Stillman, Steel, “Matthew Brannon: In the Studio with Steel Stillman,” *Art in America*, November 2011, pp. 154-163

MATTHEW BRANNON

IN THE STUDIO WITH STEEL STILLMAN

GIVEN THE SOPHISTICATION *of Matthew Brannon's artwork, you might not guess that he was raised in sparsely populated North American wildernesses. Born in 1971 in St. Maries, Idaho, where his father was embarking on a career with the U.S. Forest Service, Brannon grew up at a remove that in fact honed his fascination for the metropolitan mien—for its mix of glamour and insecurity. In his late teens, Brannon gravitated toward city life. After a brief stint at Rutgers University he moved to Los Angeles, where he completed his undergraduate studies at UCLA in 1995 before relocating to New York. He earned an MFA from Columbia in 1999.*

In the late 1990s, Brannon discovered a model for his esthetics in B-movie posters from the '40s and '50s. Since then, he has produced silkscreen and letterpress prints, in which he juxtaposes simply colored silhouetted imagery of everyday, often upscale objects with texts that he writes himself, deploying a mimic's skill to conjure a host of familiar-sounding cosmopolitan voices. (A writer as well, he has a novel in progress.) Attentive viewers will find an occasional iPod depicted amid the outdated bric-a-brac in works that, predating "Mad Men," have a deceptively nostalgic look—and an undertone of noirish aggression. Over time, the prints have spawned sculptures and complex stagelike installations, but the core subject for all Brannon's work has remained consistent: the anxious desires that make his imaginary characters seem real.

Brannon's career accelerated quickly after graduate school: he has had 19 solo exhibitions and been in nearly 70 group shows in the U.S., Europe and China since 2000, including the 2008 Whitney Biennial. As befits an artist whose exhibitions are often thematic assemblies of disparate objects, Brannon possesses a curator's sensibility, and he has organized a half-dozen group shows. The most recent, "Not So Subtle Subtitle," at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York in 2008, included work by Christopher Williams, Matt Keegan and Shannon Ebner, among others.

Brannon lives and works in New York and is married to the artist Michelle Elzay. In August, we met for lunch at his well-organized studio in the garment district and talked for much of the afternoon.

Opposite, Matthew Brannon in his studio, 2011. Photo Paola Ferrario.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Gentleman's Relish" at Casey Kaplan, New York, through Dec. 17.

STEEL STILLMAN It sounds like you moved around a good deal when you were younger.

MATTHEW BRANNON By the time I graduated from high school in 1989, in Kalispell, Montana, I'd already lived in eight remote towns in six states, including Alaska, and I couldn't wait to get away from the woods. I enrolled at Rutgers as an art major—my parents had always supported my creative side—but I was immediately distracted by New York City, and didn't get any work done. When a high school girlfriend needed a roommate in Santa Monica, I dropped out of Rutgers and moved to L.A., where I worked in record stores. After a year or two, I went back to school and studied graphic design at Santa Monica College of Design, Art and Architecture, and began pre-med courses at Santa Monica College.

STILLMAN So, when you transferred to UCLA in the fall of 1992, you were planning to become a doctor.

BRANNON I was, and sometimes I regret not sticking with it. But earlier that year MOCA had put on its "Helter Skelter" exhibition, and art looked to me like a more open-ended career choice. UCLA's program was interdisciplinary, and I worked in painting, photography, filmmaking and music. I also made performance videos—there was a lot of nudity in them—in which I played a doctor or a nurse. It was a productive time and I got to try out many things.

STILLMAN What kind of work did you do in graduate school?

BRANNON I struggled with painting but lost its thread. Instead, I turned my attention to art as decor, and built mock office and domestic interiors as settings for my paintings. But gradually I became more interested in the rooms themselves. I was trying to understand what art's role could be. Eventually I stopped painting and began curating a series of real and imaginary exhibitions. For these, I made invitations, press releases and posters, and all that printed matter became my first serious artwork. My thesis exhibition consisted of every poster

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Steak Dinner, 2007, letterpress on paper, 24 by 18 inches.

Opposite, view of the installation “Where Were We,” 2007, at the Whitney Museum at Altria, New York. Photo Lamay Photo.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

I'd made in an installation surrounded by security mirrors.

