DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

Matthew Brannon
Elijah Funk & Alix Ross
(Online Ceramics)
The Galaxy Song

July 17 – August 28, 2021

press@davidkordanskygallery.com
www.davidkordanskygallery.com
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David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present The Galaxy Song, an exhibition featuring unique silkscreen prints and paintings by Matthew Brannon, and paintings and sculpture by artists and fashion designers Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics), who have become widely recognized for their t-shirt designs, among other projects, on view July 17 through August 28.

For both Brannon and Funk & Ross, The Galaxy Song is an occasion to treat the motifs, cosmic mindfulness, and countercultural narratives associated with the Grateful Dead as springboards for open experimentation. While the 1960s-era, psychedelic origins of the Dead—as well as the band's propensity for inspiring its fans to reinterpret its densely interwoven iconographies—provide the show's major conceptual through lines, it is just as much a celebration of the possibilities inherent to the screenprinting process as an improvisatory dive into the dark, weird, humorous spaces in America's past, present, and future.

If the Grateful Dead has been many things to many people, it is, at the end of the day, a social phenomenon with music at its core. The music has given rise to many things, including a unique visual language that cannot be reduced to any one set of parameters. Certain, immediately recognizable motifs recur: skulls, anthropomorphized animals (mostly bears and turtles), and transpositions of the band members' likenesses into any number of context-specific variations are a few of them. These motifs aside, what has made the production of Dead-related imagery a lasting mode of expression is a spirit of openness and constant reinterpretation: the spirit, in other words, that defines the "tribe" of the Grateful Dead itself, with its predilection for itinerant journeys both outwardly and inwardly oriented, and its anarchic, self-organizing (if not self-regulating) ethos.

Accordingly, The Galaxy Song is not a group exhibition in the traditional sense. It is, rather, a space—a song?—into which three artists have temporarily stepped in order to articulate their perceptions of a chaotic, terrifying, beautiful, and mysterious world.

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For more than two decades, Matthew Brannon has posed radical questions about what printmaking can do and how it functions in the art historical landscape. His unique silkscreen prints are the products of meticulous research and involve the use of dozens, if not hundreds, of screens. Brannon has dedicated the better part of the last five years dedicated to making work about the Vietnam War; his exploration of the Grateful Dead began as an extension of his interest in the war's ripple effects throughout American culture in the 1960s,'70s, and beyond.

Online Ceramics is widely known as the vehicle by which Elijah Funk and Alix Ross have produced screenprinted t-shirts both inside and outside of not only official Grateful Dead-related contexts, but also those associated with independent film, popular and world music, environmental advocacy, and spiritual practice. And while this marks the first time that they have shown their work under the Online Ceramics rubric in a contemporary art context, Funk & Ross originally conceived of their project as a conceptual provocation with roots in a variety of avant-garde traditions.

Given their makers' respective trajectories, the works in The Galaxy Song are, taken together, a masterclass in screen-printing techniques. Images borrowed from a broad range of sources are freely mixed with moments of pure invention and historical extrapolation. Ideas about the experience of time and approaches to the telling of cultural narratives differ from work to work.

Brannon, for instance, locates signifiers that tie the Dead into an ever-expanding net of geopolitical, commercial, and psychological factors; postwar America is seen through the lens of its wars and its chemical dependencies, its consumer infatuations, and its literary breakthroughs. In Funk & Ross's paintings, meanwhile, Web 1.0- and 2.0-era aesthetic markers provide frameworks for reproductions of watercolor fantasias, gnomic texts, and psychedelic visual riddles. Throughout the show, pumped-up color and biting wit define the

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works' surfaces; lying in their depths are symbols of longing and fear, and earnest attempts to reconcile the positivity of hippiedom's official party line with the palpable darkness of its spiritual and practical realities.

As in any Grateful Dead-adjacent experience, exceptions to these categorical descriptions prove the rules. Funk & Ross have produced a life-sized bronze sculpture of a skeleton riding a giant turtle; the flat, mediated spaces of their canvases have, at least momentarily, given way to an object defined by its physical presence, weight, and materiality. Brannon has made paintings, meanwhile, in which the dense referentiality of the prints recedes in favor of bold, graphic riffs on typography and design that flirt with pure abstraction.

The Galaxy Song is a show about change and variation. It is about the Dead's continual and ongoing changes, and about what it means to change the makeup of your own mind; it is about alternating currents of art and music, and about seeing things differently depending on where you are in your life. It isn't a place for fixed opinions or literal readings: each work alludes to the possibility that its maker(s) might have seen things through other eyes on other days, and that its viewers inhabit a secret space of dreams.

Matthew Brannon (b. 1971, St. Maries, Idaho) has long been recognized not only for his wit and literary sensibility, but also for the precision with which he approaches his chosen mediums. He is perhaps best known for his radical approach to printmaking, which, contrary to traditional usage, frequently involves the elaborate production of unique artworks. In 2019, Gregory R. Miller & Co. published Concerning Vietnam, a book dedicated to Brannon's multi-year project investigating the Vietnam War. Brannon has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Marino Marini Museum, Florence (2013); Portikus, Frankfurt (2012); Museum M, Leuven, Belgium (2010); Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York (2007); and Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2007). His work is in the permanent collections of numerous museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art;

Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Denver Art Museum; DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens; and Museo MADRE, Naples, Italy. Brannon lives and works in New York.

Online Ceramics is a fashion design company founded by artists Elijah Funk (b. 1989, Zanesville, Ohio) and Alix Ross (b. 1990, Cincinatti, Ohio), who began collaborating in 2011 as students at the Columbus College of Art and Design. Among Online Ceramics's first designs were bootleg t-shirts that the duo sold in parking lots outside concerts by Grateful Dead spinoff band Dead and Company beginning in 2016. They have since produced designs for a broad range of musicians, filmmakers, and other groups and companies, including the Grateful Dead, Dead and Company, John Mayer, A24 Films, Safdie Brothers, Estate of Fela Kuti, GQ, Estate of Ram Dass, and North Face (forthcoming). Online Ceramics maintains a semi-permanent space at the Los Angeles location of Dover Street Market, which is one of a select group of retailers to carry their work; others include Ssense, Slam Jam, Union, and Maxfield. Profiles have appeared in The New Yorker, GQ, Los Angeles Times, Vogue, and other publications. Funk and Ross live and work in Los Angeles.

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Matthew Brannon
Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
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Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
Welcome to town, let me play you a little tune. (The Ride), 2021
bronze
77 x 76 x 54 inches
(195.6 x 193 x 137.2 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.001)

Matthew Brannon
Events Occurring in the Year 1973, 2021
acrylic and enamel on canvas
60 x 72 x 1 3/8 inches
(152.4 x 182.9 x 3.5 cm)
(Inv# MB 21.007)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
Ride Like the One-Eyed Jack of Diamonds With the Devil Close Behind, 2021
acrylic on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.008)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
Dreams Are the Notes in the Song of Joy, 2021
acrylic on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.009)

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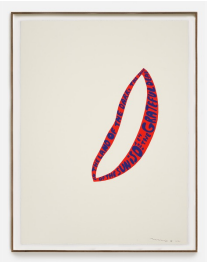


Matthew Brannon
Wipe that smile off your face., 2021
silkscreen on paper
30 1/4 x 22 1/2 inches
(76.8 x 57.2 cm)
framed:
33 x 25 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(83.8 x 64.1 x 3.8 cm)
unique
(Inv# MB 21.010)

Matthew Brannon
710 Ashbury Street, San Francisco 1967, 2020
silkscreen with hand-painted elements on paper
84 x 52 inches
framed:
88 x 56 x 2 inches
(223.5 x 142.2 x 5.1 cm)
unique
(Inv# MB 20.002)

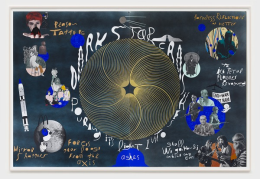
Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
The Trickster, 2021
acrylic and airbrush on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.007)

Matthew Brannon
Nonsense Incense, 2021
silkscreen, acrylic, enamel, and pencil on paper
24 x 19 inches
(61 x 48.3 cm)
framed:
26 3/4 x 21 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(67.9 x 55.2 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# MB 21.015)

Matthew Brannon
1969, 2021
acrylic on canvas
72 x 60 x 1 1/2 inches
(182.9 x 152.4 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# MB 21.006)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
Double Double Toil and Trouble, 2021
acrylic on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.006)

Matthew Brannon
Chapel Perilous, 2021
silkscreen and pencil on paper
30 1/4 x 22 1/2 inches
(76.8 x 57.2 cm)
framed:
33 x 25 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(83.8 x 64.1 x 3.8 cm)
unique
(Inv# MB 21.011)

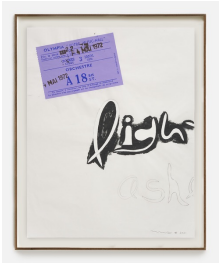


Matthew Brannon
Chapel Perilous, Dark Star, and The End of the Sixties, 2019 - 2021
silkscreen on paper with hand-painted elements
80 x 120 inches
(203.2 x 304.8 cm)
framed:
85 1/2 x 125 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches
(217.2 x 318.8 x 6.4 cm)
unique
(Inv# MB 21.005)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
Self Portrait 1, 2021
acrylic and airbrush on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.004)

Matthew Brannon
Concerning Nicaragua: On the Road with the Grateful Dead in the 1980s, 2021
silkscreen on paper with hand-painted elements
71 x 52 inches
(182.9 x 132.1 cm)
framed:
76 x 56 x 2 inches
(193 x 142.2 x 5.1 cm)
unique
(Inv# MB 21.003)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
The skeleton waves
Once had flesh cloaked over bones
Eternally lost, 2021
acrylic and airbrush on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.003)



Matthew Brannon
Doses, Doses, Doses, 2021
silkscreen, acrylic, enamel, and pencil on vellum
24 x 19 inches
(61 x 48.3 cm)
framed:
26 3/4 x 21 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(67.9 x 55.2 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# MB 21.013)

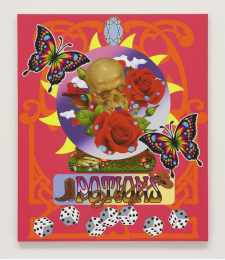
Matthew Brannon
Warm Beer, Melting Ice Cream, Nitrous Oxide, and European Checkpoints, 2019 - 2021
silkscreen on paper with hand-painted elements
67 x 52 inches
(170.2 x 132.1 cm)
framed:
70 1/4 x 55 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(178.4 x 140.3 x 3.8 cm)
unique
(Inv# MB 21.002)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
Scarecrow staring
In an empty field for years
Looking for a friend, 2021
acrylic on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.011)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
It Must Be the Moon, 2021
acrylic, airbrush, and gold leaf on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.002)

Matthew Brannon
Turn In, Tune Out, Distribute & Dilate,
2021
silkscreen on paper with hand-
painted elements
52 x 72 inches
(132.1 x 180.3 cm)
framed:
55 1/4 x 74 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(140.3 x 188.6 x 3.8 cm)
unique
(Inv# MB 21.004)

Matthew Brannon
San Francisco Owes/Owns/Sold Me,
2021
silkscreen, acrylic, enamel, and
marker on rice paper
31 x 23 1/2 inches
(78.7 x 59.7 cm)
framed:
33 3/4 x 26 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(85.7 x 66.7 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# MB 21.014)



Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
Laughing in the Dark, Peddling Potions, 2021
acrylic on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.005)

Elijah Funk & Alix Ross (Online Ceramics)
All of the Forests Gone, 2021
acrylic on canvas
57 1/2 x 48 x 1 1/2 inches
(146.1 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)
(Inv# OC 21.010)

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MATTHEW BRANNON

born 1971, Anchorage, AK
lives and works in New York, NY

EDUCATION

1999 MFA, Columbia University, New York, NY
1995 BA, University of California, Los Angeles, CA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
(* indicates a publication)

2021 *The Galaxy Song,* Matthew Brannon and Online Ceramics (Elijah Funk & Alix Ross), David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Cold Shoulders / Foreign Affairs / Seafood Dinners / Pregnant Décor / Power Vacuums / and The Last Gate at the End of a Long Terminal, Gió Marconi, Milan, Italy
Casey Kaplan, New York, NY

2018 *Concerning Vietnam,* Casey Kaplan, New York, NY

2017 *Concerning Vietnam*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

2016 *Vulture*, HiromiYoshii, Tokyo, Japan

2015 *Skirting the Issue*, Casey Kaplan, New York, NY

2013 *Leopard*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
**Midlife Crisis Intermission*, Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, East Hampton, New York, NY
**Department Store at Night (Five Impossible Films, I)*, curated by Alberto Salvadori, Marino Marini Museum, Florence, Italy

2012 *The Ventriloquist*, Office Baroque, Antwerp, Belgium

2011 *Gentleman's Relish*, Casey Kaplan, New York, NY
**A Question Answered with a Quote,* Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany

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2010 *The Inevitable and the Unnecessary*, Gió Marconi Gallery, Milan, Italy
Mouse Trap, Light Switch, Museum M, Lueven, Belgium
Reservations, Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Kraichtal, Germany
Wit's End, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

2009 *Nevertheless,* The Approach, London, England

2008 *The Question is a Compliment*, Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, NY
Grandmothers, Galleria Gio Marconi, Milan, Italy

2007 **Where Were We*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York, NY
**Try and Be Grateful*, AGYU, Art Gallery of York University/Toronto, Toronto, Canada

2006 *Cum Together,* Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, NY
Shoegazers & Graverobbers, Art 37 Basel: Statements, David Kordansky Gallery, Basel, Switzerland
Hyena, Jan Winkelmann / Berlin, Berlin, Germany

2005 *Meat Eating Plants*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Penetration, Jan Winkelmann / Berlin, Berlin, Germany

2004 *If Direction is a Look,* with Sarah Morris, Galería Javier López, Madrid, Spain
Exhausted Blood & Imitation Salt, John Connelly Presents, New York, NY

2003 *Tatum O'Neal's Birthday Party*, Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami, FL

2000 *Soft Rock*, Künsterhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS
(* indicates a publication)

2020 *Death Cult,* curated by Max Presneill, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance, CA

2018 *Fake News: Some Artistic Responses,* Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Winter Park, FL
The Lulennial II: A Low-Hanging Fruit, Lulu, Mexico City, Mexico
Becoming American, curated by Fionn Meade, San Juan National Historic Park, Friday Harbor, WA

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Picturing War, curated by Margaret Milford, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Winter Park, FL

2017 *Multiple Modernisms,* curated by Kimberli Gan, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
Mistaking the Moon for a Ball, curated by Jacob Proctor, Galerie Martin Janda, Vienna, Austria
Fleming Faloon, Office Baroque, Brussels, Belgium
True Faith, curated by Matthew Higgs, Jon Savage, and Johan Kugelberg, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, England

2015 *I Hope To God You're Not As Dumb As You Make Out*, Mary Mary, Glasgow, Scotland
Rio, curated by Louis-Philippe Van Eeckhoutte, Office Baroque, Brussels, Belgium
Certain Snakes, LAND (Los Angeles Nomadic Division), Los Angeles, CA
Yes We're Open, Giò Marconi, Milan, Italy

2014 *Never Look Back When Leaving*, Casey Kaplan, New York, NY

2013 *Trapping Lions in the Scottish Highlands*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO
Paper, Saatchi Gallery, London, England
Out of the Blue, curated by Alberto Salvadori, Cortesi Contemporary, Lugano, Switzerland
Antibody, Lisa Cooley, New York, NY
**Beg, Borrow and Steal*, Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA
**Set Pieces*, curated by Andrew Berardini and Lauren Mackler, Cardi Black Box, Milan, Italy
Notes on Neo-Camp, curated by Chris Sharp, Office Baroque Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium
Gió Marconi @ Gerhardsen Gerner, Gerhardsen Gerner, Berlin, Germany
**The Assistants*, curated by Fionn Meade, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

2012 *The Feverish Library*, organized in cooperation with Matthew Higgs, Petzel Gallery, New York, NY
No. 17, Casey Kaplan, New York, NY
**Brannon, Büttner, Kierulf, Kierulf, Kilpper*, Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen, Norway
Struggle(s), Maison Particulière, Brussels, Belgium

2011 *In the Name of the Artists – Contemporary American Art from the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art*, sponsored by IGUATEMI, São Paulo Biennial Pavilion, São Paulo, Brazil
After Hours: Murals on the Bowery, Art Production Fund and the New Museum, New York, NY
**Shape of Things to Come: New Sculpture*, Saatchi Gallery, London, England
**For Love Not Money*, 15th Tallinn Print Triennial, KUMU Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia
Mit Deiner Kunst; Texte Zur Kunst Editionen 1990-2010, Sammlung Haubrok Gallery, Berlin, Germany
FAX, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Predictable Feelings, Office Baroque Gallery, Antwerpen, Belgium

2010 **At Home/Not at Home: Works from the Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg*, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
Cabinet of Curiosities with Pablo Bronstein, Matthew Brannon, Anthea Hamilton, Wayne Koestenbaum, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, England
We Pictured You Reading This, Redux Contemporary Art Center, Charleston, SC
Interim in Three Rounds, Fredrik Petzel Gallery, New York, NY
Behind the Curtain, Gio Marconi Gallery, Milan, Italy
Owl Stretching Time, curated by Gyonata Bonvicini, Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin, Germany
Matthew Brannon, Mathew Cerletty, David Diao, Daniel Sinsell, Office Baroque, Antwerp, Belgium
The Space Between Reference and Regret, Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, NY
Permanent Transients, Country Club, Cincinnati, OH
Matthew Brannon, Katarina Burin, Charlie Harper: Permanent Transients Air-Conditioned, Country Club, Cincinnati, OH
Contemporary Magic: A Tarot Deck Art Project, curated by Stacy Engman, The Contemporary Art Department of The National Arts Club, New York, NY
Matthew Brannon, Katarina Burin, Charlie Harper: Permanent Transients Air-Conditioned, Country Club, Cincinnati, OH
An Unpardonable Sin, curated by Philippe Pirotte, Castillo/Corales, Paris, France

2009 **Beg, Borrow, and Steal*, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL
Learn to Read Art: A History of Printed Matter, curated by AA Bronson, PS.1, New York, NY; Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany
**Embrace*, Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
**Five*, Baibakova Art Projects, Moscow, Russia
No Shoes on the Carpet, Cirrus, Los Angeles, CA
**Poor. Tired. Tired. Horse.,* ICA, London, England
Matthew Brannon, Marcel Broodthaers, James Lee Byars, William E. Jones, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
**CODE SHARE: 5 continents, 10 biennales, 20 artists*, curated by Simon Rees, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania
Born in the morning, dead by night., curated by Tony Matelli, Leo Koenig, Inc., New York, NY
**Stuart Sherman: Nothing Up My Sleeve,* curated by Johnathan Berger, Participant Inc, New York, NY

2008 **50 Moons of Saturn*, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, T2 Torino Triennial, Turin, Italy
Featuring, Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris, France
Fair Market, curated by Haley Mellin, Rental Gallery, New York, NY
DISPATCH Portfolio Project #2, DISPATCH, New York, NY
Tapestry, Karyn Lovegrove Gallery at Hudson Salon, Los Angeles, CA
**Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Kunst im Hei, Captain Petzel, Berlin, Germany
**Uncertain States of America*, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, Gunnar B. Kvaran, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague, Czech Republic; Songzhuan Art Center, Beijing, China
**Acquisitions, Gifts, and Works from Various Exhibitions 1985-2008,* curated by Bob Nickas White Columns, New York, NY
One Morning I Woke Up Very Early, with Tony Conrad & Nathan Hylden, Office Baroque, Antwerp, Belgium

2007 *Multiplex: Directions in Art, 1970 to Now,* curated by Deborah Wye, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
**USA Today: New American Art from the Saatchi Gallery*, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia
Stuff: International Contemporary Art from the Collection of Burt Aaron, Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, MI
On The Marriage Broker Joke, Office Baroque Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium
**Uncertain States of America*, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, Gunnar B. Kvaran, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, The Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw,

Poland; Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland; Moscow Biennial, Moscow, Russia; Le Musee de Serignan, Serignan, France; Herning Art Museum, Denmark; Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France
ETATS, curated by Peter Coffin, Palais de Tokyo Museum, Paris, France
(the) Melvins @ (the) Mandrake, The Mandrake, Los Angeles, CA

2006 **USA Today: New American Art from The Saatchi Gallery*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, England
Bring the War Home, Q.E.D, Los Angeles, CA, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, NY
**Uncertain States of America*, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, Gunnar B. Kvaran, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Serpentine Gallery*, London, England; Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
6.6.06, curated by Jan Tumlir, Gayle and Ed Roski Fine Arts Gallery, USC, Los Angeles, CA
An Ongoing Low-Grade Mystery, curated by Bob Nickas, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, NY
Exquisite Corpse, curated by Bob Nickas, Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York, NY
Slow Burn, curated by Jonah Freeman, Galerie Edward Mitterrand, Geneva, Switzerland
Social Design, curated by Angelika Stepken, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany
Matthew Brannon, Wade Guyton, Patrick Hill, United Artists. Ltd., Marfa, TX
Social Design, curated by Angelika Stepken, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany
Matthew Brannon, Wade Guyton, Patrick Hill, United Artists Ltd., Marfa, TX

2005 **Uncertain States of America,* curated by Daniel Birnbaum, Gunnar B. Kvaran, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, Norway
Suspended Narration, curated by Maureen Mahoney, Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin, TX
Passion Beyond Reason, Wallstreet 1, a Miller/Rockenschaub Project, Berlin, Germany
Temporary Import, curated by Susanne Titz, Art Forum Berlin, Special Exhibitions, Berlin, Germany
Threshold, Max Wigram, London, England
New Tapestries, Sara Meltzer, New York, NY
**We Could Have Invited Everyone,* curated by Peter Coffin, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, NY

The Most Splendid Apocalypse, curated by Jason Murison, PPOW, New York, NY
Post No Bills, curated by Matthew Higgs, White Columns, New York, NY
There Is a City in My Mind, Southfirst, New York, NY
Wordplay, Julie Saul Gallery, New York, NY
**Lesser New York*, A Fia Backström Production, New York, NY
*Greater *New* York, MoMA PS1, Queens, NY
We Love Amerika, Jan Winkelmann/Berlin, Berlin, Germany
On the Beach, curated by Justin Lowe, Printed Matter, New York, NY

2004 *Halloween Horror Films*, Southfirst:art, New York, NY
**Besides, popularity is rather a lumpy concept, no?*, curated by Ralf Brog & Petra Rinck, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Germany
Summer Summary, curated by Roger White, temporary space, New York, NY
Noctambule, D'Amelio Terras at the Fondation Dosne-Bibliotheque Thiers, Paris, France
Curious Crystals of Unusual Purity, curated by Bob Nickas & Steve Lafreniere, MoMA PS1, New York, NY
Tapestry From An Asteroid, Golinko Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Hohe Berge, Tiefes Tal, curated by Markus Draper, Autocenter, Berlin, Germany
**Collection: How I Spent a Year*, curated by Bob Nickas, MoMA PS1, New York, NY
Lumpen Decadents, curated by Gean Moreno, Ingalls & Associates, Miami, FL
Cave Canem, John Connelly Presents, New York, NY

2003 **Kult 48 Klubhouse*, curated by Scott Hug, Deitch Projects, New York, NY
My people were fair and had cum in their hair (but now they're content to spray stars from your boughs), curated by Bob Nickas, Team Gallery, New York, NY
Inaugural Exhibition, Golinko Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
I'm Afraid of Everything, Blonde Revolution, New York, NY
**Escape from New York*, curated by Jason Murison, Summit Art Center, NJ
Corporate Profits vs. Labor Costs, D'Amelio Terras, New York, NY
Parking Lot, Ten in One Gallery, New York, NY
**The Melvins*, curated by Bob Nickas, Anton Kern Gallery, New York, NY
Late to Work Everyday, curated by Noah Sheldon, DuPreau Gallery, Chicago, IL
**Talking Pieces, Text and Image in Contemporary Art*, curated by Ute Riese,

Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany
Snowblind, with Wade Guyton & Mungo Thomson, John Connelly Presents, New York, NY
Snowblind, with Wade Guyton & Mungo Thomson, John Connelly Presents, New York, NY

2002 *Triple Theatre*, with Heidie Giannotti, Triple Candie, New York, NY
**Dark Spring*, curated by Nicolaus Schafhausen & Liam Gillick, Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Kraichtal, Germany

2001 **Dedalic Convention*, curated by Liam Gillick and Annette Kosak, MAK, Vienna, Austria

2000 *Luggage*, Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, Germany
@, curated by Jason Murison, PPOW Gallery, New York, NY

1999 **Made Especially for You*, curated by Jenelle Porter, Artists Space, New York, NY
**The Wight Biennial*, curated by Mungo Thomson, The New Wight Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
**MFA Thesis Exhibition*, curated by Thelma Golden, Columbia University, New York, NY

