustrative guile and the captions left you spluttering and re-assessing the images' now-suspect beauty. Devoid of such guidance here, you are left to read the images yourself. Closer inspection reveals that one of the letters is from the US Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, announcing the conclusions of a recent trip to Vietnam. It speaks of 'favourable military trends' and 'no possibility of a successful coup'. Yet the copy of *Time* on the desk, dated a month later, has 'Military Coup in Vietnam' splashed across the cover. Whoops. The book the cocktail rests on is about the climactic battle of the First Indochina War – a disastrous loss for France against the anti-colonial, communist Vietnamese – that had occurred ten years previously. It's a warning being used as a coaster. Look closer at that cigar, too. The band around it tells you it's Cuban, and now the back of your brain is patching together the narrative: this is taking place just one year after the Cuban Missile Crisis. One emergency has bled into another. It's as if America has a death wish, and no amount of model boats are going to help. The objects – rendered flatly, without shadow, seemingly without any weight at all – are, in fact, freighted with real-world significance and Brannon is carefully curating them to explain the ensuing calamity. Here, the world is about to tip into disaster amidst bad intelligence, willful ignorance of the past and a collection of sentimental tchotchkes.

'Concerning Vietnam' seems so *sui generis* that when I tried to think of similar 'evidential' projects – by which I mean the portrayal of items dense in real-world information – two very dissimilar examples came to mind. The first was Hans Haacke's



artworks from the 1970s and '80s, tracking systems of influence and power by displaying financial records. The second was traditional still-life painting, in particular the table in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), with its collection of odd and obscure objects, none without import. If Brannon's prints can be called still lifes then they run deep, plumbing the fathoms of research, intent on showing how the most calamitous event in American history since the Civil War can be explained in scraps of paper and desk toys. In the artist's hands, every knick-knack becomes a *memento mori*.

'I've always been somebody who looks back,' says Brannon, 'and, as a believer in psychoanalysis, I definitely don't think that looking back is an unproductive strategy.' The historical constraint of his project has, perversely, allowed him to flourish. Brannon's colour palette has broadened, as have his screen prints. Some works consist of over 80 screens painstakingly layered on top of one another, the most complex work he's ever done. Nor has the profundity of the subject matter dulled his wit: take the knowing equivocality of the title of the project, for instance. Nevertheless, the drollness of the past has transformed into a deeper comic resonance. The jibbing non-sequiturs have been replaced by a narrative that is both more cogent and more bleakly comic. *Lunch Meeting* (2015) depicts a delicately sketched map of the Ho Chi Minh trail – the vital supply route for the North Vietnamese forces – pinned next to a sandwich order form for President Johnson and his cabinet. The artwork references the Tuesday lunches at which Johnson and McNamara would choose their bombing targets. Without even knowing this, however, the contrast between the trail's complexity and the simple boxes of the order form suggest the discrepancy between the war's actuality and the simplistic view of it taken in the chambers of power.



If Brannon's prints can be called still lifes, then they run deep, plumbing the fathoms of research.

Or take *Trying to Remember (August 2nd, 1964)* (2016), a hand-drawn reconstruction of the *USS Maddox*, the destroyer which was said to have been attacked by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats in 1964, and thus gave America a reason to launch itself into the war. Here, however, it seems so placid, so innocent, ploughing dutifully through the waves into a disastrous future. 'I wanted it to be like a doll's house for old men,' says Brannon, and it has that playful feeling to it – even though it was soon to start an inferno in the nursery that would set the rest of the house on fire.

Interestingly, however, we never see the flames, just the totems and amulets that portend disaster. Desks are the war zones here; violence is hidden beneath political euphemism, folded maps and coffee pots. Ordinarily, art related to the Vietnam War conjures images of polemic: the Art Workers' Coalition poster *And babies* (1969), a brutal colour photograph of bodies left behind after the My Lai massacre, or Peter Saul's hideously psychedelic 'Vietnam' series from the mid-to-late 1960s. Brannon's project offers quite the opposite: it's a strikingly bloodless autopsy. And, while parallels to the current misadventure in the Middle East can be easily drawn, Brannon seems keener on seeking understanding than outrage.

'A number of people have said: "Oh, you're making political art," and I hesitate to use that word. I think, in its strictest sense, political art would hopefully influence elections, legislation, whereas this is much more a historian's way of thinking about it.' There is no doubt that this work demands a lot more from the viewer, too, than expressions

of horror. To follow Brannon on his journey requires application and a certain amount of faith in the artist. This is not a role he takes lightly. 'Previously, I was trying to make what I thought people wanted to see, to try and feed the machine. Or I was making something to ruin their day. But I've lost that in this work. It's a different kind of responsibility.'

Brannon has ambitions that his work could move outside the conventional contemporary art venues, and that he could rope journalists, historians and other artists into interacting with it. He is already planning a text counterpoint to his pictures. A deft and erudite writer, he has begun a series of essays with titles such as 'Michael Herr Doesn't Want to Talk about Vietnam', 'A Short History of Napalm' and 'Lunch with Lyndon (Tuesdays 1965–68)'. Lectures, sculptures and films will all soon follow. His project could become as diffuse as the Vietnam conflict itself, causing conflagrations far beyond the art world. Brannon chooses to embrace this gargantuanism: 'I've made these bold claims saying it's a five-year project, a ten-year project, just because in the art world somebody makes a suite of paintings and, after they show it, it's like: "That's that." I really want to be clear with everyone that that's not the case here.' ♦

George Pendle is a writer based in Washington D.C., USA.

Matthew Brannon is an artist based in New York, USA. Brannon has presented solo exhibitions at venues including Casey Kaplan, New York (2015); Marino Marini Museum, Florence, Italy (2013); and Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany (2011). His most recent novel, An Irresponsible Biography of the Actor Laurence Harvey (2014), was published by Onestar Press, Paris. The artist's solo show, 'Vulture', is at Hiromi Yoshii, Tokyo, Japan, until 5 November; in autumn 2017, he will have a solo show at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, USA.

Previous page
Concerning Vietnam: Oval Office
November 1963, 2016, silkscreen with
hand-painted elements,
1 x 1.4 m

1
After the War
2016, silkscreen and hand-painted
elements on paper,
1.5 x 1 m

2
Trying to Remember
(August 2nd, 1964), 2016, silkscreen
with hand-painted elements,
1.1 x 2.8 m

Courtesy
Previous page the artist and
David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles;
photograph: Ronald Amstutz •
1 the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York;
photograph: Dawn Blackman •
2 the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York;
photograph: Jean Vong