STILLMAN There seems to be a connection between your interest in posters and your having grown up in places where culture was hard to come by.

BRANNON In Alaska in the '70s, I would see ads for a movie like *Star Wars* on TV but would have to wait a year to see the actual movie. Similarly, a decade later, when I was a teenager in Montana and interested in punk rock, there was no scene for hundreds of miles. So I would drool over things long before I had them, and fetishize whatever I could get my hands on. I began collecting posters then—it's something I still do—and I loved everything about them, from the quality of the paper to whether they were folded or rolled, the color of the images and the word choices and fonts. The handmade silkscreens I made at Columbia were my attempts to emulate soon-to-be-forgotten work from the pre-digital era.

STILLMAN What led to the faux movie posters that you began in 2001?

BRANNON Things changed after school. I was asked to participate in group shows and would often contribute an announcement or a poster. But I felt I needed stronger content. I'd been watching a lot of haunted house films, when one day it occurred to me that these movies and group shows had distinct similarities. In both cases a diverse group of skeptics and believers are invited to assess a haunting, and each participant must overcome (or succumb to) the competing agendas of his fellow invitees, as well as his own inner demons. Inspired by these films, I started a series

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of posters—one was called *Satan's Bedroom* [2001]—that reflected my youthful ambivalence toward the art world. I was torn between seeking praise and biting the hand that was beginning to feed me.

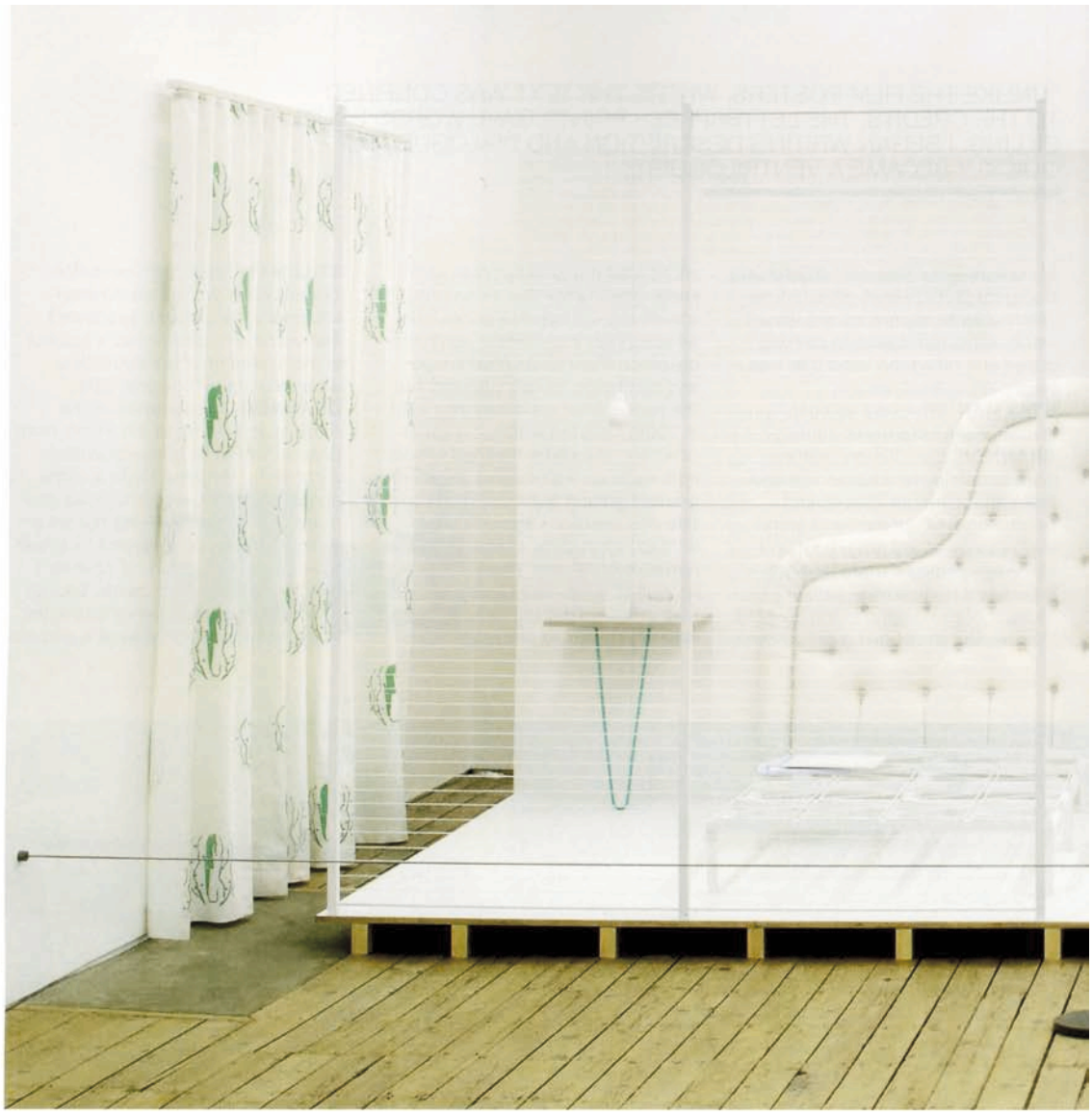
STILLMAN When did you get involved with letterpress printing?