1998 *1+3=4x1*, collaboration with Liam Gillick, curated by Susanne Gaensheimer, Galerie fur Zeitgenossische Kunst, Liepzig, Germany
Oh My God, I live on the thirteenth floor in Holland, doesn't exist in the United States, or no?, collaboration with George Rush, H. Cleyndertweg 13 space, Amsterdam, Netherlands
exhibition|Exhibition 1998, Miller Theater Lobby, Columbia University, New York, NY

1996 *Paint as Purpose*, curated by Roger Ray and Jesse H. Rivard, Galerie Purple Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
New Memory, curated by Slater Bradley, Spanish Kitchen Studios, Los Angeles, CA

1995 *The 1995 Banale*, curated by Michelle Alpern, RE:Solution Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

PUBLICATIONS

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

2019 *Concerning Vietnam*, designed by Mỹ Linh Triệu Nguyen, STUDIO LHOOQ, with text by Veronica Roberts and Mark Atwood Lawrence, New York and Los Angeles: Gregory R. Miller & Co., Casey Kaplan, and David Kordansky Gallery, 2019

2013 *Mr. Brett Easton Ellis / Mr. Matthew Brannon*, East Hampton: Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, Inc., 2013
In Italy It's Called "Department Store At Night" (Five Impossible Films, I). The Rest Of The World Knows It As "Postcards & Death Certificates", Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013

2011 Tumlir, Jan, *Matthew Brannon: Hyenas Are…*, Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2011

2010 "If I Said it, I Don't Remember," *Kaleidoscope*, April/May 2010, pp. 98-103
"Guy De Cointet," *Mousse*, Issue 22, February/March 2010, pp. 72-77

2009 "Matthew Brannon," *Dazed and Confused*, Volume 72, Issue 78. p. 208
"Liam Gillick: Interview by Matthew Brannon," *Interview,* June/July, pp. 74-77
"Like It, or Not," *Artforum*, February 2009, pp. 57-58
"Thoughts in Simon Dybbroe Moeller's about fashion and history, about waiting," *Kunstverein Hannover*, catalogue essay, pp. 70-76
"Matthew Brannon," I Like Your Work: Art and Etiquette, *Paper Monument*, p. 53, 2009
"Where Were We: Art Basel 2009," *V Magazine*, May 2009

2008 "Back to Basel," *Vmagazine.com*, December 2, 2008
Frieze, artist project & subscription card, October 2008, p. 215

2007 "Hyena," numbered edition of 100, book
"Use Value," *Heather Rowe: Shards*, D'amelio Terras, p. 54-55, ill., insert
"Artist Projects: CMYK," curated by Walead Beshty, *Cabinet*, Issue 27, Fall 2007, pp. 36-37 ill., insert
"Out-of-Body Experience, The Artist and Poet Matthew Brannon Invests Fall's Silhouettes With An Inner Life," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 26, 2007, pp. 276-279
"Who Is Guy de Cointet?" *Artforum*, Summer 2007, p. 412

2006 *North Drive Press*, interview & multiple, Issue 3, New York, NY
LAB Magazine, insert, Issue 1, Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, France

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2005 *Parkett*, insert, Issue 73, New York, NY/Zurich, Switzerland
SITE, insert, Issue 8, Düsseldorf, Germany
Mixburgh, cassette, curated by Tyson Reeder, *General Store at SPACE*, Pittsburgh, PA
On The Beach, wallpaper, curated by Justin Lowe*, Printed Matter*, New York, NY

2003 Poster Project in 3 Locations, curated by Ralf Brog & Petra Rinck
SITE Ausstellungsraum, Düsseldorf, *Art Frankfurt*, Frankfurt & *Reg Vardy Gallery*, London, England
K48, Religion & Cult Issue, K48 Magazine, New York, NY.
Charley Magazine, Ed. Maurizio Cattelan, Bettina Funcke, Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick
2002 *SITE*, insert, Issue 8, Düsseldorf, Germany
Open City, Insert, Ed. Mungo Thomson, Issue 16, New York, NY

2001 *The UKS Biennial*, book jacket, collaboration with Heidie Giannotti, Norway

CURATORIAL PROJECTS

2012 *Drawing a Blank (On Forgetting, Refusal, Censure, and Impotence)*, co-curated with Jan Tumlir, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
THE UNENDING HORRIBLE: Film Posters from the Collection of Matthew Brannon, Galveston Artist Residency, Galveston, TX

2008 *Not So Subtle Subtitle*, Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York, NY

2005 *Good Titles from Bad Books*, [Carol Bove, Peter Coffin, Liam Gillick, David Noonan, Michael Phelan, Heather Rowe, Ed Ruscha, Noah Sheldon, Haim Steinbach], Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami, FL

2000 *Luggage*, [Matthew Brannon, Jason Dodge, Heidie Gionatti, Karston Konrad, George Rush], Max Hetzler Gallery, Berlin, Germany

1999 *Fuck Yourself*, Theater Space, Columbia University, New York, NY

1998 *exhibition/EXHIBITION 1998*, Theater Space, Columbia University, New York, NY
This Description, Theater Space, Columbia University, New York, NY

1997 *Thug Life, or How I Learned to Draw*, Watson Gallery, Columbia University, New York, NY

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2019 Moody Research Grant, The LBJ Foundation, Austin, TX

2016 Artists for Frescobaldi Award, Milan, Italy

2009 Juilliard Visual Arts Competition, New York, NY

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2011 "Condensation," *Art Journal*, Volume 70, Number 4, Winter 2011, pp. 58-59 (insert)
"Masturbating a Lot," Portikus, Frankfurt, silkscreen ed. 50
"Oral Examination," Museum Leuven, Leuven, silkscreen ed. 125

2010 **Between the Lines*, Volume 2, New York: RxArt, 2010
"Under the Mattress," Paper Monument, 4 page insert
T-shirt Design, ADAM + Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

2009 Café.Bar.Contemporary, Nottingham Contemporary, installation
"Between the Lines, Volume II," children's benefit coloring book pages, RxArt
"Now You Know," ICA, London, September, silkscreen ed. 100
Fondazione Sandretto Re, silkscreen ed. 200
"You Tell Me," Verdure, Numéro 2, Nice, insert
"Under the Mattress," Paper Monument, 4 page insert
VISIONAIRE, Issue 57
"And you remember thinking…" t-shirt design for Whitney Museum by ADAM

2006 "Performance Anxiety," Printed Matter, New York, silkscreen ed. 200

2005 Matthew Brannon, Wade Guyton, Patrick Hill, United Artists Ltd., Poster
Uncertain States of America / Adverts & Poster for Astrup Fearnley Museet for Kunst, Oslo, Norway
Carol Bove, Adam McEwen, Seth Price / Poster for United Artists Ltd.

New Art Dealers Alliance / NADA Identity & Fair Catalogue for New Art Dealers Alliance
Law Sex & Christian Society / Richard Phillips, Poster for Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, NY
Almost Vegetarian / Noah Sheldon, Poster for Southfirst:art, New York, NY

2004 Sam Gordon, Poster, for Feature Inc. New York, NY
Lost Weekend / Sarah Morris, Poster, for Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, NY
The Armory Show, All Printed Material for The Armory Show Owners & MoMA, New York, NY
IV / Assume Vivid Astro Focus, Poster, for Deitch Projects, New York, NY

2003 So Happy I Could Die / Pia Dehne, Catalog for Laura Mars Group & Art Berlin, Berlin, Germany
Clear Structures for a New Generation / David Altmejdt, Poster for Ten in One Gallery, New York, NY
Lisa Ruyter, Poster for Slater Bradley and Ardnt & Partner Galerie, Berlin, Germany

2002 Everybody Now, Poster and Catalog, for Katy Siegel and Hunter College, New York, NY
America / Richard Phillips, Poster, for Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, NY

2001 Medium, Poster, for Heidie Giannotti for Columbia University
Wall Labels & didactics, Commissioned by Stefano Basilico, New School University, New York, NY

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2020 Castaneda, Vera, “6 artists display work online for Orange Coast College’s ‘Almost Presidential’ exhibit,” *LATimes.com*, October 8, 2020

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Tumlir, Jan, "Desktop Picture Plane," *Artforum*, January 2019, pp. 160-165

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2016 Kinsella, Eileen, "See the 10 Most Exciting Artists in the United States Today," *Artnet.com*, Art World, December 14, 2016
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2005 AGYU Art Gallery of York University, (with Liam Gillick), Toronto, Canada

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2010 University for Southern California, Los Angeles
Conservation with Haley Mellon, MoMA, New York

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

2009 University of California, Irvine
University of California, Riverside
Yale School of the Arts, New Haven
New York University, New York
School of Visual Arts, New York
Nostalgia: What's the Role of the Past in Fashioning the Future? Frieze Talks, October 17

2008 Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis
Logan Lectures: Matthew Brannon, Denver Art Museum, Denver
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

2007 Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York
New York University, New York

2006 Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe

2005 Art Gallery of York University, Toronto

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Van Eeckhoutte, Louis-Philippe, “Armchair Traveler: From Milan to New York and Back Again,” *InterviewMagazine.com*, April 14, 2021

Armchair Traveler: From Milan to New York and Back Again

By Louis-Philippe Van Eeckhoutte | April 14, 2021

The art world too global for you? Each month, Interview highlights in pictures the shows you’d want to see—if you could jet-set from one international hub to the next. Bon voyage!

Matthew Brannon, “Paper Moon,” 2021, Silkscreen with hand painted elements on paper, 142 x 125.5 x 5 cm framed (detail), Photo: Kevin Frances, Courtesy: the artist; Gió Marconi, Milan.

Matthew Brannon: Cold Shoulders / Foreign Affairs / Seafood Dinners / Pregnant Décor / Power Vacuums / and The Last Gate at the End of a Long Terminal

Gio Marconi, Milan

April 8 – June 3, 2021

Matthew Brannon, best known for his expansive approach to printmaking, is presenting a series of vibrantly colored plane interiors. The unique silkscreen works are all forms of still lives, full of varied objects and carefully researched details. Brannon’s skill to translate artworks into rich stories is apparent throughout the exhibition, which reminds us of the bygone pleasures of travel and movement.

Tumlir, Jan, “Desktop Picture Plane,” *Artforum*, January 2019, pp. 160-165

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.

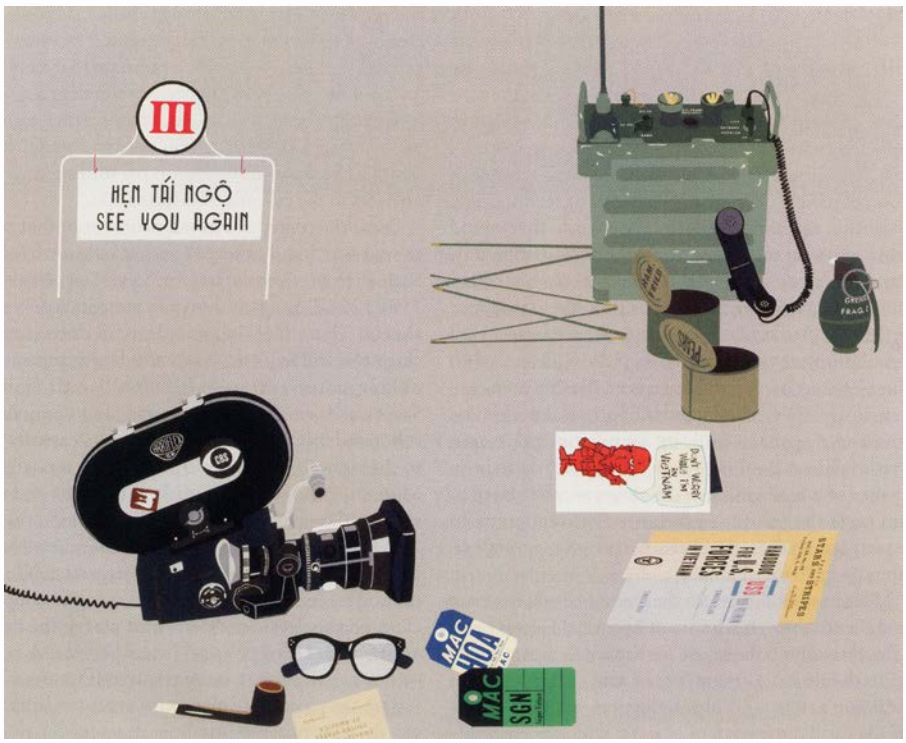
This page: **Matthew Brannon, *Bell UH-1D Iroquois, Cockpit (II)*, 2018,** silk screen, acrylic, enamel, and ink on paper, 67 × 103".

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.



Tumlir, Jan, “Desktop Picture Plane,” *Artforum*, January 2019, pp. 160-165

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.)

Vail, H.W., “What to See at the 2018 Frieze Art Fair in N.Y.C.,” *VanityFair.com*, May 3, 2018

VANITY FAIR

What to See at the 2018 Frieze Art Fair in N.Y.C.

From the booths favored by A-list stars to the most Instagrammable art, a guide to the annual contemporary-art fair.

By H.W. Vail | May 3, 2018

Photograph by Mark Blower/Courtesy of Frieze.

Spring has arrived in New York just in time for the celebrated Frieze art fair, which since 2014 has brought out a fresh wave of contemporary art’s bright young things and the august collectors clamoring to own the next Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst. The curiosities aren’t just for the walls, however— Frieze is known for pageantry that can eclipse this weekend’s Kentucky Derby, where even attendees who got there via public transportation dress the part of the discerning collector. For those who want to know which way to turn once they’ve crossed the bridge to Randall’s Island, a guide to this year’s Frieze Art Fair, in N.Y.C.

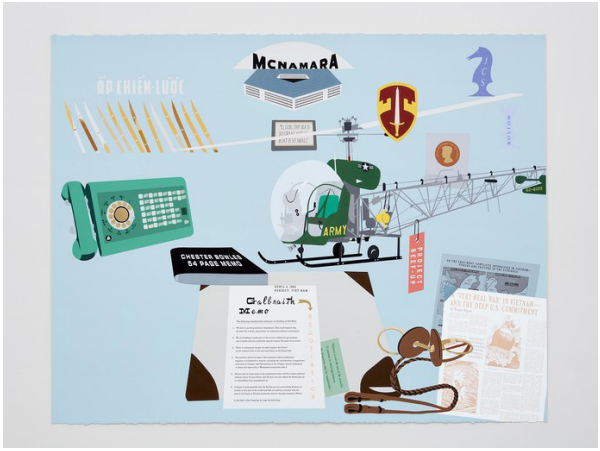
Photograph by Tom Barratt/Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Pace Gallery, Stand B2

The Pace Gallery has devoted the entirety of its prestigious gallery space, located right by the north entrance, to work by David Hockney. For Hockney purists still reeling from the Met’s retrospective that opened late last year, the works at Frieze are a distinct departure, nearly all of them having been made with the Brushes app for iPhone and iPad. Several of them, especially the flower “paintings” are childishly charming, while others may be just childish. More interesting are the computer-manipulated photos of Hockney at work in his studio—panoramic shots woven together depicting the artist toiling away at works now visible at Pace’s Chelsea location. Whether you’re in it for Hockney’s iPad doodles or an inside look at his studio, definitely stop by Pace.

Photograph by Lee Thompson/Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

David Kordansky Gallery, B15 and FYI7
Los Angeles’s David Kordansky Gallery is showcasing a fantastic solo show of Norwegian artist Torbjørn Rødland, whose photographic series is a must see. The images are each beautiful, vaguely domestic scenes that are, for some reason, psychologically discomfiting. Think Vermeer by way of Darren Aronofsky. Rødland has made waves in the art scene of late with a show at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, that opened in early April, and has an exhibition coming to the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, Backlit Rainbows, on June 2, 2018. Plus, when I stopped by during the V.I.P. preview on Wednesday, Scarlett Johansson was in deep conversation with a gallerist. If it’s good enough for ScarJo’s walls, it may just be good enough for yours.



Courtesy of Casey Kaplan Gallery.

Casey Kaplan, C1
For those who pre-ordered tickets to see Chappaquiddick and associate Camelot with the Kennedys, and not King Arthur, make a beeline to the Casey Kaplan booth for Matthew Brannon’s solo show called Concerning Vietnam. Brannon’s five silkscreens are devoted to the iconography of the Kennedy period of the Vietnam War. Rotary-dial phones, Ray-Bans, ashtrays, and snippets of Kennedy’s speeches all figure prominently against blue backgrounds for a Mad Men-meets-Magritte experience. Brannon’s works are a must-purchase for any oak-paneled drawing room in Hyannis Port.

Galerie Peter Kilchmann, B19
Mera and Don Rubell are perhaps the art world’s soundest and most sensitive barometer. The powerhouse-collector duo have been a fixture on the art-fair circuit for decades—and following them around Frieze is a sure way to understand which way the market winds are blowing. The Kilchmann offering, set up near the talks space, and many miles from its Zurich-based gallery, is where Mera Rubell took a brief break during the V.I.P. preview on Wednesday. “We never miss this gallery,” Rubell said. Indeed, the works displayed at Kilchmann’s booth are diverse and not to be missed. Of note was Armin Boehm’s Building Bridges, an oil and fabric painting for haters of Silicon Valley and lovers of Picasso. Try to pick out Boehm’s warped and slightly frightening depictions of Mark Zuckerberg and Cheryl Sandberg.

Photograph by Mark Blower/Courtesy of Frieze.

Marilyn Minter’s Trump Plaque, C21
Marilyn Minter has never shied away from politics in her work—and this year at Frieze she tackles it head-on. Minter’s Trump Plaque is, as the name implies, a parody of a memorial plaque that features the president’s grinning mug above the transcription of his infamous Access Hollywood tape. Minter herself may be there, as she was when I stopped by, handing out Downtown for Democracy fund-raising flyers.

David Zwirner Gallery, D29 and FYI4
David Zwirner Gallery, an undisputed power player in the contemporary-art scene, brings Josh Smith’s mesmerizing and moribund series to the fair: each painting depicts a Grim Reaper–like figure that clashes with psychedelic whorls of color. Alternately, bad-boy Jordan Wolfson’s multimedia works are a meditation on the decadence of the computer age.

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, C20
Photography buffs should make a point to pass by the Austrian gallery’s booth, where breathtaking photos by Robert Mapplethorpe and Irving Penn will be quick to sell. The Mapplethorpe’s are a steal for those with change to spare—the cheapest of the three-part series on display features a stunning black-and-white male nude selling for a cool $24,000. Before moving on, take a look at the George Baselitz, which is actually a repainting of an earlier work depicting two heroes returning from war. Former head of Dior, current head of Calvin Klein, and renowned art collector Raf Simons was spotted perusing the options at Ropac Wednesday—so take a gander this weekend and you may find yourself predicting runway trends by the time Fashion Week rolls around.

Photograph by Mark Blower/Courtesy of Frieze.

Gagosian, D14 and FYI6
For those in need of a sufficiently envy-inducing Instagram story, be sure to stop by the Murakami show at Gagosian’s northern-most booth (FYI6). Millennial pink abounds both on the walls and in the larger-than-life anime-inspired figures that dominate the booth. It is a Dragon Ball Z fever dream from the Japanese artist, who has been making waves since the early aughts, and the paintings and sculptures are worth a look, even if you don’t have a space for them in your East Village walk-up.

frieze

Frieze New York Preview: Matthew Brannon

Ahead of their debut dispay at Frieze New York next week, the artist discusses his new meticulously constructed silkscreens, exploring the imagery of Vietnam War

Matthew Brannon, frieze New York, Preview video

Matthew Brannon shows a new series of ephemera-sourced paintings, chronicling the political and cultural narratives of a complex history, with Casey Kaplan in the main section of Frieze New York 2018. Brannon’s graphic style lends itself to a visual deconstruction of decisions made and fallouts endured between the years of 1954 and 1973. With traditional silkscreen printing techniques as well as hand-painting, the artist layers hundreds of screens in an intricate network of overlapping and boldly colored objects. Image and language intersect in evocations of dual meanings and underlying narrative.

Frieze New York 2018 takes place May 4—6, with Preview Days on May 2 and 3. Tickets are available here.

Halperin, Julia, “Matthew Brannon on His 10-Year Quest to Understand the Vietnam War Through Art,” *Artnet.com*, On View, September 25, 2017

artnet

On View

Matthew Brannon on His 10-Year Quest to Understand the Vietnam War Through Art

His latest exhibition is one small part of an epic research project.

Julia Halperin, September 25, 2017

Ahead of the opening of his latest exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, Matthew Brannon sent his dealer what he calls a “cheat sheet” for each work in the show. These are not simple summaries. A sample cheat sheet includes a five-paragraph introduction, copious archival images, and recommendations to read no fewer than four books.

The length of this document—and the fact that reading it feels less like cheating and more like really thoroughly doing your homework—is indicative of how deeply Brannon has delved into his latest subject.

Since 2015, the New York-based artist has been exhaustively researching the Vietnam War. His show at David Kordansky, “Concerning Vietnam,” is the most comprehensive display of work from the project to date. Some of the silkscreen prints—the largest and most complicated he has ever made—span two sheets of paper and require hundreds of screens.

“Anyone who starts research on Vietnam oscillates between feeling overwhelmed and absorbed,” Brannon says. He now sees echoes of what happened in Vietnam everywhere. “I used to feel that when I watched a movie or TV show, there would be a 90 percent chance you’d see infidelity, substance abuse, or cancer. Now that I’ve been studying the Vietnam War for so long, I find it comes up constantly.”

Matthew Brannon’s *Concerning Vietnam: Air Force One, November 1963* (2017). Photography: Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

He plans to continue his research for another eight years. Mousse will publish his first book on the subject next spring. A documentary will eventually follow.

For this edition of “Origin Story,” which explores the backstory behind an individual work of art, we spoke to Brannon about one of the most ambitious prints in the show, *Concerning Vietnam: Air Force One, November 1963* (2017).

The work imagines what Air Force One would have looked like from John F. Kennedy’s perspective during the final month of his life, when he made the decision to greenlight

a coup that would result in the death of South Vietnam’s president. JFK himself would die three weeks later.

President John F. Kennedy flies over Passamaquoddy Bay in Maine, October 19, 1963. Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

How did you first become interested in Vietnam?

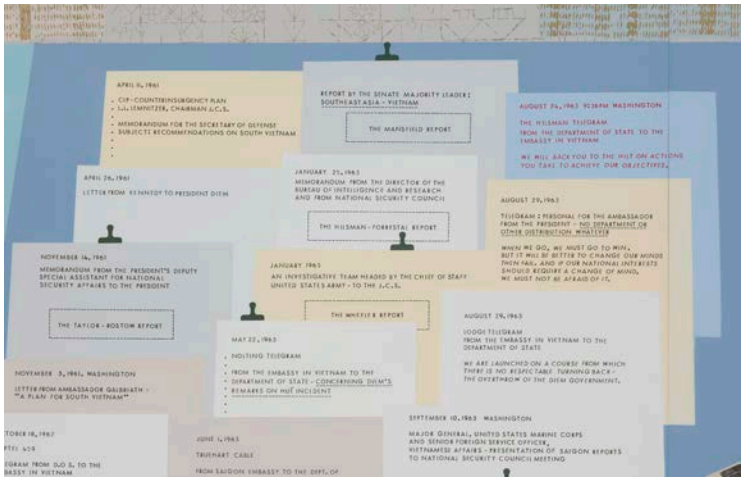
I was born in 1971, during the Nixon years, just as he was switching from a strategy to win the war in Vietnam to a strategy to exit. As a young person, nobody I knew spoke about it, including friends whose parents had been in the war. I lived in nine states before I graduated high school, and the America I grew up in is really born from this time period. But it doesn’t reflect well on who we are as a country, so it was a topic that people tended to avoid.

So the research began more as a hobby. Why did you decide it would make a fruitful artistic subject?

I did around two or three years’ worth of reading before I started the series. When it comes to Vietnam War studies, which also involves Cambodia and Laos, it takes—or at least, it took me—about a year to get the basic scaffolding down. It’s so confusing, and it went on for so long. I used to make these maps: “10 Things You Have to Understand in Order to Understand How It All Started.” When I first started the research, I would tell people it may lead me outside the art world. Unfortunately, I can’t help but be an artist. In a way, the artwork is less about showing people what I know than it is about organizing the information in my own head.

How did you develop this particular tableau aboard Air Force One?

Over the past couple years, I came up with this idea of trying to put myself, or the viewer, in the perspective of the decision-maker. In this case, we aren’t in the Oval Office, but in Air Force One. John F. Kennedy was the first to use the Air Force One SAM 26000, the first plane ever designed and customized for a US president. He really saw himself as a traveling president. Jackie [Kennedy] worked with a designer to develop the interior and the color palette that you see. In a pre-digital age, I love imagining the job that never stops, even when you are flying across the sky.



Matthew Brannon’s *Concerning Vietnam: Air Force One, November 1963* (2017), detail. Photography: Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Why make the papers the focal point?

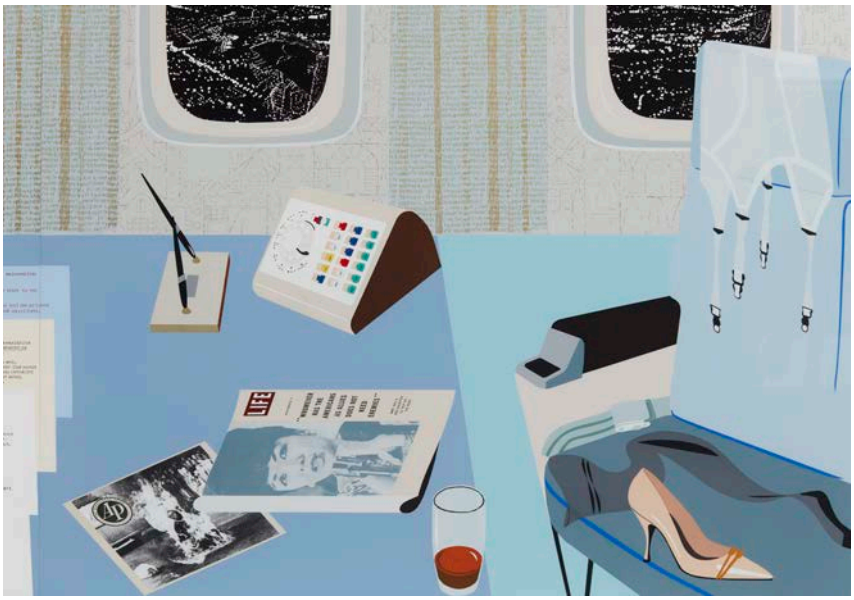
The overall goal with this print was to convey both the US’s complex involvement with South Vietnam and offer a taste of how decisions were made. Each of the documents, from 1961 to 1963, is real and spread out in chronological order, although the font and colors are my

own. I put the key document in that purplish color—the one where the US let the people planning the coup know that we wouldn't get in the way of their plan to assassinate the South Vietnamese President, Ngo Dinh Diem.

I wanted to show how, as president, there is this tidal wave of information that's coming at you constantly. One of the biggest misconceptions about Vietnam is that people didn't think it through and weren't well informed. Actually, it was almost the opposite. No war has been more agonized over than this one.

Are you trying to create a faithful representation of how Air Force One looked at the time? If so, how do you do that?

First, I do as much research as I can, and then I make decisions that play off that accuracy and make changes for the compositional benefit of the print. All the prints refer to a specific month, so I tried to find photos of JFK on the plane at that moment. I might spend an entire day trying to find original images of the right phone. In this case, I drew on photos of Air Force One published in LIFE magazine. But there's no visual index—you won't find a real photo from this vantage point. It's patched together from multiple sources.



Matthew Brannon's *Concerning Vietnam: Air Force One, November 1963* (2017), detail. Photography: Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Can you point out some of the historical Easter eggs in the print?

The hearing aid on the left-hand chair in the corner is a reference to William Averell Harriman, the former ambassador to Moscow who was among those pushing the hardest to assassinate Ngo Dinh Diem. At this point, he was a bit older and was notorious for turning his hearing aid on and off whenever he wanted. The globe is a motif from the real Air Force One. I think it's interesting that it has the US at the very center of the globe.

What about the dress and heels on the right chair?

It's kind of a cheap shot, but you won't read a biography of JFK where his affairs don't come up. It's interesting to read now that the press would never report on them even though they were constant and not very hidden. It doesn't have anything to do with Vietnam, but in some way it shows you that the decision-maker is still very human.

Diehl, Travis, “Matthew Brannon,” *Artforum.com*, Critics’ Picks, September 18, 2017

ARTFORUM

Los Angeles

Matthew Brannon

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY
5130 West Edgewood Place
September 9–October 21

Americans born in 1971, such as Matthew Brannon, have a range of astrological signs, but share a political one: Richard Nixon. Thus the artist has given himself license to base a body of work on that retrograde subject, the Vietnam War. The screen prints in the ongoing series “*Concerning Vietnam*” imagine symbolic centers of command and control, from the Oval Office set up for a presser (*Concerning Cambodia: Oval Office, April 1970*, 2017) to a Huey cockpit littered with pilots’ trinkets (*Concerning Vietnam: Bell UH-1D Iroquois, Cockpit*, 2016–17). Comprising dozens of intricate layers, at the scale of classical history painting, each is a full-bleed tour de force. *Concerning Vietnam: Air Force One, November 1963*, 2017, depicts the plane’s interior sometime during John F. Kennedy’s last days. Spread across swaths of dust blue and army gold are articles of ladies’ clothing; on the table, a cascade of vintage memos recounts the runaway war, and a half-tone rendering of a self-immolating monk pops into sudden focus.

Matthew Brannon, *Concerning Vietnam: Bell AH-1S Cobra, Pilot’s Seat,* 2016–2017, silk-screen with hand painting on paper, 66 1/2 x 52”.

As with Brannon’s previous works, his loose, graphic statements seem charged with narrative, like the polished outline of a fantasy studded with uncanny facts. Here, the human scale and first-person perspective are enough to lend the impression of control to those searching for meaning in their own horrorscope. *Concerning Vietnam: Bell AH-1S Cobra, Pilot’s Seat*, 2016–17, sets the viewer at the gauges and switches. FIRE 1 PULL, FIRE 2 PULL; screen 29, ink 50; the colors would flake apart like meat from hot bone.

— Travis Diehl

Martin, Clive, “Vietnam War: A different view,” *CNN.com*, August 9, 2017

Vietnam War: A different view

By Clive Martin
Wed August 9, 2017

Something about the Vietnam War has always captured the imagination of artists. Arguably, other than World War II, no conflict has been subject to as many interpretations, examinations or adaptations as America’s controversial intervention into South East Asian geopolitics. The key texts, such as Francis Ford Coppola’s “Apocalypse Now,” Michael Cimino’s “The Deer Hunter,” Paul Hardcastle’s “19” and Credence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son,” depict the war as vivid, violent, surreal and futile. They often recreate the drug-fueled experiences of American soldiers and the unspeakable things they saw in that strange war. But with the benefit of time and distance, younger artists are channeling their childhood perceptions of the war into bold new work.

Concerning Vietnam: Presidential Palace, February 1967, 2017, silkscreen with hand-painted elements, 51 1/2 x 62 inches (130.8 x 157.5 cm), framed: 55 1/2 x 68 5/8 x 1 1/2 inches (141 x 174.3 x 3.8 cm), unique

Why Vietnam?

Hot on the heels of Ben Tunbull’s “No Guts No Glory’ at Saatchi Gallery comes a new exhibition from New York artist Matthew Brannon. “Concerning Vietnam” -- which opens in September at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles -- looks at the war from a very different perspective, moving away from the frontline towards places of detachment: the offices of the US Presidents who made the orders and the cockpits of helicopter pilots. “Why Vietnam?” Brannon pondered on the phone from his studio in New York. “It’s such a simple question, but so large. It’s really the question that still plagues America and has ripped apart a few presidencies. My own personal interest in Vietnam has always been there but, for a long time, I was hesitant to investigate it,” he explained. “I think that says something about my generation. I was born in the Nixon years, it was the last thing anyone wanted to talk about.” Brannon’s interpretations of the war don’t conform to the usual tropes of Vietnam-inspired films and books. There are no decorated helmets or napalm fires here -- his visions come in the form of clean, cartoonish prints that could almost be mistaken for tasteful birthday cards if it wasn’t for the subject matter.

Concerning Vietnam: Presidential Palace, February 1967, 2017, silkscreen with hand-painted elements, 51 1/2 x 62 inches (130.8 x 157.5 cm), framed: 55 1/2 x 68 5/8 x 1 1/2 inches (141 x 174.3 x 3.8 cm), unique

For Brannon, his unusual approach to Vietnam adds a certain depth: “I’m very interested in a first read and a second read,” he explained. “I want the second read to be the more complicated one ... but I want someone to like it before they understand it. Even with this project, on the most difficult of subject matters, I’ve tried to make it so that as a viewer you’re still drawn to it. There’s no blood, no burned out buildings, there is something in not beginning from a place of upset that allows for a longer, slower read. I think part of the American consciousness is that we want to know what side everyone is on, we want shorter answers, and I’m interested in complexity.” For Brannon this project isn’t so much an anti-war statement, but a rumination, not just on Vietnam but the American predisposition towards war, which he believes is still there today. “Often when artists make art about war it’s usually very clear: war is bad. What I’m trying to say is that this is not protest art. I see myself acting as more of a historian or a biographer, I’m taking one war and trying to understand it, and I’m allowing the viewer to make whatever bridges they can to our contemporary situation.”

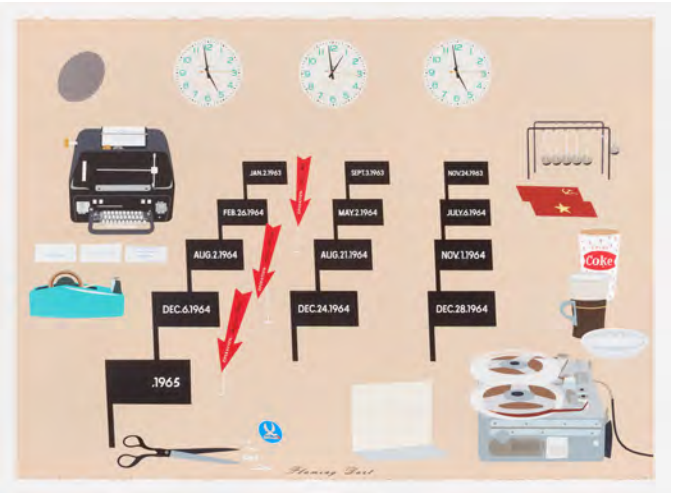
Concerning Vietnam: Bell UH-1D Iroquois, Cockpit, 2016-2017, silkscreen with hand-painted elements, 67 x 103 inches (170.2 x 261.6 cm), framed: 72 x 108 x 2 inches (182.9 x 274.3 x 5.1 cm), unique

A borderline obsession

Looking at the works, full of recreated documents and artifacts from the time, it’s clear that this is an extremely thorough process, a borderline obsession perhaps. “Research is the horizon of the work,” he confirmed. “I pick a moment in time and then I read and read, swimming around it, coming closer and closer. With my books, half of it is going to be bibliography and footnotes. I usually end up with a pile of notes and it gets closer to being visual art at that point. I’ve read tens and thousands of pages. There are times when I’ve become overwhelmed by it.” A major theme within these works seems to be the disconnect between the banality of everyday -- the paper envelopes and coffee dispensers on presidents’ desks -- and the terrible acts that these innocuous items belie. “I think that’s always been there in everything I’ve done. I like to be able to show a bottle of baby shampoo and show there’s something disturbing in it. In this case there’s a tension between something that’s innocent and something that’s very much not, there’s a motion and a repulsion that’s constantly in motion. One of the most potent things about visual art is that it can hover in a space like this. One that’s very different to a film or a book.”

Clearly Brannon’s take on Vietnam is forged in his approach, which in turn offers us a different perspective and, just maybe, a higher level of understanding when it comes to this great American disaster story.

“Concerning Vietnam” by Matthew Brannon is on at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, from Sept. 9 to Oct. 21, 2017.



Concerning Vietnam: Situation Room - February, 1965, 2016, silkscreen with hand-painted elements, 42 x 58 inches (106.7 x 147.3 cm), framed: 46 1/4 x 62 1/4 x 1 3/4 inches (117.5 x 158.1 x 4.4 cm), unique

Concerning Vietnam: Air Force One, August 1963, 2016, silkscreen with hand-painted elements 40 1/4 x 58 inches (102.2 x 147.3 cm), framed: 46 5/16 x 62 5/16 x 1 3/4 inches (117.6 x 158.3 x 4.4 cm) unique

Pendle, George, “Matthew Brannon Goes to War,” *frieze*, November/December 2016, pp. 116-119

frieze

Matthew Brannon Goes to War

Pendle, George, “Matthew Brannon Goes to War,” *frieze*, November/December 2016, pp. 116-119

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

Pendle, George, “Matthew Brannon Goes to War,” *frieze*, November/December 2016, pp. 116-119

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Pendle, George, “Matthew Brannon Goes to War,” *frieze*, November/December 2016, pp. 116-119

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 jibing 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.

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

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

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

2

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.*

Kinsella, Eileen, “See the 10 Most Exciting Artists in the United States Today,” *Artnet.com*, Art World, December 14, 2016

artnet news

See the 10 Most Exciting Artists in the United States Today

Here’s what to look out for in 2017.

Installation view, *‘Rashid Johnson, Fly Away’* Hauser & Wirth New York, 18th Street , Photo: Martin Parsekain © the artist Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

It’s that time of the year when we pause to take stock of the artists that caught our eye in 2016, while also looking ahead at the packed roster of exciting museum and gallery exhibitions in the months to come across the United States. There is no shortage of dynamic artists to pay attention to right now, and that’s a great thing, given the somber mood after a bruising, unprecedented presidential election.

With this in mind, artnet News brings you our picks for some of the most vibrant, exciting artists at work from coast to coast.

Kinsella, Eileen, “See the 10 Most Exciting Artists in the United States Today,” *Artnet.com*, Art World, December 14, 2016

1. Jordan Wolfson (b. New York. Lives and works in New York.)

The artist keeps dreaming up clever ways to simultaneously terrorize and transfix audiences. Two years ago it was an animatronic Female Figure in a white baby doll dress with a grotesque mask, that stared viewers in the face (the Broad Museum in Los Angeles acquired one of an edition of three). This past spring, Wolfson outdid himself when David Zwirner gallery installed Colored Sculpture, a large dangling puppet with animatronic eyes, that was a cross between Howdy Doody and Huck Finn, with chained limbs that were violently jerked around the gallery, crashing into the floor over and over again. At times, the iconic 1960s song “When a Man Loves a Woman,” played at ear-splitting volume, broke through the din.

The piece managed to be funny, poignant and heartbreaking all at once. Colored Sculpture went on view late last month at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (through January 26) as the first of a two-part solo show there titled “MANIC/LOVE” and “TRUTH/LOVE,” respectively. The latter, which is planned for Feb 18–April 23, 2017, will feature Female Figure, along with a new video installation, Riverboat Song (2016).

Look out for more of Wolfson’s work in the next edition of the Whitney Biennial.

Jordan Wolfson, *Colored sculpture (2016)* Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ and David Zwirner.

Titus Kaphar, *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* (2014) Image: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

2. Titus Kaphar (b. Kalamazoo, MI. Lives and works in New York and Connecticut.)

Audiences can’t seem to get enough of Titus Kaphar’s masterful paintings that appropriate style and imagery across the canon, while addressing racism head on.

The artist debuted at New York’s Shainman Gallery in 2015 with a splash—a two-part solo show “Asphalt and Chalk” and “Drawing The Blinds” that capped a string of successes. Time magazine commissioned him to create a painting addressing the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Titled, Yet Another Fight for Remembrance (2014), the piece depicted black men with their arms raised in the “hands up, don’t shoot” pose that has been ubiquitous at demonstrations against police violence.

His next much-anticipated solo show at Jack Shainman gallery, “Shifting Skies,” opens December 16, 2016 and runs through January 28, 2017.

3. Daniel Arsham (b. Cleveland, OH. Lives and works in New York.)

Daniel Arsham’s “Circa 2345” at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin on the Upper East Side—his first New York solo show—was a certified Instagram and selfie-friendly success.It also marked the first time that the artist, who is color blind, went beyond black-and-white imagery.

After walking through a series of vivid sports-related objects—blue calcite footballs, baseballs, helmets, and fan jackets—visitors wandered into a mind-altering violet-hued “grotto” of sorts, titled, Amethyst Sports Ball Cavern (2016), featuring a glowing basketball sculpture. Arsham told artnet News that he imagined the objects “as if they’ve been uncovered on some future archaeological site.” With respect to the amethyst cavern, Arsham explained that the installation is the latest in a series of “fictional archaeological spaces” where he was looking back at culture from antiquity onward.

On February 25, 2017, Arsham’s “HOURGLASS” opens at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.

Daniel Arsham with installation for *‘Circa 2345’* at Galerie Perrotin. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin.

Tamara Gonzales, *not yet titled* (2016). Courtesy the artist and Klaus vonNichtssagend Gallery, New York

4. Tamara Gonzales (b. Madera, CA. Lives and works in Brooklyn.)

One of the first exhibitions we’re looking forward to seeing in the new year is Tamara Gonzales’s solo show at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery on January 6.

“Ometeotl,” her second solo show at the gallery, will feature new paintings, drawings, and woven tapestries. These three distinct branches of Gonzales’s work will be shown together for the first time, revealing her multifaceted practice.

Kinsella, Eileen, “See the 10 Most Exciting Artists in the United States Today,” *Artnet.com*, Art World, December 14, 2016

5. Rashid Johnson (b. Chicago. Lives and works in New York.)

Johnson basically stormed Hauser & Wirth‘s West Chelsea space this past fall with “Fly Away,” a riff on the influential 1929 hymn “I’ll Fly Away,” and featuring new paintings and sculpture as well as a monumental installation that took advantage of the gallery’s cavernous, soaring architecture.

The well-received show saw Johnson exploring themes of history, yearning, and escape while furthering his interest into the relationship between art, society, and personal identity. The artist’s solo show, “Rashid Johnson: Hail We Now Sing,” opens February 9, 2017, at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri. It’s on view until May 21.

Installation view, Rashid Johnson, *Fly Away*. Photo: Martin Parsekain © the artist, courtesy of Hauser & Wirth, New York.

6. Liz Craft (b. Los Angeles. Lives and works in LA.)

One of the most memorable parts of the Whitney Museum’s fabulous group show “Mirror Cells” this past spring was Liz Craft’s fantastical, surreal multi-media installations, which consisted of wooden women striking strange poses and sprouting random spider webs. The scene created a sense of intrigue and darkness both at once.

In the year ahead, keep an eye out for Craft’s signature surreal works at shows including Liszt in Berlin with Pentti Monkkonen, and group shows at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; Weiss Falk, in Basel, Musee d’art Moderne de la Ville in Paris, and at the Orange County Museum of Art, California.

Kinsella, Eileen, “See the 10 Most Exciting Artists in the United States Today,” *Artnet.com*, Art World, December 14, 2016

7. Maggie Lee (b. Westfield, NJ. Lives and works in New York.)

Having also wowed crowds with work in the Whitney’s “Mirror Cells,” Maggie Lee was also a standout at the “Positions” section of the the most recent Art Basel in Miami Beach with a solo show at Greenpoint Brooklyn gallery Real Fine Arts. She turned the booth into a blown-up version of one of her smaller glass tanks, which tend to reference scenarios such as a 1970s teen girl’s room or an empty nightclub.

Look for more of Lee’s work at forthcoming group shows in 2017 at Kunshalle Zurich (March) and T293 Gallery, Naples (February).

8. Amy Yao (b. Los Angeles. Lives and works in New York.)

Another standout in the “Positions” section of Art Basel in Miami Beach was the booth of always cutting-edge Los Angeles gallery Various Small Fires, which chose to highlight work by Amy Yao. The artist focuses on tragedies surrounding manufacturing, contamination, and environmental racism. A large pile on the floor, titled Doppelgängers II (2016) references an incident in China where consumers were sold a mixture of rice mixed with other materials–including PVC plastics—for consumption.

In the coming year, Yao will have solo shows at 47 Canal in New York, and at Édouard Montassut in Paris, and will also be part of a group show at the Musée D’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

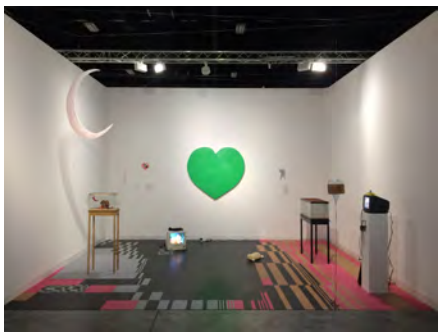
Lower East Side gallery Sargent’s Daughters was the site of a 2014 show, “Brad Jones” an ongoing collaboration between Rubell and artist Brandi Twilley that began in 2013. The title is a loose reconfiguration of the artists’ first names, and was imagined as belonging to the next sensational, aggressive American (male) painter.

Rubell’s first solo New York show, “Housewife,” opens at Sargent’s Daughters on January 18, 2017.

9. Jennifer Rubell (b. New York. Lives and works in Miami.)

Rubell has become well known for her participatory artwork that blends performance art, installation, and events. The pieces are often monumental in scale and engage the senses, frequently incorporating food and drink as media—a

Liz Craft, Installation view of “*Mirror Cells*” at the Whitney Museum. Courtesy the artist, Real Fine Arts, and The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



nstallation of work by Maggie Lee at Real Fine Arts in the Positions section of Art Basel. Courtesy of Real Fine Arts, Greenpoint, New York,

Jennifer Rubell. Photo by Melanie Dunea Photography

mass of ribs with honey dripping on them from the ceiling, for instance, or 2,000 hard-boiled eggs with a mountain of gloves nearby for handling.

Lower East Side gallery Sargent’s Daughters was the site of a 2014 show, “Brad Jones” an ongoing collaboration between Rubell and artist Brandi Twilley that began in 2013. The title is a loose reconfiguration of the artists’ first names, and was imagined as belonging to the next sensational, aggressive American (male) painter.

Rubell’s first solo New York show, “Housewife,” opens at Sargent’s Daughters on January 18, 2017.

10. Matthew Brannon (b. St. Maries, ID. Lives and works in New York.)

At this past January’s edition of Art Los Angeles Contemporary, we loved David Kordansky’s booth. It was given over to a solo presentation of Matthew Brannon’s new works, and was clearly a much-buzzed about highlight of the fair.

Brannon has used his distinctive “mid-century graphic design,” to delve into the era of the Vietnam War, specifically through the lens of the four presidents who held office during the lead-up to and exit from the protracted conflict.

Next fall, Kordansky Gallery is planning a solo show of Brannon’s works, so get ready.

Matthew Brannon, *Concerning Vietnam: Air Force One*, 1963 (2016). Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Morgan, Nicholas Chittenden, “Matthew Brannon, Casey Kaplan,” Artforum.com, Critics’ Picks, September 2015

ARTFORUM

New York

Matthew Brannon

CASEY KAPLAN
September 10–October 24

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.

— Nicholas Chittenden Morgan

Wyrick, Christopher, “Art here is polyglot — and it pops up everywhere,” *The Art Newspaper,* Vol. XXIV, No. 271, September 2015, VI

Art here is polyglot—and it pops up everywhere

With contributions from Christopher Wyrick

Matthew Brannon’s “Certain Snakes” series

Billboards dominate LA’s visual landscape, selling supersized Hollywood glamour to drivers stuck in polluting traffic. Matthew Brannon intervenes with humorous pastiche in his “Certain Snakes” series. Along with John Baldessari and Eve Fowler, among others, Brannon is one of ten participating artists who have created art billboards for the Manifest Destiny Billboard Project, an initiative of the non-profit public-art organisation Los Angeles Nomadic Division.

The fruits of Art + Practice’s artist-in-residence programme

Mark Bradford has returned to Leimert Park, the neighbourhood of his youth and the hub of African-American art in Los Angeles, to establish Art + Practice in partnership with the arts patron Eileen Norton, activist Allan DiCastro and the Hammer Museum. The foundation offers art education to disadvantaged young people, museum-curated exhibitions highlighting the work of local artists, and an artist-in-residence programme in a part of Los Angeles that has nurtured black artists for almost a century.

Michael Sistig’s Anti Ark (2013)

The El Segundo Museum of Art (ESMoA), founded by the collectors Eva and Brian Sweeney, is a strikingly refined art space in a part of town known mostly for the apocalyptic-looking chimneys of an oil refinery. (“Segundo” means “second” in Spanish; the area was named after Chevron’s second refinery.) Since its founding in 2013, ESMoA has put itself on the LA art map with shows, including the installation Anti Ark (2013) by German artist Michael Sistig, and interactive events, around themes such as silence and sustainability.

Indrisek, Scott, “5 Must-See Gallery Shows in New York: Ron Nagle, Keegan McHargue, and More,” BlouinArtInfo.com, September 21, 2015

BLOUINARTINFO

5 Must-See Gallery Shows in New York: Ron Nagle, Keegan McHargue, and More

by Scott Indrisek
September 21, 2015

Matthew Brannon at Casey Kaplan Gallery, through October 24 (121 West 27th Street)

Brannon’s series of new works — mainly using a letterpress, serigraph, or silkscreen technique — purports to “explore emotional registers within the context of the Vietnam/American War.” That mission, however, is obscured, or at least softened, by the nostalgic pull of Brannon’s aesthetic. Most of the pieces are forms of still life in which various objects and products seemingly suspended in midair. Brand names dominate — Chesterfield, Western Union, Heinz, Sno Sheen — with the occasional outlier item provoking a joke: a bottle of Liquid Paper, for instance, beneath a diploma from the New York Psychoanalytic Society, as if poking fun at Freud’s mistakes. The pall of war is mostly lost amid the clutter of domesticity and consumer goods, which is, perhaps, the point. A hint of the wider world, though, pops up in “Ready or Not,” 2015, in which a folded Order to Report for Armed Forces Physical Examination sits alongside a box of corn flakes, a novelty greeting card displaying Snoopy as Joe Cool, and a shuttlecock.