BRANNON By 2004 my posters were becoming less about film and more about interior spaces and psychological themes. I was working on some tapestries—flora and fauna embroidered and stenciled on unstretched canvas—which I thought of as hanging in the haunted houses. But then I met a printer who introduced me to letterpress and I knew immediately that I was onto something. Letterpress prints have an amazingly rich, almost sculptural presence that results from image and text being literally pressed into the paper. After experimenting a bit, in 2006, I started work on a series of letterpress prints that had almost nothing to do with movies and that granted greater autonomy to image, title and caption. I figured that if I let each syntactical element have a narrative of its own, there would be no limit to what their recombinations might mean. I'd discovered a platform with which I could say anything.

STILLMAN Your 2007 exhibition “Where Were We” at the Whitney Museum's Altria space suggested that you'd also discovered a subject in the foibles of upwardly mobile urbanites of the '50s and '60s.

BRANNON The location of the Altria space—across the street from Grand Central Station—provided a context. I decided to do a show about New York, and imagined corporate commuters seeing my art on their way to work. I wanted to speak their language, which, of course, I only really knew from films. Taking my cue from letterpress's strengths and limitations, I developed a graphic

Stillman, Steel, “Matthew Brannon: In the Studio with Steel Stillman,” *Art in America*, November 2011, pp. 154-163



style that referenced midcentury design's poaching of modern art. Hence, the commuter became a man in a gray flannel suit.

Having arrived in New York in the late '90s, when the economy was booming, as it still was in the 2000s, I wanted to deal with status and its anxieties without being autobiographical. Using imagery that evoked outdated and clichéd markers of success, like lobster or steak dinners, provided a comfortable degree of abstraction.

STILLMAN Language plays a stronger role in the letterpress prints than it had in the film posters, twisting what are essentially still-life images in a narrative direction.

BRANNON Unlike the film posters, where text was confined to the credits, the letterpress prints gave words equal billing. I began writing description and dialogue and quickly became a ventriloquist. *Steak Dinner* [2007] tweaked the language of advertising: “This year tell her you love her all over again. With a grab bag of diamonds. [. . .] And a soft slap on her bare ass.” *But You Do It Anyway* [2007] was closer to film noir: “[. . .] The hum of the air conditioning. The drips in the tub. An unanswered phone ringing in the dark.”

When I was studying painting at UCLA, one of my teachers, Lari Pittman, would describe art as having two reads, a quick initial take followed by a more thought-out one. In my own work, I decided to make the second read the more compelling one. And I went about it quite literally: image, then text. The first read should be well-dressed and familiar. The second, somewhat rude and discomforting.

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View of the installation *Nevertheless*, 2009, wood, steel, aluminum, string and mixed mediums. Courtesy The Approach, London. Photo FXP Photography, London.

STILLMAN Why are your prints unique, and not in multiples? And what led you to create easel-like pedestals and freestanding walls to display them on?