Malick, Courtney, “Los Angeles: Matthew Brannon,” *Artforum.com*, Critics’ Picks, January 2, 2014

ARTFORUM

Los Angeles

Matthew Brannon

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY
3143 South La Cienega Boulevard, Unit A
November 16–January 18

View of “Leopard,” 2013.

Unlike much of Matthew Brannon’s signature pared-down, stencil-inspired imagery, for “Leopard,” the artist’s third solo exhibition at the gallery, his latest work is centered on an erotic novella that he penned himself, also titled *Leopard* (2013), which reveals a sinister and frankly perverse nature. To mark Brannon’s return to experiments in such provocative writing all the more strange, the book itself is completely inaccessible.

Rather than presenting the story as a readable object, Brannon slyly utilizes six canvases installed on the gallery walls as its hiding place. On the side of each canvas, small slots have been lined with metal, in which copies of the thin book have been wedged. In this way, Brannon has created a confusing confluence between the functionality of a bookshelf and the inherent antifunctionality of a painting. While the tight, squiggly, and haphazardly scrawling lines in Brannon’s black-and-white paintings on view, each of which begins with the title *Inside Out*, such as *Inside Out, VII (The Proofreader*) and *Inside Out, VI (The Translator)* (all works 2013), are reminiscent of Brannon’s other graphic work in acrylic, the paintings also include materials, such as brass, enamel, and offset printing on paper, that nod toward publishing.

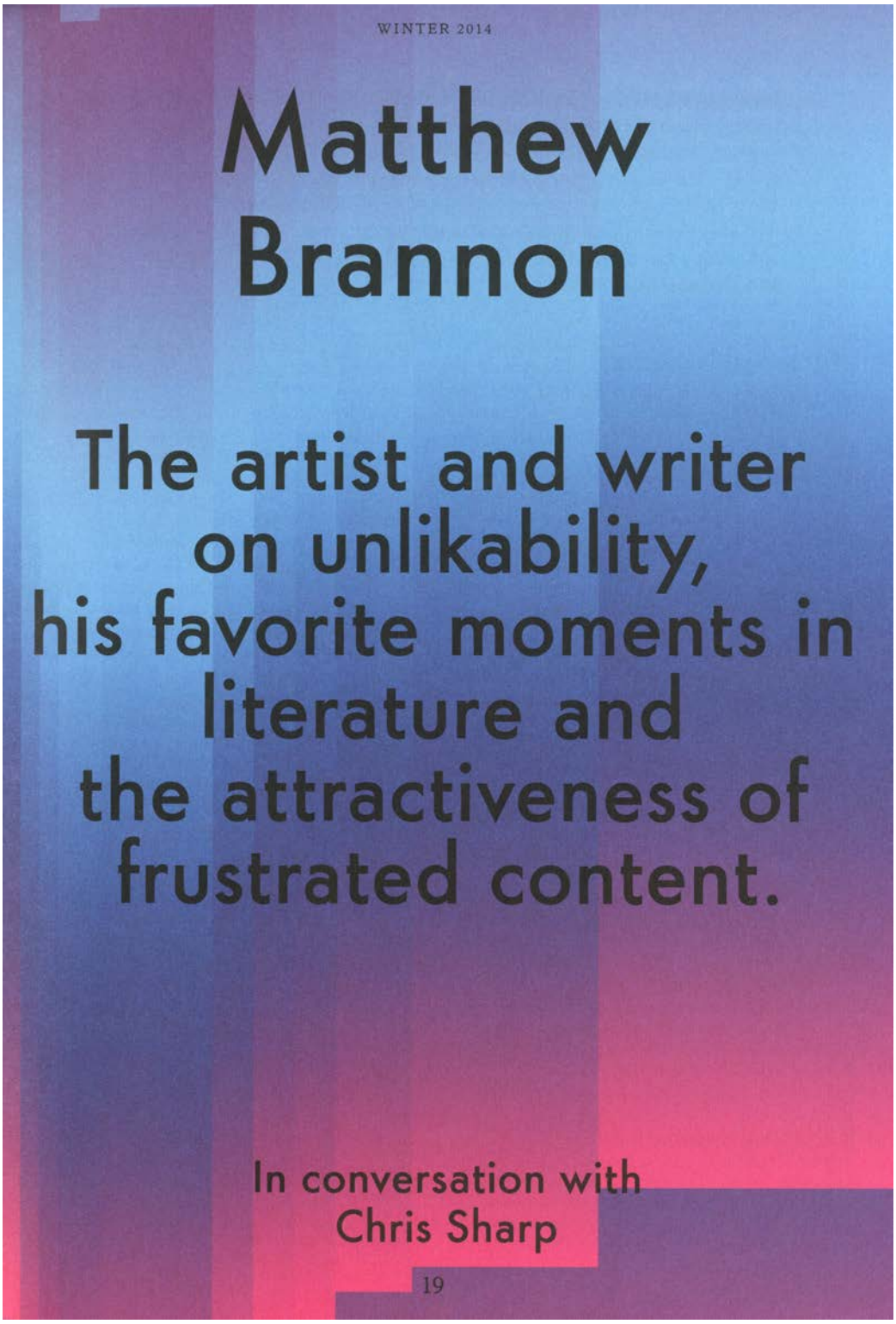
In the middle of the gallery two monitors play *Undivided Attention (Leopard)*. The left screen shows a woman sitting while reading Brannon’s book, seemingly unaffected by its bravado. On the right, the book’s text scrolls upward a bit too quickly for the viewer to hang onto any single word. In this haste, a fragmented story silently unfolds. One gathers that the protagonist is writing to his ex-lover, recalling their time spent in an experimental collective that based performances and films on their unusual sex acts, some of which involved being tied up or crammed into a room with other writhing bodies. Knowing that such intimate and raunchy secrets are tucked inside such cool, collected paintings imbues these works with an insatiable sense of intrigue that mimics the tense tone of the book, which epically ends with the filming of a schematized, depraved, and fatal orgy on an airplane.

— Courtney Malick

Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, “Matthew Brannon,” *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

Photography by
Naho Kubota

Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, “Matthew Brannon,” *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27



Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, "Matthew Brannon," *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

New York-based artist Matthew Brannon might seem like an unlikely surfer, given that he grew up in Montana, but a stint studying at UCLA helps to explain his affinity for waves. His graphic prints and sculptures are known to draw upon the clean, spare style of post-war American advertising, whose sophisticated, self-assured optimism becomes the whipping boy of Brannon's incisive and acerbic wit. Chris Sharp engages him about his growing investment in writing, his interest in literature and the stakes of artistic commitment.

Chris Sharp: So here we find ourselves in an issue of WAX Magazine dedicated to theme of *flux* and the relationship of the word to art history. The latter issue seems to bear some relationship with your work...

Matthew Brannon: I once titled a show *Where Were We*. But I'm sort of over looking back. In many ways the art world that exists today bears little, if any, resemblance to the art world I entered in the mid Ninties. When I was young it was very important to me that you knew that I hated everything you liked. Now we live in a culture of obsessive consensus where consideration is distilled into everyone 'liking' things. So the question I'm asking myself now is—how can I keep it interesting or potent or disruptive given the current flattening conditions?

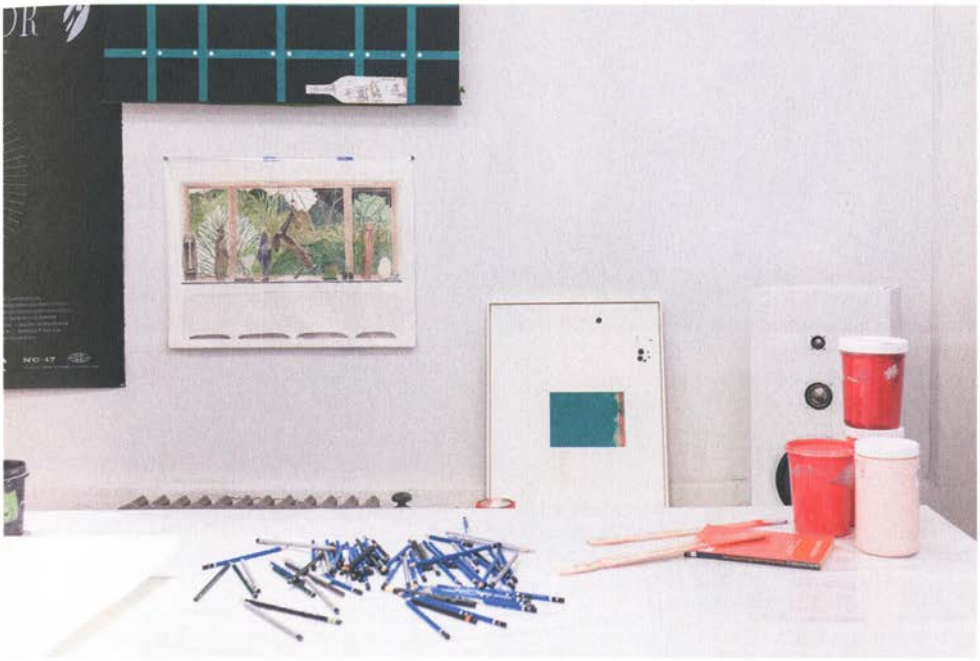
CS: It would seem that the solution to that dilemma is to become definitively 'unlikable.' But that too seems to be an exhausted strategy... However, in such a context of radically reductive, ready-made language (*like*—can that even be called *language* anymore?), the irruption of language itself becomes potentially disruptive. That said, I remember in a recent conversation we had, you spoke about moving away from text in your prints, and yet at the same time you're writing more and more fiction, such as the publication for your recent exhibition at the Museo Marino Marini in Florence. Maybe you could say a few words about your fictional pursuits?

MB: Between the pages is definitely where my mind is. Literature always retains its one-to-one radicality. Ideas or feelings a hundred years old can feel personal and direct through language. In many ways the text in my work has always been its center. And the images I've used have always been the camouflage to bring the writing forward. I want someone to swallow it first and then feel sick later. I'm always shooting for the delayed reaction. But every strategy eventually grows stale. I sometimes fear my initial formula of an absurdist collision of text and image now seems formulaic. The idea now is instead of having one medium piggy back on the other, to place them side by side.

So I'm putting the writing in it's proper place. Writing short novels you can take with you on the train. Except there's nothing proper about them. They're pretty nasty things. In Italy I published a novella called *Antelope* about a radical theatre group who uses a department store at night for readymade sets. Except things go horribly wrong and before summer's end a few people are dead. But telling you about the plot of course is not really telling you anything about what it's about. That's something different. I can't say how many people saw the exhibition actually read the book. The fact that it's a lot to ask of an audience is part of the point for me. *Of course you wouldn't bother.*

CS: Is that last italicized comment a work? If not, it could be. One also pictures the likes of Truman Capote slurring it at someone at, say, closing time in a bar in NY circa 1975... It's interesting what you say about the enduring impact of the written word. I have always felt that literature possesses more romance than art somehow. Perhaps this is because—and even if this is just a myth—it has a closer link with lived experience, the every day, whereas art tends to be something apart. One also goes in your pocket, while the other requires a whole infrastructure... If I am not mistaken, *Antelope* will have a follow up? Can you tell us anything about that?

Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, “Matthew Brannon,” *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27



Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, “Matthew Brannon,” *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

LEOPARD

You're talking. You're saying something important. Its taken you a tremendous amount of energy to say what you're saying. It's obvious you've given it a great amount of thought. I want you to know I'm listening and that what you're saying is registering deeply. But I'm dying to tell you a large bug has landed on your shoulder and its intentions are nothing but bad.

I didn't have sex for a year. I made the decision not to. My thoughts were completely and constantly lurid. I tortured myself. I could do nothing but imagine taking everyone's pants off. Bending them over tables and spreading their legs. Gnawing on their necks. Shoving my cock into every hole imaginable and then some. My dick felt like the size of my arm. I denied myself masturbation. I wanted my thoughts to fester into a coral of perversion. For unfed desire to calcify layer upon layer into a thick shell resting at the very base of my feelings. I wanted to make sex again

You're talking. You're saying something important. Its taken you a tremendous amount of energy to say what you're saying. It's obvious you've given it a great amount of thought. I want you to know I'm listening and that what you're saying is registering deeply. But I'm dying to tell you a large bug has landed on your shoulder and its intentions are nothing but bad.

Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, "Matthew Brannon," *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

MB: Funny you mention a pocket. The follow up book to *Antelope* is called *Leopard* and it comes literally inserted into the side of a large painting. I've made what looks like brass mailbox slots that hold the books inside the paintings with only the spine showing. It's a ridiculous idea that grew out of a number of conversations this summer while I was teaching at Skowhegan in Maine. I've been thinking of them as vaginas or as where the content resides. It's a very flat-footed continuation of my theme of a polite exterior countered by a more complex interior.

Leopard is a sequel of sorts where the actors hole up in a old house for the summer taking everything to extremes and end it all by having an orgy on a plane that they intentionally crash into the ocean. All the while they're filming everything and making an archive for others to see. It's a bit much but I felt like it had to be, considering its secret home.

I've also made a video of someone reading the book to themselves in real time in one sitting and another video of the entire text scrolling by. I'm showing the viewer that someone did read it. I'm offering proof it exists and that its thoughts have passed from myself to the page and into another mind all without the viewers inclusion. For me part of it is about access.

CS: Here I would like to ask you a kind of formulaic interview question, such as, if you weren't an artist, what would you be? But I think I already know the answer to that question. So here's another one, which is lot easier and less cheesy than you might think: what are, today, at the time of this interview, your three favorite moments from literature? (Normally I would ask five, but space feels limited) Which is not to say, favorite books, but actual moments, it could be a scene, a mood, a detail. And why?

MB: I used to wish I was a surgeon but I think that was a fantasy. I sometimes wish to be the guy who changes the posters in the subway. But that's a different fantasy. Now I'm trying on this writer's hat. But I still feel like a bit of a fake or like someone who's pulling up a seat where there wasn't one before. As for my three favorite moments in literature... off the *very* tip of my brain and because it's us talking, I'll say:

The scene when the young boy falls into the cave they believe is home to a demon in Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*. He describes this group hovering around the lip (or mouth) of this black abyss deciding who will go in. For me, it's about fear and death and being very alone. And I felt less alone reading it.

There's an unhealthy side of myself that loves (or returns to) the very moment towards the end of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* when they're in the elevator going to see Julian's John and Clay says "I realize that the money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst." This testing of the extremes is something I wrestle with. And in Ellis's condensed fashion he's putting a pin directly at its center.

For a third I'll say the first twenty and last twenty or so pages of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. To appreciate them one must read the six hundred or so pages in between. But the beginning when everything is pleasant (and very funny) and the end where everything is awful (and not funny) I found to be very moving. You have a sense on a very personal level of how horrific and intrusive and disregarding war is.

Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, "Matthew Brannon," *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

I could revise this list all day. I mean– am I really this dark? I hope not. I guess I'm listing personal emotional triggers for which I'm not entirely responsible. I also keep thinking of a moment this summer when at a dinner party in the kitchen a friend opened up Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* and had me read this one mind melting sex scene. *(pg. 120 in the HB)*

CS: It's funny. These are all great moments. I remembering reading *The Magic Mountain* in my early twenties and being very marked by the conflict between the intellect and charisma that takes place in the novel, as if these two different forces (mind and body, one being disembodied thought and hesitation and the other being pure, embodied vitalism) were battling over Hans Castorp's soul. It's this weirdly Cartesian dilemma that has always haunted me. Like Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty in *On The Road*. Same dilemma. Just this morning I was thinking about how Roberto Bolaño used to write in his kitchen in Blanes, Spain. It makes sense that such a vitalistic writer should work in the most vitalistic part of the home in order not to succumb to the monotony of what is ultimately a very disembodied, non-vitalistic activity: writing (isn't it curious how it is an almost perfect contradiction about what I wrote with regard to literature above?). But allow me to indulge in another straight interview question: If you could own any piece of art, which one would it be, and why?

MB: I've been asked this before and my answer has changed. I'm more suspicious of good looking things and even more suspicious of bad looking things these days. I'm now very attracted to frustrated content, ambitious transgression, conceptual accountability and total creative indulgence so I'm going to say the full set of Mike Kelley's 1985 *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*. Or since I don't believe I'm ever having a child I'll take whomevers childrens' drawings. Everytime I see one I feel jealous of their mark making.

CS: Indeed, one becomes suspicious. It's hard to have clear, identifiable criteria, as they are always changing. Lately, I feel like I can't get behind a given artist unless the work has a real, fundamental problem– and not necessarily in the world, but in itself—that it is trying to solve, and when I say *real, fundamental problem,* I mean, not borrowed, not some chic and fashionable malaise lifted from the super mall of contemporary art. Something needs to be really wrong. And yet at the same time, so right. This is very difficult to account for. That said, I'm curious to know how your answer has changed and why?

MB: It has much to do with what you so described so well. As I suggested before with this "culture of consensus," the way we see it internalized for artists is that they often work until they find some sort of endorsement (financial, critical, institutional) and then they churn out endless variants of the same idea. It's the same thing as retiring really. One idea, different colors. This is all very condescending of me to say, but I think these are real challenges we need to present ourselves. Sometimes I worry I'm too old to be an artist anymore. Maybe the best artists are the younger ones. Art making is frustrating business (as is writing) but the understandable search for comfort or assurance or security is boring us to death.

CS: And lastly how do feel about being in a surf magazine? Personally, I don't feel so out of place; being a skater in high school, I hung out in the 'back parking lot,' which was predominantly the turf of surfers and skaters (I'm from the bay area). We all got wasted together. The main difference was that when they cut school, they went to the beach; and when we did, we went to the Embarcadero (this was the early '90s).

MB: I like it! Surfing for me is all about breaking a perspective. One minute I'm in my cement box apartment then forty five minutes later I'm in the water facing the land getting my ass handed to me. Nothing could be healthier. I've always admired surfers and skaters. It's such a cult thing. By that I mean it's successes are almost impossible to measure. Funny enough they're also very fluid when it comes to wordplay. Recently an Italian friend of mine had to ask me what someone meant when they used the phrase *sick*.

Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, “Matthew Brannon,” *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

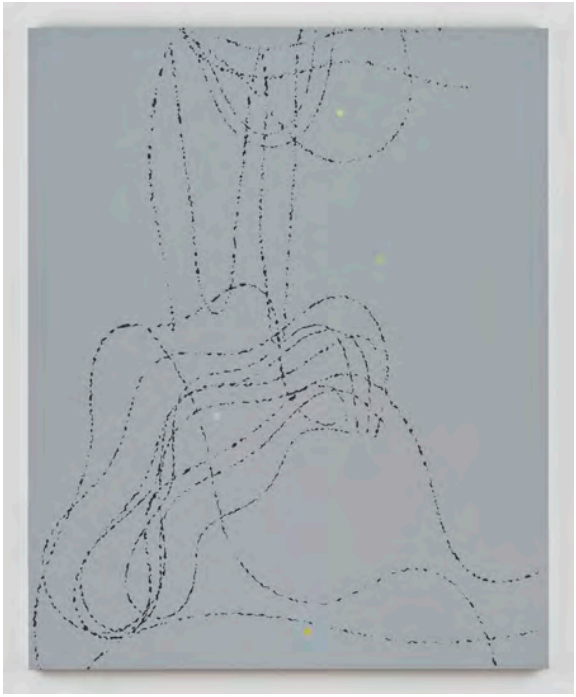
Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, “Matthew Brannon,” *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

Sharp, Chris, in conversation with Matthew Brannon, “Matthew Brannon,” *WAX 4*, Winter 2013, pp. 18-27

Florian, Federico, “Leopard. Matthew Brannon,” *CuraMagazine.com*, December 5, 2013

cura.

Leopard. Matthew Brannon



American artist Matthew Brannon presents his new body of work at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. The solo show is entitled *Leopard*, the name of an erotic novella written by Brannon himself, and explores the relations between text and visual art, reimagining the role of literary narrative.

The text of the book takes the form of a two monitors video work in the center of the gallery; on one monitor, a woman reads the *Leopard* book to herself, while on the another one the text scrolls upwards like the credits to a film. The narrative intensely condenses the fictional universe that Brannon has created over the course of his career, with references to Surrealist literature, avant-garde film and the theater of the absurd.

Around the monitors is a series of six paintings: inserted in a slot cut into the side of each painting, is a copy of *Leopard*. Viewers cannot leaf through its pages; the only way they can “read” the book is looking at the visual compositions on the canvas – irregular lines punctuated by dots of color – realized through printing processes.

David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles Leopard by Matthew Brannon 16 Nov – 18 Jan, 2014

Muchnic, Suzanne, "'The Assistants' David Kordansky, Los Angeles," Reviews: national, *ARTnews*, May 2013, pp. 104-105

'The Assistants'

David Kordansky

Los Angeles

This absorbing think piece of a show, curated by Fionn Meade, grappled with the role of contemporary art in today's world, exploring whether it should extract meaning from daily life, expose societal problems, or perhaps deal with larger philosophical issues. The works on view, contributed by eleven artists, including Uri Aran, Matthew Brannon, and Dieter Roth/Björn Roth, appeared at first to have little in common, and yet, each tapped into unsettling experiences likely to have been shared by viewers.

At the exhibition's opening, *Mystical Protest*, a 2011 wall piece by the collective Slavs and Tatars, greeted visitors with a cynical statement: "It is of utmost importance that we repeat our mistakes as a reminder to future generations of the depths of our stupidity." Painted in big block letters, the words mingled with silk-screened Arabic script and fluorescent lights on a colorful cloth background, echoing the cacophony of visual and verbal messages distributed around the world through technology. The black-and-white photographs that make up Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside, July 22, 1973* document a 1973 "maintenance art" performance in which the artist spent a day obsessively cleaning the galleries of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. In the photos, visitors come and go, observing her unexpected actions, and the work raises compelling questions about the behind-the-scenes nature of labor in established institutions such as art museums.

COURTESY DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, AND KRAUPA-TUSKANY ZEIDLER, BERLIN, GERMANY

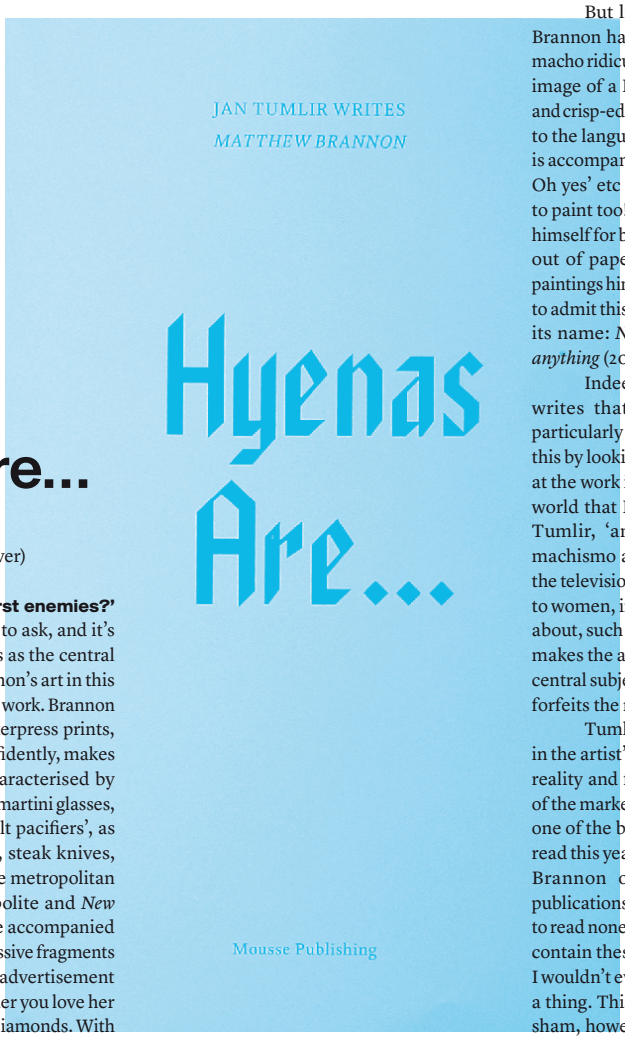
Slavs and Tatars, *Mystical Protest*, 2011, paint on silk-screened fabric, fluorescent lights, 94½" x 244¾". David Kordansky.

One of the most captivating contributions was *Carlo's Vision*, a 2011 film by Rosalind Nashashibi. Based on *Petrolio*, an unfinished 1992 novel by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the film follows a man being pulled through Rome on a director's dolly. He witnesses evidence of the city's history along with realities of its contemporary life, and philosophizes about truth and illusion. Like the exhibition itself, the work is complicated but fascinating to contemplate.

—*Suzanne Muchnic*

McLean-Ferris, Laura, “Matthew Brannon: Hyenas Are...,” *ArtReview*, Issue 56, January & February 2012, p. 136

Books



Monograph

Matthew Brannon: Hyenas Are...