BRANNON In an art world that privileges unique works, prints are poor cousins, so limiting them to an edition of one might look like a marketing strategy. And yet the truth is letterpress prints are hard to make, and sometimes you can only get one good one. Likewise, in many art contexts, prints are viewed in diminished circumstances, away from painting and sculpture. Designing display units became a way to put them center stage. My hope for viewers has been that they would move from inside out, from the sound of the words in their heads to the print itself, then to the frame, the thing the frame hangs on, and out into the world. If it were up to me, I'd design the walls, the lighting, the ventilation ducts, everything!

STILLMAN You had another solo show in 2007, "Try and Be Grateful," at the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto, which featured, in addition to

Stillman, Steel, “Matthew Brannon: In the Studio with Steel Stillman,” *Art in America*, November 2011, pp. 154-163

Left, *As It's Its Own*, 2011, oil on linen, 72 by 60 inches.

Opposite, *Useful—Useless—Used*, 2010, collage and acrylic on canvas, 32 by 28 inches.

prints, a sound recording and a play that were both called *Hyena*. The installation partly suggested a theater set.

BRANNON In 2005 I had a show in Berlin and celebrated a little too much after the opening. The next morning, with a blinding hangover, I went to the zoo, where, for the first time in my life, I encountered a hyena and its unbelievable sound—like a human trapped inside an animal's body. The hyena seemed to be mocking me. A few months later I went back to Berlin to record the hyena's cackle, but the result was more playful than what I'd remembered. Still, the recording seemed like it could be part of something, so I began to write a play about humiliation, centered on a theater director directing a play called *Hyena*.

As I wrote, I made "props": director's chairs, lightbulbs, bookshelves and other things. Realistically designed and to scale, but not functional, these objects were more signs of things than things themselves. They looked like they'd walked right out of my prints. I think of the setlike installations as sculptures, with each object operating in much the way individual motifs operate within the prints, that is, as elements in a larger construct. In "Try and Be Grateful," black-bound copies of the text of *Hyena* were piled on director's chairs and on the floor. The book could also be purchased in the museum store and the recording itself played on turntables off to the side.

STILLMAN You've since written other books, including a series of murder mysteries that so far have been accessible to only a few people.

BRANNON After *Hyena*, I began writing Raymond Chandler/Graham Greene-like novellas and hiding them in plain sight, making sculptures out of rows of books installed on bookshelves,

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"WHEN I BEGAN MY CAREER, IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT MOST ARTISTS MAKE CONSERVATIVE VERSIONS OF RADICAL ART. SO I DECIDED THAT ONE OF MY GOALS WOULD BE TO MAKE RADICAL VERSIONS OF CONSERVATIVE ART."

which hang out of reach of gallerygoers. Basically, I wanted to see if I could get away with murder. What would happen if I wrote whatever I wanted, even about the people I was involved with, but only let those who actually bought the sculptures read what I'd written? The first book was called *Mosquito* and others include *Poodle*, *Rat* and *Iguana*. Some are better than others, and someday I'd like to publish them in a low-priced compendium and sell them at regular bookstores.

STILLMAN You've continued to make installationlike sculptures organized around narrative constructs. For the 2008 Whitney Biennial, the setting was an apartment in a Manhattan high-rise, and for a solo that year at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, you conjured up a sushi restaurant and two stores. Then in 2009, you staged *Nevertheless* at The Approach, in London.

BRANNON *Nevertheless* was my first solo show in London, and was conceived in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. The title "never/the/less" was my cheeky response to the pressure to make diet art. Having no money didn't mean we couldn't afford ideas. The setting was meant to suggest a ship on a transatlantic voyage, and was inspired by an Evelyn Waugh novel, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, about an alcoholic writer undergoing a psychotic breakdown. On a low plinth, I created three contiguous spaces—the ship's deck, a bar and a stateroom—and then I scattered around an assortment of "props" and a store-bought sound-canceling machine, like those found in psychoanalysts' offices. The whole exhibition occupied the back third of the gallery and was roped off with a cord borrowed from the Tate Modern, where it had been used to keep people from touching artworks. I wanted viewers to feel they were behind police tape at a crime scene.

STILLMAN I'm glad you mentioned the white noise machine, because sound has become a vital aspect of your work. I'm particularly curious about the recording *Gag* [2010], which you featured in two recent solo shows.