By Jan Tumlir
Mousse Publishing, €26 (hardcover)

‘Why are people their own worst enemies?’ This is as good a question as any to ask, and it’s the one that Jan Tumlir identifies as the central problem posed by Matthew Brannon’s art in this sparkling, polished response to his work. Brannon is best known for his elegant letterpress prints, which the artist contrarily, or confidently, makes in editions of one. These are characterised by simple graphic images of lobsters, martini glasses, cigarettes, bottles of wine – ‘adult pacifiers’, as Tumlir puts it – and fruit bowls, steak knives, chessboards – ‘the heraldry of the metropolitan subject’. The prints look neat, polite and *New Yorker*-ish, though the images are accompanied by despairing, often passive-aggressive fragments of text that mimic the effect of an advertisement or a movie poster: ‘This year tell her you love her all over again. With a grab bag of diamonds. With mouthfuls of caviar.’ Or: ‘You keep the art. It’s all shit anyway. I’ll take the house.’

Tumlir creates a curiously absorbing narrative to this text, chiefly by describing the artist’s work throughout as if it were a character – a technique that succeeds due to the strong sense of personality that the artist conveys in his works. His prints are ‘suggestive of clean white shirts and dark-gray suits’, though ‘careful to allow for the occasional jaunty splash of primary color on the tie, pocket scarf, and/or socks’. He points out the ‘lures’ in Brannon’s works – drawings of fish and eels, which mark the start of exhibitions – that ‘greet the viewer gladly’; like generous hosts, they are attractive and appear to be perfectly genial. We are dropped clues and offered intriguing conversational fragments like so many titbits of gossip over cocktails. Indeed, if anything, Tumlir writes about Brannon as a Gatsby-like figure, fascinated by the double role the artist is able to play within his work – polite, charming and sexy, yet leaden with failure, guilt and nastiness.

But like Fitzgerald’s famous character, Brannon has something to hide. He mocks the macho ridiculousness of painting – a letterpressed image of a Pollock-like drip (the action of neat and crisp-edged paper-pressing utterly antithetical to the languorous dripping and flicking of fluid) is accompanied by the words ‘Yes. Yes. Fuck yes. Oh yes’ etc – but that’s because Brannon wants to paint too! He is quoted as miserably berating himself for being ‘a grown man who makes things out of paper’. He recently turned to making paintings himself, however, with titles that appear to admit this love that previously dared not speak its name: *Now you know and it doesn’t change anything* (2011).

Indeed, when it comes to desire, Tumlir writes that he hears that Brannon’s work particularly appeals to women, and tries to prove this by looking at people of both genders looking at the work in photographs. ‘It is largely a man’s world that Brannon’s work represents’, writes Tumlir, ‘and one still redolent of postwar machismo and misogyny. However, much like the television show *Mad Men* (which also appeals to women, incidentally) it is not only of, but also about, such things.’ Brannon, Tumlir continues, makes the authority assumed by men one of his central subjects, and in drawing attention to this, forfeits the right to assume it himself.

Tumlir swims easily around the subjects in the artist’s work: the thinning divide between reality and fantasy, and the crisp guiding hand of the market. And in doing so, he writes not only one of the best books about an artist that I have read this year, but one of the best books full stop. Brannon often displays closed stacks of publications in his exhibitions; the viewer is able to read none of them. But Tumlir tells us that they contain these words: ‘I’m a very private person. I wouldn’t ever confide in you. I wouldn’t tell you a thing. This art is a sham.’ If Brannon’s art is a sham, however, what does that mean for those who look at it or read about it? Brannon’s sham feelings are perhaps best conveyed in a reported episode in which the artist experiences a moment of panicked shame upon seeing hyenas at the Berlin Zoo looking out at him and laughing. These, then, are the hyenas of the title: they are a projection, the part of you that knows you are a sham and cackles hysterically as you try to greet and charm the world. The image of you being your own worst enemy.

LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS

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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“UNLIKE THE FILM POSTERS, WHERE THE TEXT WAS CONFINED TO THE CREDITS, THE LETTERPRESS PRINTS GAVE WORDS EQUAL BILLING. I BEGAN WRITING DESCRIPTION AND DIALOGUE AND QUICKLY BECAME A VENTRILOQUIST.”

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

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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

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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.

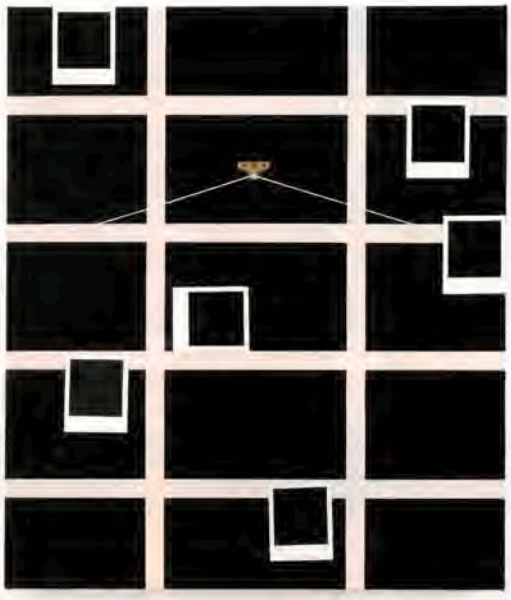
BRANNON I'd wanted to do a performance that involved gagging for several years—the verb itself has such an interesting combination of meanings, from choking, to silencing, to playing for laughter—but I knew I didn't have the endurance to do it myself. So I found a woman, an adult film star, and recorded 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.

Beeson, John, "Review: Matthew Brannon, Frankfurt," *Spike*, Issue 27, Spring 2011, pp. 129-130

spike

MATTHEW BRANNON
»A question answered with a quote«
Portikus, Frankfurt am Main
29.1.–3.4.2011

SECOND HAND INFORMATION

Just inside the entrance to the gallery of Portikus, a multicolored letterpress print entitled *Regrets Only* (2008) introduces several tendencies in Matthew Brannon's repertoire. Hanging down from the top of the page are two ghostly legs – below, an overturned champagne bottle, a radio, and the line of text: »Not another word.« An implicit reference to suicide is a fitting preface to this exhibition, which, with a forked tongue-in-cheek, often smuggles harsh language and macabre subject matter in the form of charmingly illustrative imagery.

Altogether, twenty-four prints in a similar format are positioned on eight wooden, viewing structures, as if providing a compendium of instructive parables; images and texts sit on white paper, set in black frames against a painted black surface, tilted back to promote direct, individual viewing. Supplementing these printed works are a decorative wallpaper along the back wall, a hanging sculpture of a light bulb painted black, and the sound installation *Gag* (2010) – gulps, coughs, and gasps resounding throughout the space with only moments of intervening silence. Stifling, disturbing, and arresting, the soundtrack speaks to the printed works' didacticism and is only one example of the exhibition's constant, self-reflexive interplay between consumption and excess.

New York-based artist Matthew Brannon (*1971) comes from a background of painting and book design, and his subjects and styling have drawn references to authors and filmmakers – from Capote to Calvino, Saki to Nabokov, Fitzgerald, Freud and, regularly, Jean Renoir – as well as to 50s American advertising-chic. Brannon's sensitivity to detail can be seen in his flawless employment of traditional letterpress printing; that selfsame sensitivity to detail also motivates the total, aesthetic nature of the exhibition. From the elegant design of the print-viewing structures to their eccentric, off-axis arrangement in the space, this site-specific installation underscores the material and social attentiveness that Brannon's work embodies and critiques. While standing in front of *More Than Enough* (2010) – a print depicting three iPods – viewers can glimpse, against the wall behind the print, the electronic equipment producing the sound installation. Creating a formally striking composition, the lustrous, black record player stands in stark contrast to the pure white of the record and the deep red of its label; this chic, minimal arrangement connotes material and social means at the same time that it displays an aesthetic that is popular in installations of contemporary art.

MATTHEW BRANNON
Installation view / Installationsansicht »A question answered with a quote«, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2011
Photo: Rainer Schilling

In the printed works, the broad array of iconography composes a real-life variety of personal possessions, from the tawdry to the extravagant. Although forms and references are often abstract to the point of evoking association, their consistent stylization specifically recalls the artist. Sometimes Brannon's images and texts would seem to reference his own experience, or one like his, such as when he narrates the self-conscious thoughts of a professional artist in an art supplies store: »In front of you the undergraduate with a shopping list. Behind you the retired hobbyist.« The various texts' constant oscillation from a voice of self-doubt, to one of cynicism, to one of resolution constitutes an earnest, effective humanity. Sometimes addressing viewers, sometimes provoking them, and sometimes speaking on behalf of them, the field of subject matter can be consuming, and its tone can evoke an emotional response, drawing the viewer into its reality. Nevertheless, in the last print in the far corner of the gallery space – once again, *More Than Enough* (2010) – Brannon addresses the ever-present possibility that he is presenting artifice: »So I finish my story and he says, ›*wait*, is this second hand information?‹« One can sense Brannon everywhere but, perhaps, never see him. What is most poignant and magnanimous in this offering is neither the abstraction of his visual language, nor the beauty of his stylized material, but rather the work's candor, which collapses the distance between it and reality. So beautifully produced and installed, the art, itself, embraces indulgence but remains, in its textual referents, always self-conscious and critical. Brannon's work speaks neither purely from a position of submission, nor from one of pure incisiveness, but of a consciousness of better habits. Here is a penetrating cross-section of contemporary life – distilled, made aesthetic, dramatized, and reified. After all, as one text concedes: »… how could you not drink. Not watch television?« Found elsewhere, it comes as no real surprise: »I can't say I didn't enjoy it.«

SECOND HAND INFORMATION

Gleich im Eingang zum Portikus führt ein mehrfärbiger Druck mit dem Titel »Regrets Only« (2008) einige Richtungen in Matthew Brannons Repertoire vor. Vom oberen Rand des Blattes hängen zwei geisterhafte Strümpfe – darunter eine umgelegte Champagnerflasche, ein Radio und die Textzeile: »Kein Wort mehr.« Die implizite Andeutung auf einen Selbstmord ist eine gelungene Einführung in diese Ausstellung, die mit gespielter Ironie eine derbe Sprache und makabre Themen in charmant illustrative Bildwelten hineinschmuggelt.

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MATTHEW BRANNON
More Autopsy Than Diagnosis, 2006
Letterpress on paper / Hochdruck auf Papier, 61 x 46 cm

Insgesamt sind 24 Drucke in ähnlichen Formaten auf acht Displays aus Holz angebracht, wie ein Kompendium von lehrreichen Parabeln; Bilder und Texte auf weißem Papier vor schwarzem Hintergrund in schwarzen Rahmen werden nach hinten geneigt präsentiert, um ein direktes und individuelles Betrachten zu ermöglichen. Die Drucke werden von einer dekorativen Tapete an der hinteren Wand, einer hängenden Skulptur aus schwarz bemalten Glühbirnen und der Soundinstallation »Gag« (2010) ergänzt – Schlucker, Huster und Keucher mit nur ein paar kurzen Momenten von Stille füllen den Raum. Erdrückend, verstörend und fesselnd, kommuniziert der Soundtrack mit der Didaktik der Drucke, nur ein Beispiel für das selbstreflexive Spiel der Ausstellung zwischen Konsum und Exzess.

Der in New York lebende Künstler Matthew Brannon (*1971) kommt aus der Malerei und der Buchgestaltung, und in seinen Themen und seinem Stil finden sich Bezüge zu Autoren und Filmemacher von Capote zu Calvino, Saki zu Nabokov, Fitzgerald, Freud und immer wieder Jean Renoir, wie auch zum Schick der amerikanischen Werbeästhetik der 50er Jahre. Brannons Sensibiliät für Details zeigt sich auch in seinem makellosen Einsatz der traditionellen Technik des Hochdrucks. Die gleiche Sensibilität zum Detail zeigt sich in der gesamten Ästhetik der Ausstellung. Vom eleganten Design der Displays für die Drucke zu ihrer exzentrischen Platzierung aus der Achse im Raum, unterstreicht diese ortsspezifische Installation die Aufmerksamkeit für Material und gesellschaftliche Themen, die Brannons Arbeit sowohl verkörpert wie auch kritisiert. An der Wand hinter der Arbeit »More Than Enough« (2010) – ein Druck, der drei iPods zeigt – kann man das elektronische Equipment der Soundinstallation erkennen. Der glänzend-schwarze Plattenspieler kontrastierend zum reinen Weiß der Platte und dem tiefen Rot ihres Labels bilden eine formal eindrucksvolle Komposition. Dieses schicke Minimal-Arrangement weist auf materielles und soziales Kapital hin und führt gleichzeitig eine Ästhetik vor, wie sie in Installationen zeitgenössischer Kunst gängig ist.

Die Druckgrafiken komponieren in ihrem breiten ikonografischen Spektrum eine Mannigfaltigkeit von persönlichen Obsessionen aus dem realen Leben, vom Geschmacklosen zum Extravaganten. Auch wenn die Formen und Referenzen oft einen Grad an Abstraktion erreichen, der Assoziationen hervorruft, lässt ihre konsequente Stilisierung an den Künstler denken. Manchmal sieht es so aus, als ob sich Brannons Bilder und Texte auf seine eigenen Erfahrung beziehen würden, oder einer ihr ähnlichen, wenn er zum Beispiel von den selbstsicheren Gedanken eines professionellen Künstlers erzählt: »Vor dir der Student mit einer Einkaufsliste. Hinter dir der Pensionist, der Hobbykunst macht.« Das konstante Oszillieren der verschiedenen Texte im Ton von Selbstzweifel zu Zynismus zu Entschlossenheit bringt eine aufrichtige, wirkungsvolle Humanität zum Ausdruck. Manchmal sprechen die Arbeiten den Betrachter an, manchmal provozieren sie ihn, und manchmal sprechen sie in seinem Namen. Die Sujets sind einnehmend, und der Ton kann eine emotionale Reaktion hervorrufen, die den Betrachter in deren Welt zieht. Doch mit dem letzten Druck am hinteren Ende des Ausstellungsraumes – wieder »More Than Enough« (2010) – thematisiert Brannon die stets präsente Möglichkeit, dass alles was er macht, ein Trick ist: »Also beende ich meine Geschichte, und er sagt ›halt, ist das eine Information aus zweiter Hand?‹« Man kann Brannon überall spüren, aber ihn wohl nie sehen. Was so ergreifend und großzügig an dieser Präsentation ist, ist nicht die Abstraktion der visuellen Sprache oder die Schönheit des stilisierten Materials, sondern vielmehr die Aufrichtigkeit der Arbeit, die die Distanz zwischen ihr und der Realität aufhebt. So perfekt gemacht und installiert macht sich diese Kunst sogar das Gefällige zu eigen, bleibt aber in ihren textuellen Bezügen immer reflektiert und kritisch. Brannons Arbeit spricht weder nur aus einer Position der Kapitulation noch des reinen Scharfsinns, sondern aus einem Bewusstsein einer besseren Moral. Man findet hier einen eindringlichen Querschnitt durch das zeitgenössische Leben – destilliert, ästhetisiert, dramatisiert und verdinglicht. Denn letzten Endes, wie ein Text eingesteht: »…wie kannst du nicht trinken. Nicht fernsehen?« Und an einer anderen Stelle kommt es nicht wirklich überraschend: »Ich kann nicht sagen, dass ich es nicht genossen hätte.« —

JOHN BEESON
Aus dem Englischen von der Redaktion

»unExhibit«
Generali Foundation, Wien
4.2.–17.7.2011

VERDUNKELUNG

Eine Ausstellung aus dem Jahr 1957 ist der Ausgangspunkt für »unExhibit« in der Wiener Generali Foundation: Für »an Exhibit« entwarfen damals die Künstler Richard Hamilton und Victor Pasmore mit dem Theoretiker Lawrence Alloway eine Ausstellung ohne Exponate – nur das Display selbst wurde in Form von farbigen Plexiglasscheiben ausgestellt. Es entstand ein selbstreferenzieller Parcours »to be played, viewed, populated«, wie es im Einladungstext hieß.

Fotos dieser Metaausstellung sind gleich im Eingangsbereich der Generali an die Wände tapeziert. Ein paar Schritte weiter steht man dann vor einer Wand aus halbtransparenter, grauer Gaze von Heimo Zobernig. Als Double parallel zur zentralen Betonwand des Ausstellungsraums schafft sie eine räumliche Barriere, während sie den

Coulson, Amanda, "Matthew Brannon: Portikus 'Frankfurt am Main'," *Frieze*, April 2011, p. 141

frieze

GERMANY

Matthew Brannon
Portikus *Frankfurt am Main*

What do 'Coronet Brandy' and 'El Producto Cigar' have in common? Certainly they'd make for a nice combination, but their logos were both created (in 1941 and 1952, respectively) by the legendary American graphic designer, Paul Rand. Beginning in the 1940s, Rand is known for having revolutionized graphic design, producing globally recognized corporate logos for the likes of IBM and UPS. The works on view in Matthew Brannon's solo show, 'A question answered with a quote', appeared at first glance to be an homage to this venerable star of advertising and communication: simple images, clean lines, bright block colours depicting consumer items in cleverly stacked graphic collages. From a distance they seem to be vintage ads, something *Mad Men*'s Don Draper might have thought up.

The items depicted in Brannon's letterpress prints – exhibited here on tilted wooden stands resembling rudimentary drafting tables – are straight out of a fashion or luxury lifestyle magazine. Lobsters, wine glasses, ladies' stockings, a Rolex watch and the inevitable array of super-sexy 'i's – iPod, iPad, iPhone – all look glossy, vibrant and attractive. Yet the discreet texts underneath, where one would expect a catchy slogan, turn out to be unexpectedly caustic: some imply a blackly humorous narrative while others make mordant observations on modern life.

Indeed, while most of the depicted objects are lusted-after luxury items, many are actually in a state of decay – worn, used, leftover – adding a kind of jadedness or shabbiness to the scenes. The champagne bottles and glasses, indicated by simple black profiles, are always empty and tipped on their sides (such as in *Ladies Choice*, 2007, or *Regrets Only*, 2008). The dark-red rose, which also looks like a full glass of red wine, in *A Difference of Hours* (2010), is past its peak, the leaves are beginning to fall and the petals will soon follow. Excerpts of text – 'Dress Rehearsal/Closing Party', 'Cancelled Reservations', 'Who killed who the night before' – imply shattered hope and disappointed expectations, just as the rose-as-wine-glass conjures images of the jilted, lonely drinker. These verses deny any of the relaxed sophistication one might have imagined and instead replace it with a sense of desperate striving to attain or maintain a certain social level through constant show and consumerism.

In the corner of the exhibition space, set off by Brannon's two-tone graphic wallpaper, was a sculptural/sound piece comprising a white pedestal with black cubic speakers on either side – like a kind of sculptural Malevich – and a black record player with a white vinyl record on the turntable. A small shelf holds the white album cover with the piece's title: *Gag*. Again, Brannon uses language to both emphasize and confuse: is it all a joke? Or is the gag a metaphorical restraint, or does it all make you sick?

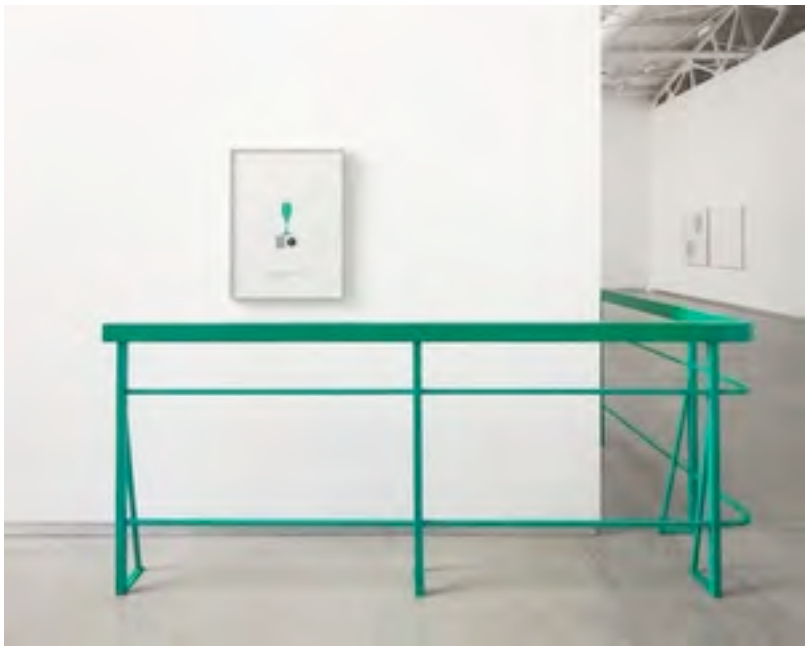
Brannon's barbed narrative texts are, according to the press release, meant to be a critical comment on 'Immoderation, greed, excesses, and most gravely, indomitable hedonism.' The artist is therefore making a criticism of the consumers' world with the very means intended to make the punters buy. It sounds clever and subversive but somehow the visuals are simply too pretty or too catchy to really deliver a hard punch. One needs to remember that Brannon is selling something too – not only his work but also the intellectual ideas behind them, and it's ultimately highly ironic to think of one of these prints ending up on a wealthy collector's wall.

Rand struggled to bring elements of high art to graphic design and advertising, to lend it credibility and depth. Brannon is doing the reverse: taking the shallow language of advertising and trying to make it deeper. The show's title 'A question answered with a quote' implies another kind of shallowness, an interrogative hoping for a profound response answered with a glib one-liner. Maybe, then, the best way to conclude is with one of Rand's famous quotes: 'Don't try to be original; just try to be good.'