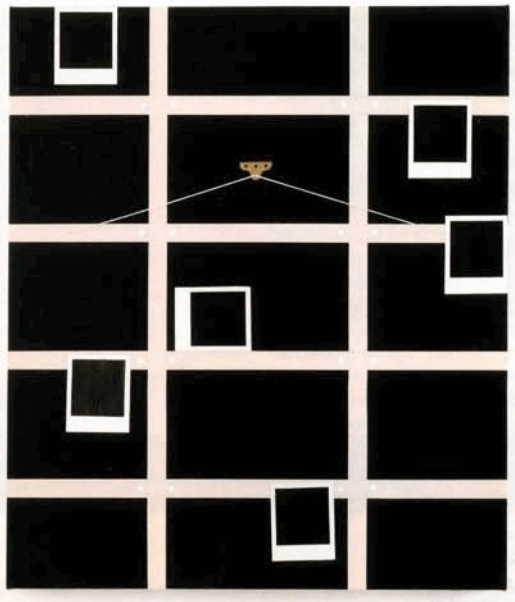
BRANNON I'd wanted to do a performance that involved gagging for several years—the verb itself has such an interesting combination of meanings, from choking, to silencing, to playing for laughter—but I knew I didn't have the endurance to do it myself. So I found a woman, an adult film star, and recorded her in a sound studio gagging on a dildo for an hour or two, and then edited out all the overtly sexual bits. I was only interested in the body's reflex.

In gagging the body tries to turn itself inside out, making sounds that are beyond language. *Gag* is hard to listen to, but if you can get past the first minute or two the sound becomes abstract, nearly musical, almost like a bird singing. In the exhibitions where I've used it, *Gag* became a kind of soundtrack, highlighting the subject of taste in the other artworks, and raising viewers' suspicions.

STILLMAN For the past several years you've been making what appear to be pseudo paintings, or perhaps they are puns of paintings. They hang on the wall but are often seen as if from the back, with their stretchers showing. Where do they fit in?

BRANNON Clichéd representations of artists, writers and film directors figure in many of my prints and scenarios, and those sculptures masquerading as paintings are mini-sets unto themselves. Most include crude trompe l'oeil representations of objects, such as a bottle of aftershave perched on a stretcher bar, or a bra slung over the top. Several have electrical outlets painted on their sides or straight razors hidden on the uppermost edge, stashed away like murder weapons. Some of the first ones were made for art fairs and had price tags hanging from them.

STILLMAN And yet for all their mocking humor, they've made you into a real oil painter again.



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“MUCH OF MY WORK IS ABOUT WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE, MYSELF INCLUDED. WHAT DO WE WANT? WHAT DO WE THINK WE WANT? AND, OF COURSE: WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?”

BRANNON I needed to confront my own resistance. So far the paintings have been based on drawings I've made in landscape settings. Most are of leaves and flowers and are painted with a reduced palette. I'm very conscious of their traditional qualities. When I began my career, it occurred to me that most artists make conservative versions of radical art. So I decided that one of my goals would be to make radical versions of conservative art. I hope this somehow applies to the paintings.

STILLMAN Psychoanalysis shows up regularly in the subject matter of your prints and sculpture. Its reflective procedures also seem important to your ways of thinking and working.

BRANNON I've been in analysis for a number of years and part of its effect on my work is that it has made me comfortable with the conflict between what happens on the surface and what goes on underneath, with what Freud described, speaking of dreams, as the difference between their manifest and latent contents. Much of my work is about what motivates people, myself included. What do we want? What do we think we want? And, of course: Where did we go wrong?

STILLMAN Tell me about your show at Casey Kaplan.

BRANNON It is called “Gentleman's Relish” and describes a private detective with erectile dysfunction who is hired to investigate a sexually deviant dentist. The exhibition incorporates sculpture, prints and paintings and is organized around three sets: a powder room, a bar and an apartment lobby. Two additional “scenes” will be staged at London's Frieze art fair. A prologue takes place in the detective's office and an epilogue at a train station. In the end, the private detective kills somebody and falls in love with a British film director. But of course it won't be theater; it will be an art show. ○

STEEL STILLMAN is an artist and writer based in New York.

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Brannon's studio.
Photo Paola Ferrario.