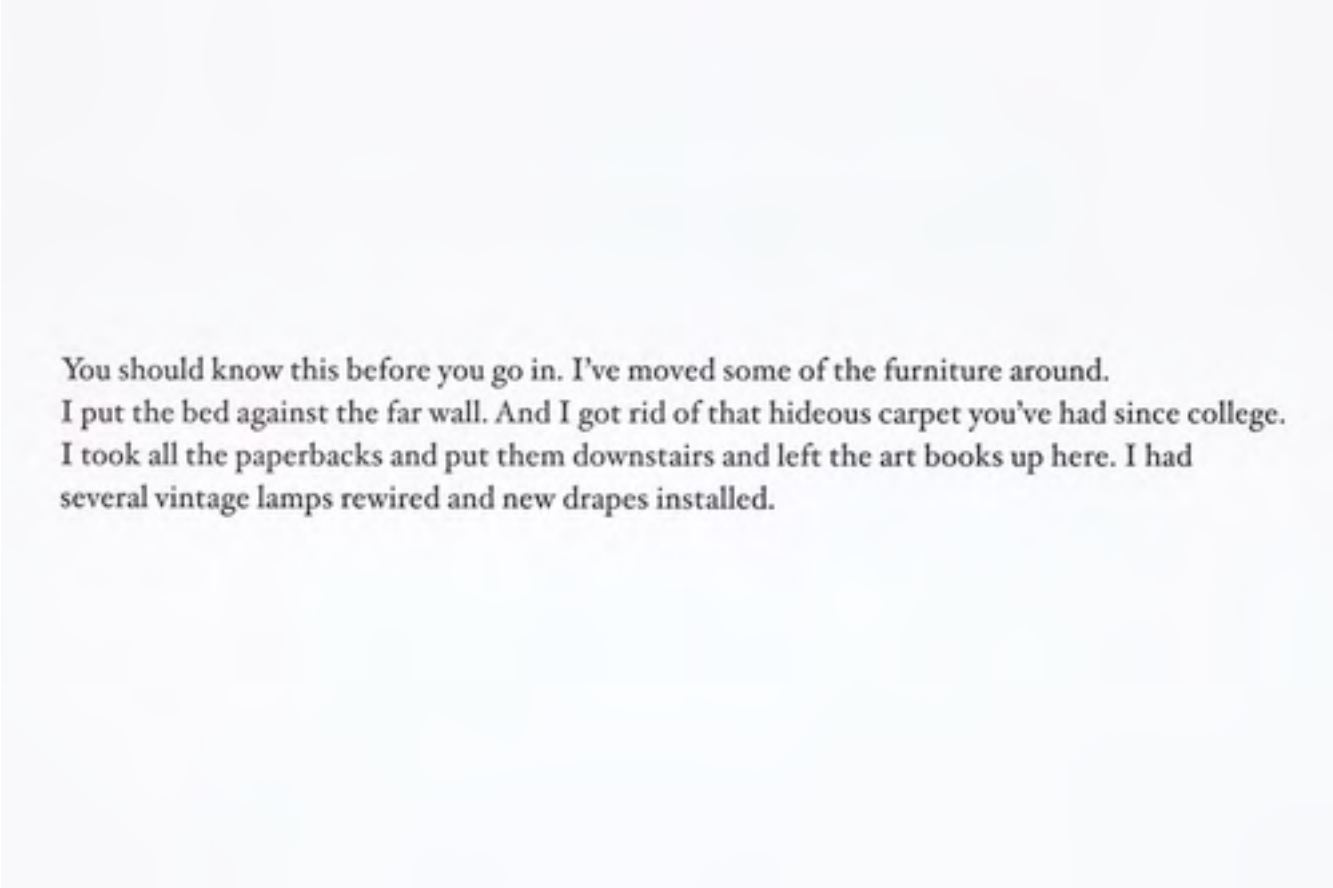
Amanda Coulson

Matthew Brannon
'A question answered with a quote'
2011
Installation view

Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah, "When Wit Ends," *Artslant.com*, November 29, 2010

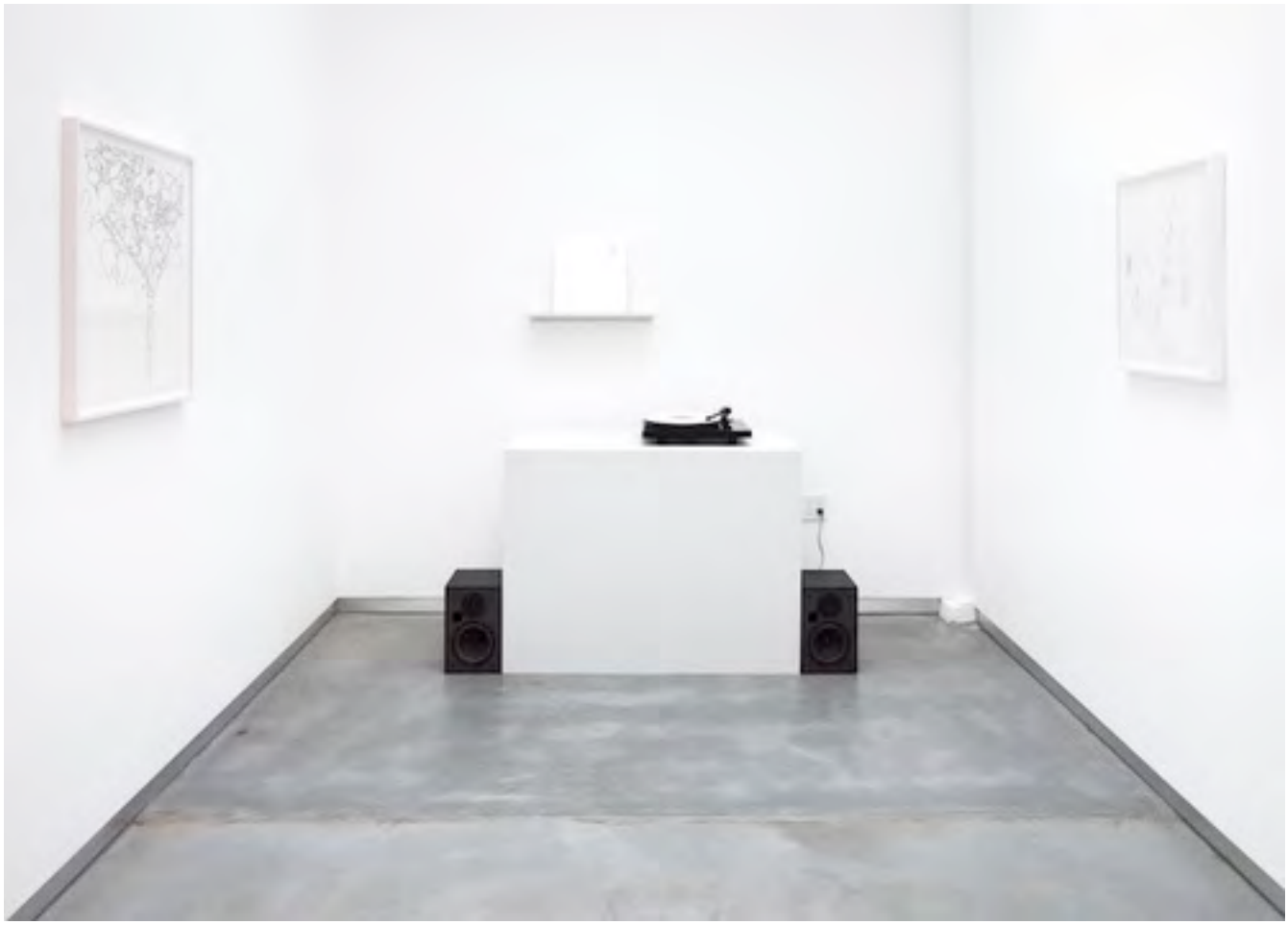


Start with *Tour Guide* (all works 2010), the hybrid print-and-sculpture that serves as entry into Matthew Brannon's exhibition, "Wit's End." Following the artist's familiar retro-Madison-Avenue/cover-of-The-New-Yorker illustrative style and image-text format, its letterpress print centers on a flute of viridian champagne fizzed with Braille-like white bubbles that sits atop a sideways iPod. In a characteristically demure visual pun, tipsiness twins tipped over music. Below the champagne and iPod totem, the print's casual narrative note (a tip of the hat to Allen Ruppersberg's serial literary paean to organizational logics, "Honey, I rearranged the collection…") prepares us in domestic lingo for a reorientation of Brannon's practice (shown below):



The practice has been reshuffled according to a new emphasis on painterly production. Under the influence of some bubbly, the urge to move things around comes off like a drunken impulse, a woozy and revealing loosening of the artist's aesthetic constraints and inhibitions.

A watery blue-green handrail beneath the print steadies the impulse and wraps around the front wall, extending like a pier out into the middle of the main gallery's panorama of paintings—scenes from a desaturated Merimekko jungle. The guide rail sets up its particular aqua shade of green as a punctuating figure that appears sparingly here and there to structure this otherwise black, white, and gray group of eleven paintings, four prints, five drawings, and one vinyl record. The color shows up (mostly in the prints) as numbers on receipts and price tags, as micro-fictions and the abstracted shorthand for text, as the geometric stand-in for *The White House*'s guard-rail or lawn, and as the filter of a wooden cigarette resting inconspicuously on the top ledge of a black canvas. A foil to the show's tonal constraints, the isolated color bobs and weaves through fiduciary, covetous, immature, sickly, and ecological connotations. Though chromatically absent everywhere else, greenness courses metaphorically through the large flat heart-shaped and teardrop leaves of the paintings' obscured floral motifs and the quivering lines of Brannon's Ellsworth Kelly-esque plant drawings.



The plant drawings (apparently inked by the artist in Liam Gillick's garden) incongruously pass vegetation and the edenic through the sexualized embodiment of their shared title, *Prostitute*. Or, rather, the other way around, they lay the prostitute in the flowerbed. Emanating from the small side gallery where the *Prostitute* plant drawings cluster, Brannon's limited edition vinyl record, *Gag*, amplifies the strained and broken sounds of a porn actress forcefully blowing and gagging on a dildo. This is the masochistic soundtrack of "Wit's End": abortive speech-acts, halting guttural emissions, and stifled staccato gasps that cycle in a gag (joke?) loop. Maybe the darkling gag, if there is any, is that her self-asphyxiating blowjob is a 'blowing it' gesture, you know, fucking up bad, failing, losing it, dropping the ball(s).

Bruce Hainley wrote a poem, "Note" from his collection *Foul Mouth*, about the nuanced joys of blowjobs and how "giving a blow job educates anyone in how to control the gag reflex, / which living in this world makes for a valuable skill." *Gag* obsessively, pathologically practices this skill, over and over, neurotically training the body to test its limits of repulsion and incorporation, rejection and engorgement. The sudden and strained bouts of choking, disembodied and defamiliarized through sonic transmission, metamorphose the human into the animal, wild and desperate in Brannon's quaking forest foliage. This must be where wit ends—in a state of frustrated articulation, aporia, blockage, and (as one painting's title has it) *Loss of Words*. It ends where sex erupts and consumes. It ends in a gag that stuffs and silences the mouth with the

other, placing the oral under review (under attack? under scouring sterilization? See *Mouthwash*) as a pre(post)-linguistic orifice of floral and animal dimension.

End with the black flip-diptych *Oral & Anal*, that Freudian book-ending of the painting-object and painter-body. Keep the anal plugged into the backside of the oral while facing the white open-ended floral diptych *A Question Answered With A Quote*, which rhymes two blossoming flowers with two electrical outlet plugs (looking more and more like little open-mouthed sad faces waiting to be gagged). I can't say what 'a question' is, but the quote that answers it is, to wit, from Bataille and found letterpressed into the back of *Gag*'s record sleeve: "…having as its object not only the direction of the discharges thrust back through the head—transforming the head into something completely different from the mouth, making it a kind of flower blossoming with the most delirious richness of forms…"

Sumpter, Helen, "Matthew Brannon," *Time Out*, October 2, 2009

‘Nevertheless', the title piece of New Yorker Matthew Brannon's exhibition sits somewhere between a stage set and a 3D representation of a disjointed narrative. Painted in white and shades of aqua, Brannon's pleasing construction suggests cut and shunted sections of the cabin and deck areas of an ocean liner; a bedside cabinet and half a bed-frame abut shelves on which sit Morandi-esque bottles, which in turn lead to a section of upper deck.

The possible scenarios one might imagine from this come from the details. A bar of white soap carefully positioned on the deck suggests a theatrical set-up for an incident of slapstick humour, while a glass of water on the bedside cabinet, listed on the exhibition plan as 'water from a melted ice sculpture', shifts the context towards conceptual art installation or perhaps recalls a more ill-fated conjunction of ocean liner and ice - RMS Titanic.

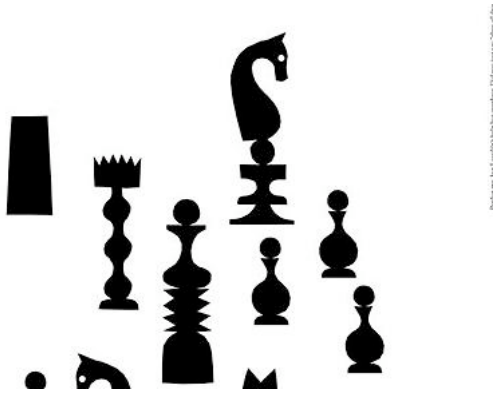
Brannon is known for his beautifully designed letterpress prints and four new ones are also part of his show. They suggest fragmented narratives, in the form of text combined with illustrative imagery, and stylistically are also in-keeping with the last-century heyday of ocean cruising.

While there's playful humour and dramatic tension in both prints and sculpture, what connects them and gives these works their charge is the exploration of equivalence; how the mood of a text can equate to a two-dimensional illustration and how a sculptural installation can suggest an era, event or art form.

Dorment, Richard, " Matthew Brannon" *Telegraph*, September 14, 2009

Matthew Brannon's Nevertheless at The Approach, review

Matthew Brannon's Nevertheless at The Approach demonstrates that he is a master of seduction and insinuation.



American artist Matthew Brannon asked us not to publish his photograph with this review. It wasn't because he is modest, but because the less you know about his identity, the more his work gets under your skin. With a background in graphic design, Brannon makes elegant letterpress prints in which he combines words and images to parody both the high-end marketing of luxury goods and the kind of art that hotel chains and multinational companies buy in bulk to fill empty walls.

But look beyond the reassuringly bland surfaces of Brannon's work and you discover a master of seduction and insinuation, the Edgar Allan Poe of modern urban decadence.

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But look beyond the reassuringly bland surfaces of Brannon's work and you discover a master of seduction and insinuation, the Edgar Allan Poe of modern urban decadence.

There is little to indicate the nature of the characters who might be on board ship, but a stack of stylised Playboy and Penthouse magazines just visible under the bed sets the scene for a mildly risqué tale set in the late 1950s or 1960s.

Dorment, Richard, " Matthew Brannon" *Telegraph*, September 14, 2009

Having led us to expect some sort of storyline, however, Brannon then withholds it. All he does is conjure up an atmosphere. What goes on in his "play" he leaves up to us, for the essence of all his work lies in things we can't see but sense are there – in this case wit, desire, sophistication and intelligence that we unconsciously associate with plays, novels and films set on transatlantic liners.

We all carry them around in our heads, don't we? Charles Ryder making love to Julia Flyte in Brideshead Revisited; Evelyn Waugh cracking up in The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold; the screwball repartee between Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda in The Lady Eve; the sinking of the Titanic in A Night to Remember.

In prints by Brannon I've seen, he explores a nebulous, in-between world of persuasion and manipulation. The ones he is showing at the Approach feel more like possible scenarios for the shipboard drama that didn't take place. All are inspired by games – backgammon, chess, dominos and cards and all contain texts that could be lines in a script or sometimes stage directions. As so often in his work, the written word either undermines the meaning of the image or changes the context in which we see it.

My favourite shows a backgammon board set up for a game between white and green draughts. The text reads "It's okay. Happens to everyone. Cough it up. Get it out of your system. That's it. You're going to be just fine. Here, wipe your chin and put this wet towel on your forehead. Now tell me. You were with whom? You went where? You did what?" You could put the words in the mouths of lovers or gangsters and the effect on the image would be the same. Suddenly, the triangular points on the backgammon board become drawn daggers or bared teeth the opponents will use to tear each other apart.

It doesn't surprise me that Brannon is also a novelist – but one who won't let anyone read his books, meticulously arranged on a shelf hung on the wall out of our reach. Engaging with Brannon's work is like talking to a man who never finishes a sentence, or finishes every sentence by contradicting what he'd said at the beginning.

"Perverse" is the word I wrote in my notes – and perversity, like decadence and wit, is the weapon of choice for aesthetes and dandies such as Ronald Firbank and Aubrey Beardsley. I don't know what they make of his work in America, but here in England he should feel right at home.

Whitney Biennial 2008, New York: Yale University Press, 2008

Steak Dinner, 2007. Letterpress print on paper, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm). Collection of the artist

opposite: *Stage (We're writing a play. It starts with an orgy. With animals tearing each other's guts out. With sound. Of breaking glass. Then it's tedious, without direction. More boring than uncomfortable. For like another hour. There's no satisfaction. No closure. No reward. You can leave after fifteen minutes. It's called "HYENA.")*, 2007. Wood, metal, leather, screenprint on canvas, and screenprint on paper, 192 x 96 x 48 in. (487.7 x 243.8 x 121.9 cm). Rennie Collection, Vancouver, Canada

Whitney Biennial 2008, New York: Yale University Press, 2008

MATTHEW BRANNON

Born 1971 in Saint Maries, Idaho; lives in New York, New York Matthew Brannon's work turns on the opposition—and ever-mounting imbrication—of art and design. After an early stint as a painter, he began to draw his inspiration from those printed materials that mediate everyday life in late-capitalist, early twenty-first-century America, from posters and advertisements to promotional flyers and take-out menus. But if Brannon's iconography conjures mass-produced, throwaway sources, his methods are laboriously handcrafted, even old-fashioned: screenprint, letterpress, and lithograph works, often executed in a limited palette and consistent in their graphic rigor. His art seems on first glance disarmingly direct. But as one turns to the text paired with his images for explication or illumination, disorder intervenes. An early series recalls the conventions of posters for horror films: in *Sick Decisions* (2004), the driveway leading to a stately house is cloaked by shadows cast by bare, looming trees. In place of what look to be credits in the lower part of the work, however, is a string of pithy non sequiturs: this film is "A Desperate Appeal Release," starring, among others, "Abuse of Education" and "Misplaced Trust," with a screenplay by "101 Unanswered Phone Calls."

In recent work Brannon pictures signifiers of contemporary metropolitan life ranging from the quotidian (an alarm clock, a tube of toothpaste, a banana peel) to the more rarefied (oysters, sushi, champagne). Here again, the straightforward quality of each depiction is offset by bewildering, quasi-poetic phrases running below it, what the artist has called a "salad of language." One line of text under the silhouette of a lobster reads, "this is how it ends" (*The Price of Admission*, 2007); another, below the rendering of a showerhead and bar of soap, "And when he's home at night trying to sleep/He sees himself as a gross pig that everyone hates" (*Alarm Clock*, 2007). Behind the veneer of convenience, plenty, and success implied by the content and format of his images, Brannon seems to suggest, reside darker imperatives—abuse, excess, careerism, insecurity, and failure.

Previous installations of Brannon's work have suggested environments such as a corporate lobby or an airport lounge, and his contribution to the 2008 Biennial evokes a similar example of anonymous urban architecture. In a setting that could be a high-rise apartment, a hotel room, or even a conference area, swaths of elegant drapery frame a faux window and painted graphic of the New York City skyline; domestic accoutrements fill the space. As is often the case with the artist's work, these items initially appear innocuous and then grow more puzzling: small sound-canceling devices, typically found in psychoanalysts' offices, create subtle white noise that aurally isolates the viewer and bolsters a sense of privacy, and the contents of a bookshelf are just out of reach. These volumes, penned by the artist yet devoid of any identifying markings on spine or cover, evade legibility to become instead enigmatically sculptural. Negotiating this theatrical space underscores viewers' sense of self-consciousness and throws into relief a constant of Brannon's work—our own complicity in deciphering and completing meaning. **L.T.**

Higgie, Jennifer, “The Embarrassing Truth, *Frieze*, November/December 2008, pp. 166-171

frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture

Issue 119 November - December 2008

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Higgie, Jennifer, "The Embarrassing Truth, *Frieze*, November/December 2008, pp. 166-171

Not Necessary
2008
Letterpress print on paper
76×41 cm

The Embarrassing Truth

The elegant aesthetic of **Matthew Brannon**'s pictures and sculptures belies a witty, acerbic take on the human condition *by Jennifer Higgie*

'Art is the triumph over chaos.'
John Cheever

You know how it is. You see a show you really like. You spend time with it and as you're thinking and walking around and looking, you jot down some words in your notebook. Then you go on your way, and the images stay with you and you recall them with accurate, complex pleasure; but after a while life takes over, and those once crisp lines begin to blur. And then the days and weeks and months pass, and all you have left of those tangled, illuminating ideas that you so enjoyed when you looked so hard at those pictures and objects are the few words you hastily scribbled in your notebook, because you said to yourself: I don't need to write the details of my thinking down, because these thoughts are so good they will never be forgotten.

Oh, but they will. So much interpretation (read: art, life) is clouded and driven by the fallacies of memory, about the slippage between actuality and recollection. Trying to mine slivers of meaning from the residue of an experience that has, inevitably, cracked and crumbled with time can complicate or cool your initial engagement with something or someone (not necessarily a bad thing). Case study: a couple of months ago I spent a good while looking at Matthew Brannon's pictures and sculptures, and I liked them *a lot*, with a rare, dizzy shot of recognition – as though they were things I wanted to know about before I realized they existed, if you know what I mean. Like Surrealist tableaux dreamt up by advertising executives in the 1950s, they were at once the freshest and most old-fashioned things I had seen in a very long time. (I must also add that they prompted, although no alcohol had passed my lips, a martini-soaked daydream, which endeared them to me *immediately*.) I loved the work's brittle originality (weird how that word has become so old-fashioned), its wit and restraint and the way its good-looking friendliness belied its tricky aspirations. I also enjoyed how the spectre of Andy Warhol's youthful, advertorial self seemed to haunt the younger artist's creations like a genial great-uncle.

More recently, revisiting the results of Brannon's toil, I still liked them a lot, but for reasons that were more difficult to articulate. Why this was so was initially unclear to me. Perhaps it was because: a) like they always do, things change, even the static ones; or b) I was now forced to write down my thoughts, an activity that tends to cast an anxious pall over subjects once heartily enjoyed; or c) it had been raining for longer than it ever had before in the history of rain; or d) I was older. But whatever, in a short space of time I had shifted from thinking about Brannon's work in an ice-clinking-in-a-tumbler-on-a-balmy-evening sort of way and had started associating it with the words of a writer whose name I can't remember, who said that living in the modern world was like having fun at a picnic while keeping your ear cocked for the distant rumble of thunder.

The thing is, Brannon's prolific output lends itself to easy readings, despite its complexity, because it's simply so enjoyable – hence my confusion. However, if you choose to spend some time with its charmingly superficial qualities, hidden depths gradually reveal themselves (but depths, I hasten to add, that cling fondly to their

Higgie, Jennifer, “The Embarrassing Truth, *Frieze*, November/December 2008, pp. 166-171

Before we begin. I'd like to thank everyone who made this evening possible. First there's ... whose countless hours and faith in this project... And ... who took the bullet when... And ... whose selflessness opened many doors once closed. And of course ... who knew what questions to ask and which to avoid, who provided the rent when there was none. And to the late ... you are in all our thoughts tonight.

Higgie, Jennifer, "The Embarrassing Truth, *Frieze*, November/December 2008, pp. 166-171

immaculate wrappings). Often displayed in cabinets that recall museums circa 1952, the work can swing, in the blink of any eye, from a sort of Ernest Hemingwayish macho will-to-truth to a mood of urbane malaise *à la* Truman Capote, to a discreet Minimalism or a wilful absurdism. Another sly level of confusion is, of course, the work's twisted relationship to nostalgia, about which Brannon declares: 'The current art world participates in a conservative version of radical. I am more interested in a radical version of conservative.'[1] It's no coincidence that the artist has chosen both to pay homage to and undermine the look of advertisements from the 1950s – the most confident decade in the history of the USA and the one in which everyone seemed to smoke, when alcoholism was the norm and disappointment was admitted to only in novels. It was, in other words, the last decade before the cracks began to show on a grand scale.

Brannon's disorientating strategies are apparent in his approach both to individual works and to his exhibition designs: he often sets his type so tiny that you have to lean in close to read it, and combines unexpected, almost invisible, objects and inaccessible sculptures with more apparently conventional elements (for example, he has placed minute poems in the spine of *Artforum* and told me about wanting to bury a screenplay in a wall). At his recent exhibition at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York, it would have been easy to overlook two handmade wooden light bulbs, a fake light switch and a pile of 25 black books and a wooden cup on a shelf so high up it was impossible to read them (*Rat*, 2008). The books were misleadingly described as 'novels' but are, according to the artist, 'more like 64-page prose poems' [2] (he has also written *Hyena* and *Mosquito*, 2007, and *Poodle*, 2008). Their inaccessibility is intentional. Brannon told me that: 'No one so far has read them aside from my wife and an editor although maybe the collectors who bought them have snuck a peek. I've been pretty careful to make sure the dealers don't'.[3] He also placed a 'sleep-sounds cancelling device' in the gallery with the stated purpose of creating a peaceful ambience, although I suspect it was included because anything as predictable as not including a 'sleep-sounds cancelling device' would make Brannon fret about the possibility of closure. It's as if he likes to seduce everyone with the sunny charm of his work and then, *whammo*, allow scenarios to spiral into something that Patricia Highsmith (who liked to keep snails in her bra, by the way) might have dreamt up in the Ripley books. (It makes sense that a few years ago he re-worked posters for horror movies.)

The dislocation Brannon mines so well mirrors the problems not only of interpretation but also, obviously, of life itself (no one is flawless). This is apparent in the gulf between what the work looks like (anachronistic, chic, insane) and what the, if not brutal, then at least acerbic (and often hilarious) texts that often accompany the images declare. (That Sigmund Freud's *The Joke and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*, from 1905, is one of the artist's favourite books should come as no surprise.) Brannon describes his rationale thus: 'I seek a play with words that is both specific in meaning and conversely teetering with inappropriate reception'.[4] It's a strategy that both mirrors the schizophrenic relationship of advertising to reality and functions as a form of resistance to a culture nurtured on quick-fix sound-bites. Accordingly, words (the original ready-made) are often the most free-associated and abstract element of the pictures. They can be terse, deadpan and literal – as in 'Finish your drink, we're leaving', written beneath an image of a smouldering cigarette and a soda siphon – or deranged micro-stories or concrete poems. Almost all of them, however, deal with, on some level, failure – of words to communicate, of alcohol to animate, of critics to criticize, of relationships to offer solace or of representation to represent. Below a picture of scattered coins, for instance, is written: 'He's telling me he didn't like the show. It's nothing more than graphic design. The writing is trite and full of gimmicks. The work is embarrassingly self-conscious, boring, over-rated, and in the end, totally unnecessary. I look away, set down my espresso and mutter *who asked you?*' Brannon also mines non sequiturs within an inch of their baffling lives: for example, the words 'Steak Dinner' underline an image of bananas, while another picture of what appears to be a pot of fish is captioned 'Compliance & Resentment'. A silhouette of a blackbird, some pencils, an iPod, paper clips and a coffee stain is accompanied by the words 'Pigs Like Us', beneath which, in tiny type, is written: 'They had to pump her stomach. Amazing what they found. Among the arugula, watercress, blue-fin tuna, age-dried steak. There it is. Your heart. And Look ... a bunch of razor blades. Little light bulbs. Cocaine. Little travel bottles. Anti-depressants. Your old untouched job application.'

Mosquito
2007
Oak, brass, steel, offset print on paper, plastic
22×51×22 cm

Brannon both pays homage to and undermines the 1950s – the most confident decade in the history of the USA, when everyone smoked, alcoholism was the norm and disappointment was admitted to only in novels.

Blank Check, Blow Hard, Tight Ass
2007
Letterpress on paper, wood
170×197×66 cm

Higgie, Jennifer, “The Embarrassing Truth, *Frieze*, November/December 2008, pp. 166-171

BLANK CHECK

Steak Dinner

Top:
Bad Manners
2008
Letterpress print on paper
56×41 cm

Halfway across the intersection you catch yourself in mid-thought. The unfinished plate. The second house. A too tight watch. A tap on the shoulder. He wouldn't dare. He hasn't the nerve. This is my sand castle.

Above:
Blank Check
2007
Letterpress print on paper
61×46 cm

• That's not what I'm saying • You've got it all wrong • It has nothing to do with ... I don't know the first thing about ... I've never even been to ... Now pull yourself together • You know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important • It's nothing you haven't done before •

Top:
Hair of the Dog
2006
Silkscreen print on paper
76×58 cm

Above:
Rough Trade
2008
Letterpress print on paper
56×41 cm

Guess. No guess again. Think back. No that's not even close. Remember when I told you I did something I shouldn't have done? In New York. That guy in the piano bar? Yeah. Well I did. I fucked him. And he's here tonight. And you were right. He *is* the author.

Top:
Regrets Only
2008
Silkscreen print on paper
61×46 cm

Not another word.

Above:
Steak Dinner
2007
Letterpress print on paper
61×46 cm

• This year tell her you love her all over again • With a grab bag of diamonds • With mouthfuls of caviar • With your rent in clothes • A credit card of hotel rooms • Stockings • Champagne • Plane tickets • And a soft slap on her bare ass •

Higgie, Jennifer, “The Embarrassing Truth, *Frieze*, November/December 2008, pp. 166-171

Disappointed Critic
2004
Letterpress print on paper
61x46 cm

Diet pill paranoia & plastic trophies

Getting absorbed in these textual mini-dramas can overwhelm the sheer range of nuance and visual reference in Brannon's work. In response to his show at Petzel I noted down things and themes that leapt out: 'ennui, language as material, sincerity (?), a 1950s' palette, women's shoes and Warhol, self-deprecation, knives (double-edged), laughter (high-pitched), drinking (as in alcohol), heels (all types), typewriters, cigarettes and cities, vodka and wine, jazz (generally), John Updike, getting tight, Richard Prince, suburbs, East Coast Pae White, *Revolutionary Road* (as in the novel), Stan Getz? Bill Evans? Vignettes, biter glances, the joy of surfaces (and superficiality?), dislocation, flatness, light bulbs, linoleum, being literal, allusive and vague (i.e., human), the embarrassment of art and sex and combinations thereof, disillusion, poems, America and hyenas.' (There's a lot more of the same, including 'the future?', 'melancholy' and 'the smell of tweed after rain', but I think you've got the idea.) Re-reading this, the only thing that stumped me, apart from the amount of question marks, was hyenas. What did they have to do with anything?

I had no idea. So I lay down in a cool, dark room and tried to remember every moment of my visit to Brannon's show and then studio, where I recalled he had greeted me in friendly fashion, in vivid green loafers. He was articulate and self-deprecating and showed me lots of things and talked about them well. He was at once very interested in the craft of his pictures (letterpress is a somewhat antiquated printmaking technique that is undergoing a revival) and in the way words can simultaneously reflect, misrepresent and complicate a situation. (Non sequiturs are a case in point: eavesdrop on a bus or a dinner party, and they're all you hear – it's a form of communication more common than you might assume.) Then I remembered something else: just when Brannon was showing me one of his exquisite prints (most of which are made in an edition of one, like paintings), without warning, he asked me if I wanted to listen to a recording he had made in Berlin of a hyena. I said yes, so we sat on his couch and listened to a wild caged animal howl, but then, as far as I remember, we changed the subject. How could I have forgotten that this happened? It was like buying tickets for a flute concerto and finding yourself at a shooting range.

(While we're on the topic of wild animals, I'd like to make a slight detour for a moment. Few people have observed – and punctured – the complacencies of polite society with as much wit as the Edwardian writer Saki, who is like a prewar British literary equivalent of Brannon. The two seem to share the belief that civilization is protected by a veneer so thin it struggles to keep the beasts – the

Higgie, Jennifer, “The Embarrassing Truth, *Frieze*, November/December 2008, pp. 166-171

Wind in the Sails
2008
Letterpress print on paper
61×46 cm

It would be an understatement to say I'm overreacting.

Market Price
2008
Letterpress print on paper
61×46 cm

You order your second before you're done with the first. Telling yourself what you want to hear. Listening only to what works. No one here knows. Everyone thinks you're right. You wear it well. And the plan is ... once you get to her place, once the drugs take effect, after the answering machine picks up ... that you let her read the letter. Let her know just how much you lost. How there is no tomorrow.

If They Only Knew
2008
Letterpress print on paper
61×46 cm

Created under duress over the course of six weeks. Directly following the most exhausting production to date. Immediately following a minor but destabilizing medical procedure. With the perceptual din of jackhammers outside. At the cost of a marriage. With the delusion that it mattered.

Brannon is interested in the way words can simultaneously reflect, misrepresent and complicate a situation.

metaphorical and literal ones – at bay. Take this exchange from Saki's short story 'The She-Wolf' (1914): "'I wish you would turn me into a wolf, Mr. Bilsiter", said his hostess at luncheon the day after his arrival. "My dear Mary," said Colonel Hampton, "I never knew you had a craving in that direction." "A she-wolf, of course," continued Mrs. Hampton; "it would be too confusing to change one's sex as well as one's species at a moment's notice."'[5]

Anyway, thinking about all of the above, I read every interview Brannon has given, and in one of them the hyena once again makes a sudden entrance. 'Did you know', he asks his interrogator, who in terms of animals has so far mentioned only ostriches, 'that hyenas are the only predators of lions outside of man? They are portrayed as frightened scavengers, but in reality a hyena eats and hunts about the same as the lion. When a hyena eats another animal, it eats everything, cracking huge bones and swallowing it all. Its faeces are often white from bone.'[6] Then Brannon's gritty conversational gambit suddenly changes gear. 'Truth', he says, 'is also another loaded term. I would like to remain on the cynical and sarcastic side and say truth is an embarrassment. But it has been said that lying is moral, which I can understand. So that leaves us with a question of responsibility to the audience. People frequently read much of my text as autobiographical. Perhaps they are right, but it wasn't my intention. I'm even suspicious of my own intentions.'[7] In other words, Brannon's work may not be literally autobiographical, but the core of it – its simultaneous distrust of, and flirtation with, absolutes – is. This makes sense to me. Why, he seems to ask, would you trust a picture in the first place? After all, even the smartest of them are simply *pictures*, not sentient beings. He makes clear that our (and by 'our' I mean people who live in big, Western cities) seemingly watertight understanding of the world is, in fact, as leaky as hell – which, though a pretty sad state of affairs, doesn't, thankfully, mean we can't have fun getting wet.

Jennifer Higgie is co-editor of frieze.

1 Rosa Vanina Pavone, 'Innocent Accidental Unintentional Indulgent. Never: An Interview with Matthew Brannon', *Uovo*, April 2006, p. 154
2 Email from Matthew Brannon to the author, 30 September 2008
3 Ibid., email from Matthew Brannon
4 Ibid., Pavone, p. 150
5 Saki, 'The She-Wolf', from *Beasts and Super-Beasts*, London, 1914
6 Ibid., Pavone, p. 148
7 Ibid., p. 148

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Ovenden, Olivia, “How Online Ceramics Captured the Gleeful Nihilism of 2020,” *Esquire.com*, December 12, 2020

Esquire

How Online Ceramics Captured the Gleeful Nihilism of 2020

The Grateful Dead-inspired LA designers discuss the political act of wearing a slogan, making art during a dark year, and the sweeter side of death

By Olivia Ovenden | December 12, 2020

ONLINE CERAMICS

There is something about a T-shirt reminding you that ‘We’re All Going To Die’ that feels so awkward, so like a nervous laugh or a shudder passing over your skin. It also feels perfectly entwined with a year in which death suddenly appeared much closer.

In October, Los Angeles brand Online Ceramics printed the phrase onto one of their t-shirts, the words cheerfully bobbing above a heart emoji-framed planet earth like a cross-stitch of a deeply weird year. The Instagram post announcing the new release quickly became a meme encompassing life during the pandemic, but the idea for the slogan had actually been around long before the world went into various quarantines, lockdowns and tiers. “We were about to release it and then the pandemic hit and we knew we couldn’t do it right now,” says Elijah Funk, co-creator of Online Ceramics, alongside Alix Ross. “As time has moved on it feels appropriate, because it’s not actually about the pandemic, it’s about existence throughout your daily life”.

Online Ceramics make twisted t-shirts and jumpers inspired by Grateful Dead iconography; a mixture of existential dread, druggy motifs and trippy California mysticism. There are skeletons propped up in a bath of blood inviting you to get in, snarling witches balancing on grumpy pumpkins, and a cauldron bubbling away with a guitar inside it. There are sweeter sentiments, too, like a lilac t-shirt with a teddybear on which reads: ‘If you are still searching for that one person who could change your life, look in the mirror’. Online Ceramics’s style is both distinctive and indiscriminate, trying to, as Funk says, “maintain a certain level of cleverness or humour or extremity to it that catapults it into a different direction”.

“A graphic t-shirt is a political statement,” says Ross, “I get excited about putting something on it that can shift someone’s way of thinking for maybe like a minute. I think that’s why people like our shirts, because they are guiding you or have these messages that are positive or just weird.”

Ovenden, Olivia, “How Online Ceramics Captured the Gleeful Nihilism of 2020,” *Esquire.com*, December 12, 2020

JASPER SPICERO

Funk and Ross are speaking to *Esquire* over Zoom, at home in LA, in front of a painting of Michael Myers from Halloween, and on a farm in Oregon with patchy WiFi, respectively. The duo met in college while studying fine art and several years later started the brand as a way to fund going to see The Grateful Dead, the band which they call themselves “disciples” of.

The duo would drive a van to concerts and set up shop in The Lot, eventually themselves becoming an attraction for fans to flock to. In 2017, as the band were having huge resurgence after John Mayer joined Dead & Co., and with releases to mark their fiftieth anniversary, Online Ceramics designed a hoodie for their fall tour which Mayer wore on stage. Since then their fanbase has grown beyond diehard Deadheads to become the outfitters of Downtown LA hipsters, clothing the likes of Jonah Hill from their Lincoln Heights studio.

Their clothes have been spotted on celebrities including Virgil Abloh, Emily Ratajkowski and Bella Hadid, and the brand has collaborated with cult studio A24 on merch for horror films like *Midsommar* and *The Witch*. All of which is to say they occupy the rarefied space of very cool brands, all while selling t-shirts which look a little bit like something your whacky aunt brought home from Sante Fe. “Online Ceramics on paper doesn’t really make sense,” says Funk of their success. “To us it’s like our own sense of humour and interests.”

Some of their slogans mirror the detached death-wishes coursing through the Internet, or else they display a kind of radical sincerity and earnestness which feels at odds with an age of rampant cynicism. Alongside motifs of dancing skeletons and grinning witches, many of their items come in gnarly tie-dye washes which emulate the band tees of the Seventies. The off-kilter aesthetic even extends to their intentionally ugly website, where clothing drops at random after being announced on Instagram.

Tie-dye is enjoying a resurgence in fashion as brands try to emulate the counter-culture style of the Sixties, a trend which Online Ceramics were at the forefront of starting up again, but don’t seem too bothered about taking credit for. “We started tie-dying shirts first and foremost because we kept getting the white shirts dirty,” says Ross. “We would tie dye them so we could charge people 30 bucks and not feel bad about it.”

2020 has been a strange year for Online Ceramics, one which has seen the personality of the brand align with the mood of the moment, yet also come with a new set of challenges. “I remember around the time of George Floyd’s death it got really difficult to know what to say,” Ross says. “We didn’t have a Dead tour this year and had to figure out how to adapt to this new way of working.”

At a time when people were reflecting and trying to maintain a sense of community, Online Ceramics didn’t want to make clothing which felt at all divisive or alienating. “For a while in streetwear it was very ‘you can’t sit here’ t-shirts”, says Funk. “I just don’t think there’s space for that now. That’s happening inherently through divisive politics in America, and we don’t need any more camps of aggression.”

That friendly sentiment exists even in the t-shirt reminding us of our own mortality, as if you look close enough the only word underlined is ‘all’, underscoring the idea that we’re all in this extreme experience together, for better or worse.

“I don’t think that messaging is at all intense,” says Funk of the idea we’re all going to die. “It’s super important to remember how lucky every day is. Out of context it seems really alarmist and hardcore, but it’s really a sweet sentiment to me.”

Fry, Naomi, “Finding Authenticity in a T-Shirt,” *NewYorker.com*, September 6, 2018

THE NEW YORKER

Finding Authenticity in a T-Shirt

By Naomi Fry | September 6, 2018

Earlier this summer, on the lot of Citi Field, in Queens, a familiar scene was unfolding. Shifty-eyed men were plying their trade (“doses and rolls, doses and rolls”), halter-topped women were selling edibles out of wicker baskets, Hare Krishnas were proffering vegetarian burritos, and grizzled men were tailgating with their wives and young children. It was an hour before a concert by Dead & Company, and this was “Shakedown Street,” the unauthorized open-air market that has become as much a part of the Grateful Dead experience as the trading of bootleg concert tapes. The Grateful Dead was always known for its eclectic fan base, and its crowd has, if anything, diversified since 2015, when most of the band’s remaining members formed a spin-off group with the musician John Mayer. In the last three years, a new breed of Dead follower has emerged, who, perhaps inspired by Mayer’s own style, is most easily identified by his combining of tie-dye with stylish streetwear. For this fan, Dead & Company, and the scene that has sprouted around it, has come to represent rebellion and its material accoutrements.

Online Ceramics’ tie-dyed T-shirts frequently sell out—which only makes them more attractive to style mavens seeking to distinguish themselves from their peers.Photograph Courtesy Online Ceramics

In the shade of a parked truck, next to a tent in which a woman was loudly complaining of having spilled a beer on her dog, a small throng of young people, more than a few of whom seemed to be wearing Vans, vintage Dead T-shirts, and Ray-Bans, were congregating around two men hawking their merchandise out of a large duffel bag. Elijah Funk, in sandals and maroon socks, and Alix Ross, in dark sunglasses, with his long, dreadlocked hair tucked into a black cap, are the twenty-eight-year-old founders of Online Ceramics, a line of elaborately screen-printed and tie-dyed graphic T-shirts, beloved by the improbable subculture comprised of Deadhead streetwear fanatics. With their grab bag of hippie, D.I.Y. punk, and hip-hop influences, Funk and Ross’s designs represent an apex of the fashion world’s search for authenticity. Tees by Online Ceramics have been picked up by the cutting-edge Los Angeles menswear shop Union, and will be carried next spring by the taste-making élite department-store chain Dover Street Market. For these purveyors and their customers, however, the fact that Funk and Ross still sell their tees in parking lots is undoubtedly part of the brand’s cachet.

On the lot, a twentysomething man in Nike sneakers—designed by Virgil Abloh, the artistic director of Louis Vuitton menswear, for his own label, Off-White—selected an Online Ceramics tee made especially for the Citi Field concert dates, and asked to take a picture with the designers. The man said that his shoes cost “four hundred bucks, but they were down from maybe nine hundred.” The Online Ceramics T-shirt, however, cost only thirty. It featured a picture of a skeleton atop a New York City taxicab driving through a brick wall, below the words “It’s one more Saturday night live,” and was typical of Online Ceramics designs, which, like those of other small brands, such as Advisory Board Crystals and Cactus Plant Flea Market, can be loosely defined as hippie streetwear. With their extremely limited production runs and handmade aesthetics, these labels are often thought of by their admirers as producing fine art rather than consumer goods. Mayer, who has followed Funk and Ross’s career since 2016 and sometimes wears an Online Ceramics shirt to perform, described the tees’ graphics, which incorporate the Grateful Dead’s traditionally trippy symbology—skulls, dancing bears, roses—like nothing he’d seen before. “There’s as much Migos in there as there is Jerry Garcia,” he said, referring to the Atlanta rap trio and the Dead’s late lead guitarist. “There’s Post Malone and Houston trap. They’re building Online Ceramics iconography rather than Dead ico-

Online Ceramics on the CRAZY RARE shirt that started it all

PLUS how to smoke DMT from a potato & what it's like to be a CHILD CLOWN

November 2, 2020

Yo damn what's up — today's newsletter is another Blackbird Spyplane ALL-TIMER, & we r sending it out a day early since tmw might be … distracting

Online Ceramics — they r young GRAPHIC-APPAREL GOATS who make SICK, CONSISTENTLY SURPRISING SLAPPERS … and as drop upon drop demonstrates, that's not gonna change any time soon !!

Elijah Funk and Alix Ross met at the Columbus College of Art and Design in their native Ohio — 2 art-school kids on their conceptual s**t who listened to noise-rock, punk, and the Grateful Dead. They moved to Los Angeles and founded Online Ceramics there in 2016, serving up hand-made tees at Dead shows on "Shakedown Street"…

In the 4 years since, they've broadened their vision without losing sight of the funny-anarchic-macabre kindvibes that made the brand a hit early on … They've designed instant-classic "cinephile bangers" commemorating *Uncut Gems (below left)* & *Midsommar*; apparel for SAVANTS OF SOUND like Weyes Blood, Oneohtrixpointnever and John Mayer (below right); created "splinter brands" like Mushroom House, Haunted Wagon, and Turtle River; and broadened their range of motifs to include … *AGRICULTURE*. "We were initially conceptual artists, so now it's, 'How can we bring that thinking into the clothing world," Elijah says.

Through it all, certain CORE PRINCIPLES have remained unchanged: 1. Ego-death is cool, 2. spooky energies are everywhere, 3. Earth is beautiful and will, like each & every one of us, one day perish — but before those things happen we got 2 protect it at all costs!!

Since we here at Blackbird Spyplane r GLUTTONS FOR INTEL aka the No. 1 source across all media for "unbeatable recon" on dope under-the-radar joints, we hit up the "OC BOYZ" and asked them each to tell us about a unique personal possession they hold near & dear…

They texted over some pics, and we got them on the Spyphone to demand answers…

Blackbird Spyplane: *Elijah, this shirt is great. It didn't wind up being yr "final choice" as far as what u wanted to talk about, but please tell us about it anyway …*

Elijah Funk: "So this is an eBay find from right when I moved here and Alix and I were first toying with the idea of making shirts. We were unhappy with the Grateful Dead shirts that were available to purchase at the time that weren't vintage, and when I found this, I was, like, 'This is the craziest graphic I've ever seen — it's so archaic and strange.' I don't know much

about it but it’s from the fall tour of ’84.

“The seller was asking $60, so I offered $50, and she sent me this whole thing back about how someone in her family made the shirt and I was insulting her family. I was, like, ‘Whoa, sorry,’ and forgot about it. And two weeks later she messaged me, like, ‘How about $55?’

“I bought it, and it was basically the genesis of us wanting to do these kind of punk, spooky Dead shirts that no one else was doing. I’d done a couple things that were Dead-adjacent but that didn’t have Dead iconography — just Dead lyrics with, like, imagery that was more in line with noise and punk.”

Blackbird Spyplane: *Wow, have you ever talked about this shirt before?*

Elijah: “No!”

Alix Ross: “And I’ve never come across this shirt any other time — just the one Elijah has.”

Elijah: “I’ve never seen it again, either, and I’ve seen it all by now. But this is what fully inspired our first bootlegs.”

Alix: “The application of the punk aesthetic to the Grateful Dead was obvious all of a sudden.”

Blackbird Spyplane: *Do u actually rock it or keep it filed away?*

Elijah, left, and Alix, right, in the process of selling approximately “3.5 shirts” to Dead fans on one of Online Ceramics’ early days

Elijah: “I wear it to bed sometimes, but it’s like a XXXL — it doesn’t go outside.”

Blackbird Spyplane: *So, Alix, you sent over a picture of an old potato that you once smoked DMT from. What’s the story?*

Alix: “I kind of like got low-key addicted to DMT when I was in college, like around 2012, when my friends were making it — then I moved to Maine and went all over the place for a few years, and the whole time I was traveling I couldn’t find DMT anywhere. It got popular in the last two years, but before then no one knew what it was unless you were, like, a festival kid.

“So finally I found some after moving to L.A., probably in 2016, and it was the first time I’d had it since 2012. I was so stoked, but I don’t smoke weed or anything so I didn’t have a way to smoke it. So I decided to make a pipe, like, ‘I need to smoke this s**t right now’ — and I saw these potatos on my counter and was like, ‘Dude.’”

Alix: “It’s really complicated. You have to carefully, like, take a Bic pen and shove it through the middle, and then do it again at a perpendicular angle with another pen, and if you don’t hit the right spot you have to keep messing with it. But I got it to work and blasted off with the potato and never got rid of it. I was like, ‘This potato is laced with DMT, it’s an interesting object’ — the buds are brown and old now, but when they were flowering it was, like, ‘Oh

my god, the DMT is making these beautiful flowers.’ Even though the potato would have grown those anyway.”

Elijah: “The flowers were kind of fractal.”

Alix: “They still are, now that I’m staring at it. Every now and then I’ll suck on it and taste the DMT — I’m sucking it now, and it’s a nice, flowery taste. But it’s straight-up petrified. It looks like a piece of bark.”

Elijah: “I remember when you made it — it’s right when Online Ceramics started. I came over that day and tried DMT off the potato. I didn’t blast off, though.”

Alix: “You’re the only other person who’s smoked out of this potato.”

Blackbird Spyplane: *What’s yr word from the wise to a mushie-lover about taking DMT??*

Alix: “My word from the wise is, ‘If DMT finds you, you should do it.’ It’s something like, if someone has it and says, Do you want to smoke it, you should smoke it, because essentially the DMT is asking you to smoke it. But if it never comes into your radius, it might not be for you.”

Elijah: “I came to DMT later. I dig it. These days it’s really difficult to sign up a whole day to mushrooms — DMT carries you further, but you can regroup in, like, 30 minutes.”

Alix: “I used to smoke it on my lunch breaks.”

Blackbird Spyplane: *Okay & finally, this picture is adorable as hell. How old are u here, Elijah?*

Elijah: “2 or 3. Basically, long story short, I chose this photo because I was a clown when I was little, instead of going to preschool. My grandmother was a clown, so that was my education: I’d tag along and go be a clown with her, so that was my formative experience of being a child. It’s informed my perspective and I think it informs the playful, clowning nature of Online Ceramics.

A photo of lil’ Elijah dressed up as a clown by his grandmother, who worked as a clown

“My first memory is my watching my grandmother put on clown make-up in her dining room, while I’m on the floor. I remember the smell of the make-up. It was strange in a way, but also totally normal, because this is my caretaker. So I’d get rolled around in a wagon at nursing homes, helping her entertain sick people, I’d be in parades — I was this little happy baby clown.

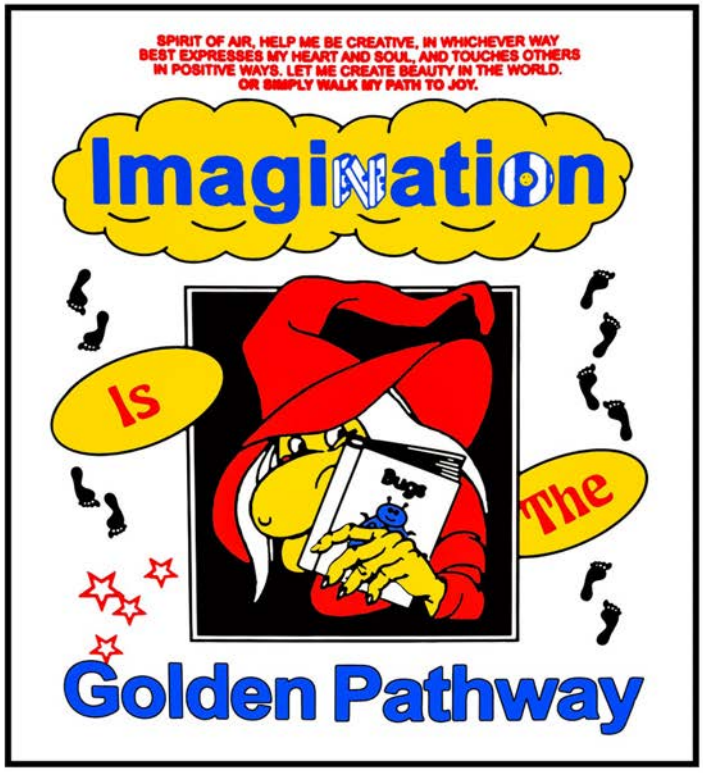
“My grandmother actually died on Halloween, and we were never a Halloween family, but I think she might have done it intentionally — like, she saw the humor in dying on Halloween. Since then it was game on — celebrating Halloween, getting haunted by ghosts, watching scary movies. A few years ago I took my mother to this abandoned insane asylum in Ohio for Mother’s Day — she was like, ‘My aunt died here.’ I was like, ‘Jesus.’

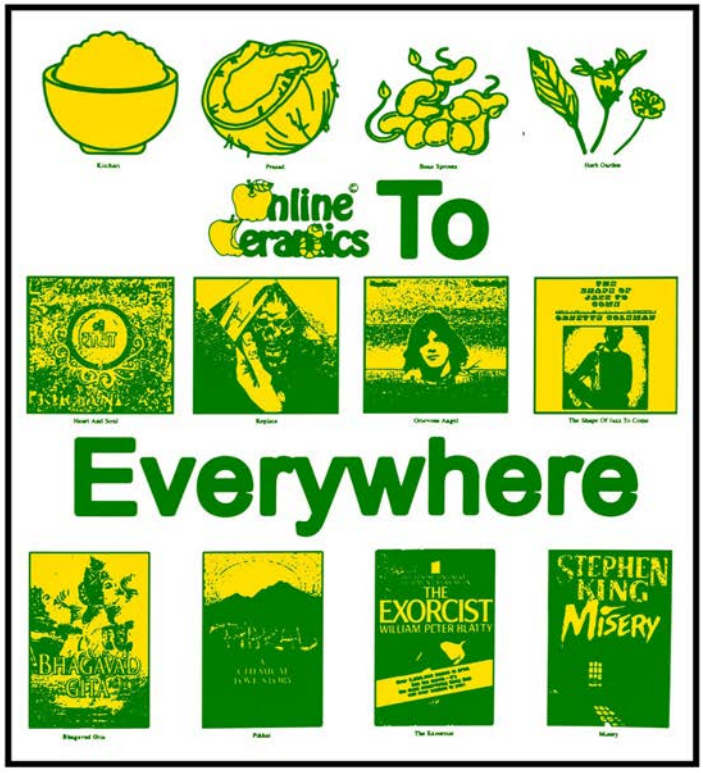
“But it all goes back to being a clown with my grandma, and her dying on Halloween — that was the start of that entire viewpoint.”

Online Ceramics Is Having an Isolation-Induced Creative Breakthroug

Check out a new design from the Dead bootleggers, made exclusively for GQ.

By Samuel Hine | May 14, 2021





Original design created for GQ by Online Ceramics.

In the great graphic T-shirt revival of the late 2010s, nobody struck a chord quite like Alix Ross and Elijah Funk, the artists behind Online Ceramics, which has grown from a scrappy bootleg Grateful Dead merch operation into an insurgent fashion movement cosigned by the likes of John Mayer, Virgil Abloh, and Bella Hadid.

Though the coronavirus shutdown has put a steady stream of summer collaborations—and their yearly ritual of touring with Dead & Company—on pause, Ross and Funk are taking advantage of the downtime to expand the universe of psychedelic skeletons, cosmic mindfulness, clean eating, and earth magic that animates their graphics. “We haven’t felt this creatively free since the start of the brand,” Ross says. “There’s actually more time to access ourselves during this,” Funk adds. “So it’s leading to more creative thought.”

From their respective homes in L.A., Ross and Funk have launched a new radio show with Elara Radio called *Train Wrecks* and *Trip Reports*, where they read spooky and shocking accounts of what they call “good trips gone bad.” They’ve also completed a virtual look book project with the digital artist Jasper Spicero, and continue to work on a forthcoming painting show. And in between their projects, they created an Online Ceramics design for GQ that reflects the far-out zones their minds have wandered to during lockdown.

“This shirt is about process, and it’s about what we do when we’re locked in,” Funk says. “I’m trying to figure out a way to illustrate the fact that you can go anywhere while still being somewhere.” Unpack the dense symbolism and you’ll find a quote from ethnobotanist Terence McKenna, text from a Wiccan spell, bean sprouts from Funk’s garden, and a selection of albums and books for isolation. “The overall energy of what we do comes from these things,” Funk says. “They are all Online Ceramics in a way.”

Shapiro, Daniel, “Online Ceramics: From Grateful Dead Bootlegs to Streetwear Staple,” *InsideHook.com*, February 26, 2020

InsideHook

Online Ceramics: From Grateful Dead Bootlegs to Streetwear Staple

Founders Elijah Funk and Alix Ross chart the meteoric rise of their brand

Via Online Ceramics / Instagram

In just a few years, the Online Ceramics shirt has turned into one of the most coveted items in nearly any wardrobe, but also the most subversive. Sure, they design shirts for Dead and Co. shows and A24 films, but there is a message of openness and experimentation behind every design.

After meeting in a Columbus, Ohio, college dorm, Elijah Funk and Alix Ross became fast friends over their mutual love for art and experimental music. They went their separate ways for a brief time before reuniting in Los Angeles. The idea then was simple: a homemade pottery and book store they would call Online Ceramics. They have since created a visual language all their own through a vast collection of thickly-inked and wild-dyed tees, knits and accessories that couple Grateful Dead imagery with Eastern spirituality, counter-cultural icons, punk-rock aesthetics and the everyday joy of shed-tour style.

InsideHook caught up with the duo to see how they make it all work.

InsideHook: The two of you met at a time when seismic shifts happen in people’s creative and personal lives. What is it that’s kept you working together to this day?

Alix: Elijah has always inspired me and inspires me to want to make art together.

Elijah: I think it was pretty inherent that early on, whatever made us friends was also a creative motivator in the way that we just trusted each other. Sometimes Alix has an idea or I have an idea that the other one sees and says I don’t know … But at the end of the day we’re always like, well, you’ve been right most of the time. It’s a severe level of trust and understanding of taste and quality that I think is pretty rare for two people to have. In the same way when you get a really good band together, you say well I’ll always work with that guy because he makes great songs. And we have a really similar sense of humor and dynamic while being pretty different people.

What was it like at the onset of Online Ceramics and how has your relationship changed from working side-by-side?

Elijah: We have a lot more responsibilities. We’re a little less crazy now. We don’t have to chase each other down at night. But for the most part I’d say it’s been fairly consistent.

Alix: The way it kind of started out was that I was working for Laura Owens, the painter. She had all this gear that we could use to screenprint. I was using her screens to print shirts while Elijah was primarily designing most of the first designs. So I wasn’t designing full time until a year and a half ago. But Elijah had been doing freelance design pretty much within the first couple of months of living in L.A. You quit your coffee job pretty quick.

Elijah: I worked a real job here for maybe 8-10 months. And then new years 2016 I was just done. They scheduled me until midnight then wanted me to come in at 5 a.m. on New Year’s and there was just no way. I was like whatever, I’m just going to make this thing work. And that allowed me the time to really build my chops. I was freelancing and I figured out how to

Via Online Ceramics / Instagram

Via Online Ceramics / Instagram

get through the work within an hour or two every day. I would pump out band shirts. And the rest of the day was pretty much not leaving my apartment in Koreatown and figuring out how to do Online Ceramics. Now it’s a little less pressure on me, creatively, where before I would design at night, Alix would burn the screens after work and we would print until one in the morning, wake up and do it again. Now it’s a little bit more of a balance.

Alix: Something that’s really dope is that I can now actually spend the whole day designing. And there’s definitely been a learning curve for me because I was never really a designer, per-se. Elijah’s always been designing T-shirts and punk posters and that’s been a part of his history as an artist. I did that stuff but not nearly as much. I was making a lot of video art in college and doing weird performance sculpture stuff. So I basically taught myself how to use Photoshop … I still don’t know how to use Photoshop, but I can use it enough to get around to making the designs that I make and build up my visual style within the brand. So being able to actually focus on Online Ceramics and build my own visual language within it was a big change since it started.

Elijah: Both of us were making pretty far out contemporary art that was probably relatively indigestible to most people, honestly, aside from our crew and our freaky little scene at the time. I think a lot of those variants have been a consistent marker in no matter what we’re making, if it’s a shirt for a movie or a shirt for us, or an event that we do, it kind of always has the same undercurrent.

There was an amazing noise and experimental scene both in and coming to play in Ohio around the time you were in school together. What sort of lasting impact did that have on how you approach what you do?

Alix: I think it’s really laid the foundation on how me and Elijah work together. We have another partner, Jack, who was also part of that same crew. Elijah and Jack ran a few noise spaces, punk houses. And later in college I was living at a place called Skylab and would book shows there. Jack eventually moved to Skylab and then Elijah moved there too.

Elijah: I remember my mom dropped me off at my first noise show at Skylab. I showed up at like 4 p.m. and the shows at Skylab didn’t kick off until 11. And there was some kid who was like, “Come up here and hang out with us all day.” But I remember being physically terrified of being there. It was the most no-holds-barred, anything-goes performance world. I think it erased a lot of fear in what we do. And also just the physicality of living in places and experiencing those things … I mean we joke around all the time with our friend Ross who works here too, and Jack, who lived in that place. We didn’t have windows, we didn’t have heat. We were literally squatting.

Alix: Yea, well Ross smashed the windows out, so …

Elijah: Yeah, but the actual physicality of being that desperate and that confused and young and saying, “I will do whatever to essentially be a freak,” that I think has made this thing happen. Because I think If Alix and I didn’t learn that at such a young age we would have given up a long time ago. It gives you a stubbornness to say I’m going to be into this thing no matter what that takes and I’ll probably do it forever, quietly.

Alix: Honestly, it’s kind of similar to a fraternity. Me, you, Jack, Josh, and Ross all work here with us at Online Ceramics, and those are all old homies from back in the day that we lived with at these spaces. So there is this unspoken psychic thing that we’ve built upon through living in really intense situations and creating beautiful experiences for people.

Elijah: Being pretty wide open and free for most of our lives and not really subscribing to other stuff has really shifted the way that we are as adults. And I just want to say that the band Sword Heaven … I recommend anyone watch a video of that because when you’re a kid and you see that, like the best noise band to come out of the Midwest aside from Wolf Eyes …

If that’s your entry point into what art can be, it really does manipulate your whole consciousness.

Alix: I was 16 years old and the first noise show I ever went to was a Wasteland Jazz Unit show in Cincinnati and Wolf Eyes headlined and that fully obliterated my concept of what art and music could be at all. I had never known or seen anything to be like that and it was really inspiring at a young age.

So if you didn’t have the influence of that scene, what do you think you might be doing now?

Elijah: I fully intended on being a teacher or an art therapist, you know, and just be a hobby artist in my garage. I was already kind of running around with some pretty fringe groups, like people really into hardcore and veganism and “Food Not Bombs” when I was a young kid. But I only thought it could go so far, you know.

Alix: I would have gone to art school no matter what and eventually probably moved to New York City, so I would be making art in some capacity for sure.

If you can, take me through a typical shirt design. How do you both work to bring the idea from your head to our backs?

Alix: I have probably 20 different Photoshop files going at one time. Three or four of those files are going to eventually become one design. I usually start with either a quote or a really strong drawing or image that I have. That could be a Clip Art piece, that could be just a drawing that I’ve done. At some point those three components will eventually make it onto one design but it always varies with which comes first.

Elijah: I work relatively similarly, but i’ll kind of just gather and gather and gather images and I’ll read and think, and generally I’m pretty stumped for weeks on what to do. And then something hits me. That’s the jumping-off point. Then I’ll usually come in and it’s just about listening to music, looking at all the images around and it usually kind of forms itself. Once I stop thinking it really comes together. I have to allow space for it to not be exactly what I was thinking when I considered it in the first place. And that’s usually where the sweet spot is, like “Oh yeah this goes here, that goes there.” But sometimes I’ll genuinely have a really solid concept and say, “This is what it needs to be.” When it comes to the crazier detailed stuff I kind of let it go until it feels resolved. Generally I can’t plan that too hard.

Via Online Ceramics / Instagram

Online Ceramics has expanded a great deal since the first shirt came out in 2016 and yet you continue to run it like a small family business. Why is that important to you?

Alix: I think for our own mental health, honestly. I like being close with everyone that we work with and I think Elijah feels the same. It has expanded a lot but we’re trying to not let it feel too crazy because the weight of running a big business can affect me on a stress level. I feel like keeping it small, keeping it as few employees as possible and just dialing it in feels good for me.

Elijah: One of the important things to remember is that we never set out to really run a business. Neither of us thought we were going to be businessmen. We never thought we’d be talking to an accountant. We never thought we’d have to worry about an LLC. That is all foreign enough to where I think the idea of turning into some conglomerate would not only take the soul out of it and take away what I think people really like about us, which is that we’re not some giant entity that they’re getting a shirt from. I like when I see on the internet that people say, “Oh it’s going to take them a while to ship, they’re a bunch of hippies.” I think that’s important to our story, but it’s like Alix is saying, it’s also a psychic thing. At what point are you producing just

to produce, to keep the lights on? At what point are we actually fulfilling a purpose here? I think we have a pretty explicit purpose for what we're trying to do. Maybe for ourselves, maybe it's a learned thing from this noise and punk and Grateful Dead world of not wanting to over-expand and eat yourself alive.

Since day one you've made experimental bootleg Grateful Dead shirts. How does it feel to now work with Grateful Dead Productions and what's the story behind the project name Turtle River?

Elijah: We're in a trial period with this whole thing kind of fishing it out. And considering that we've already worked with the band Dead and Company, It's obviously the biggest honor to get to work with people who you love and respect so much. But I don't think there's been a giant dynamic shift.

Alix: There's a few people at Rhino who have been really supportive and amazing to have a connection with now. And yeah, It's a huge honor for us to be able to use the trademarks. The whole thing with Turtle River [Online Ceramics' dedicated Grateful Dead collection] is that it was a way for us to use the trademarks but not fully impact the Online Ceramics core brand. A few times a year we'll do a few official trademark shirts or pieces.

Elijah: It's how now we work with movies. We don't want to be the brand that just makes shirts for A24. We want to have our own creative freedom to do what we want without being pigeonholed and that's just a nice little escape hatch to keep these things going and moving in new directions without carrying the weight of saying, "This is what we are".

Alix: Yeah, it keeps it all at arm's length so we can be more free in some way.

Elijah: And Turtle River is just one of those cool names that we liked. All the names we use are kind of like little bands or pet projects.

Alix: We had a few working names for six months and I eventually asked my girlfriend if she had any ideas for names. One had the word river in it and another had turtle in it, and she just said, "What about Turtle River?" And that was it. We had been failing for a minute, thinking about what we were going to call it.

Elijah: Yeah, we had been failing because it's intimidating. It's like we're trying to honor this tradition of this thing that's one of the core elements of not only our brand, but our existence. But it was about doing it in a way that feels true to us. And obviously all love and respect to Liquid Blue [another Dead merch purveyor] and what they've done, but we don't want our enterprise to be that either. We want it to still be us and for people to see that and say, "That's definitely Online Ceramics' take on that universe."

You've spent a few years in the parking lots at Dead and Company shows. Who or what inspires you in that scene?

Alix: I'm a huge fan of Nick and Alaina from Deep Thoughts.

Elijah: There's this one guy who makes these digital paintings and I can't remember his name off the top of my head. He's an older head and he's been doing it forever. He's the one who got us a parking space at Boulder.

Alix: Oh, that guy.

Elijah: Yeah, he's dope. I think more than imagery wise, I think just the actual humans involved is what really inspires me. I'm not really out looking for inspiration when I'm in the parking lot. We kind of started Online Ceramics as a result of feeling less than inspired by a lot of the modern shirts. So to me it's the actual energy and the friends. And the number-one takeaway for me is the show. That's always the biggest inspiration factor. I think we've only ever gone to one parking lot and didn't go in to the show. End of the day I want to go watch the music. It's why we started. It's funny, I think people may have a misconception of why we started or think we're from this different world, but it was genuinely to raise money to go to concerts.

Alix: Partially as a joke. We heard about the Grateful Dead lot and thought, "Why can't we try it?' Let's see what happens." It wasn't ironic, it was more like, would people buy these shirts from us? Let's see if we can do this.

Like saying, "Can we join the circus?"

Via Online Ceramics / Instagram

Elijah: Exactly, through our completely warped lens. Looking back at that, we were crazy. We were insane.

Alix: What we thought was possible … I can’t believe we had that mindset.

Elijah: We were kind of raw.

Alix: We were insane.

Elijah: We learned a lot. It was truly going out on a limb, sincerely and honestly. We both had just gotten off the high of Fare Thee Well. We were new as best friends and Deadheads and neither of us had a partner in crime in that way. It was just about going and living this thing that we were both so interested in. The thought was how do we enter that life, respectfully and artfully. I feel like we did it pretty gracefully.

How’s it feel to be at a Dead show, in that atmosphere, and you see your little corner of it?

Elijah: It’s humbling. I mean, how fortunate are we that anyone cares about what we do? Luckiest people in the world.

Alix: Yeah, we’re super grateful.

Many Online Ceramics shirts have spiritual texts and images or references to various causes or lifestyles. Do you ever think these doses of consciousness get lost in the hype of it all?

Elijah: I think there’s potential for that but I think every time someone is activating a positive thing in their environment, whether they are consciously accepting it or not is a great thing. Even if the person wearing it doesn’t get it or read into it deeply, you never know who’s behind them in line at the grocery store. You know what I mean? I’ve been a proponent for

positivity my whole life and if that’s what we can do, that’s the sickest mission that we can be on.

Alix: I feel like no matter what, it has the ability to spread.

The collection you dropped before the new year has some fairly normal pieces in it. Was that done consciously as an olive branch to the less adventurous or are you just mixing things up a bit?

Elijah: Honestly, sometimes it just gets really hard to be psycho crazy creative. And sometimes you have to accept that you can do a simple thing. That’s one of the biggest things we’ve been learning, me in particular. If you saw my computer right now you’d say, “This guy needs to calm down.” It’s like not every song has to be an insane hardcore jam. Sometimes you want to hear a sweet little thing, you know? Fortunately for us, Online Ceramics gives us this room to try new instruments, sing new songs, see where it goes. Personally, I don’t wear crazy clothes. I can be a fan of something that’s so ornate and chaotic, but that doesn’t mean I want to exist with it 24/7.

Alix: The way I usually work my designs is that Elijah will bring his maximal style and I’ll contrast that. A lot of my designs are smaller and very reactive to his more dense images. It gives people the ability to have a gamut of the vibe. You could wear a simple logo or something that’s super vibrant and intense. They’re all statements. But I think It’s fun to make something a little more simple.

Both OC and A24 have had a big year and you’ve made a lot of merch for them. Which was your favorite to create and are you working on anything with them now?

Alix: Honestly, there are no favorites with them. Pretty much every movie that we’ve done merch for, me and Elijah have been extremely excited about. Working with them, I’m so stoked and excited. It doesn’t matter what movie we’re doing. I would be just as excited. Being able to be associated with a movie when we’re a design brand is such a privilege. It’s cool to me to say the movie The Lighthouse in the same sentence as Online Ceramics. Like how could we even be associated with something so amazing? We definitely have more amazing projects coming up with them this year.

What do you have your sights set on for 2020, either personally or with your brand?

Alix: We’ve gotten down our visual style down well and have built the brand up, so I feel like now maneuvering it within its current context and finding who we align with for more collaborations.

Elijah: We’re really excited to shift gears for a minute. And kind of riffing off what he’s saying, we have figured out how to do this now. Alix and I have sacrificed a lot to get here. And the first year of my 30s I want to figure out my personal life a bit more. Find a better apartment. Find a girlfriend. Calm down. Have time at night to watch a movie. Really simple things that we threw out the window to get here. How do we navigate this monster while maintaining sanity and clarity and the things we talk about with our shirts? How do we achieve those things? How do we grow into those things, too, and how do we apply those to our own lives? Next year I want to chill out a little more. I want to go on vacation. I want to cook.

When you said you have some incredible opportunities my mind immediately went to an Online Ceramics-designed electric car.

Alix: That’s hilarious.

Elijah: Dude, well if you know anyone…

What would that even look like?

Alix: A Model-T replica.

Photograph Courtesy Online Ceramics

nography.” He told me that he had recently seen Abloh in one of the shirts. “I was telling people a year ago, ‘This is like Nirvana,’ ” he said, adding that he expected Urban Outfitters to produce imitations soon. “Give it two months.”

The T-shirt, one of the more consistent style staples of the modern era, is experiencing a particular moment of popularity. In the past couple of years, influential streetwear brands like Supreme and Palace have been reaching beyond their original target audience of urban skaters to teens, thirtysomething creatives, and moms in their forties. New versions of logoed tees are continually presented and snapped up at so-called drops—weekly unveilings of new, limited-edition merchandise. Meanwhile, high-end labels such as Vetements, Gosha Rubchinskiy, and Off-White have been introducing their own takes on graphic shirts. (In 2016, Vetements sold a plain yellow tee bearing the DHL logo in red—identical, to the untrained eye, to one sold by the courier-service company, but retailing for upward of three hundred dollars.) Perhaps most influentially, artists like Justin Bieber and Kanye West have stamped T-shirts (and hoodies and baseball caps and pants) with distinctive renderings of their names and song and album titles, setting off a craze for “merch” that has also spread to film-production companies, bookstores, and smoked-fish emporia.

It is within this context that Online Ceramics has taken off. Samuel Hine, the assistant style editor at GQ, attended a Dead & Company concert this summer, in Boulder, Colorado, and bought a yellow-and-purple tie-dyed West Coast–tour tee from Online Ceramics. “They sold, like, a hundred shirts in forty-five minutes,” he recalled of Funk and Ross. “It was, like, Shakedown Street Supreme.” The shirts frequently sell out—which only makes them more attractive to style mavens seeking to distinguish themselves from their peers. As Mayer put it, “I think of Online Ceramics like a band, and the T-shirts are the albums, and I want to collect all of them.”

For Ross, a Dead fan since high school, designing T-shirts was, at first, a way to pay for tickets to the concerts. As a student at the Columbus College of Art & Design, he became an avid taker of LSD, which helped him reach a different spiritual plane while listening to the Grateful Dead’s noodly jams. “I’ve seen him crying and slapping the ground at shows,” Funk told me recently. Ross and Funk, both from Ohio, attended Columbus College together, and felt that the Dead represented something that they wanted to re-create in their art. “The Dead had experimental music, they didn’t have a record label, they had super-D.I.Y., proto-punk ethics,” Funk said. “All we wanted to do was listen to the Dead and talk about the Dead,” Ross added.

After graduating, Funk and Ross moved to L.A. “We were super broke,” Ross told me. “We had, like, *no* money, essentially.” Funk—skinny and brimming with energy, with a blond buzz cut, wire-rim glasses, and a dense pattern of dozens of tattoos creeping up his neck and down his fingers—did some freelance design jobs and worked at a coffee shop. Ross, who is tall and lanky, with the low-key, dreamy demeanor of an early-seventies Topanga Canyon heartthrob, worked at a latex fetish shop in Silver Lake for minimum wage, assisted the painter Laura Owens, and helped out at a ceramics studio. “I had been making these flutes you could actually play—weird stuff,” he recalled. At one point, the pair thought they could produce these clay objects together. “I got, like, the domain for it—‘online ceramics,’ ” Ross said. “I just thought it was hilarious. What a goofy name to call a ceramics store!” But, in early 2016, their friend Sonya Sombreuil, of the cult line Come Tees, asked them to make a T-shirt for her booth at the L.A. Art Book Fair. “We were, like, this is our in, this is our function,” Funk recalled.

You can see the shirt that Funk and Ross made on the Online Ceramics Instagram account, which they officially launched in March, 2016. Like all of the brand’s designs, the T-shirt’s aesthetic is not immediately placeable, or even especially lovely in any conventional sense. Tie-dyed in spatters of olive green and purple, and printed with the phrase “My Religion Is Kindness” in a wonky font reminiscent of elementary-school worksheet graphics, the T-shirt also bears a hodgepodge of

enigmatic symbols: a hand with a tree growing out of its middle finger; a diagram of two circles; the word “hate” in polka-dot letters, upside down; a chalice. It appears, at first glance, like a memento from a family reunion that one might come across at a provincial Salvation Army store. To look at the shirt is to feel one’s eye straining to take in something new, or at least newly reconfigured. Is this ugly? Dorky? Cool? Is it some sort of ironic stunt, a Mike Kelley–style art-school in-joke, or a sincere gesture?

“We’re trying to see how far you can stretch something to the point where it’s just, like, a mystery, and then it’s, like, *rad*,” Funk told me, when I visited them in their studio, in downtown Los Angeles, this summer. He and Ross were sitting on upside-down paint buckets in one of the low-ceilinged, semi-dilapidated shacks in which the pair, with the help of two employees and some freelancers, now tie-dye and screen-print, by hand, hundreds of T-shirts a month. The 2018 Dead & Company summer tour was still under way, and shirts were selling out. Mayer had happened to wear the one style that hadn’t been selling well onstage the night before. “It’ll probably be jumping up now,” Funk said. Freshly tie-dyed shirts, in hues of green and purple and orange and yellow and blue, were coiled in rows, snail-like, on a table; shirts stacked in a pile to the side were printed, on their front sides, with the phrase “Your Ego Is Not Your Amigo” under a drawing of a jester in a striped cap, its long, pointy crown stretched in the shape of a circle, and, on their back, with the words “Let goooo now” on a red, smiley-faced butterfly. I later bought a shirt—a black long-sleeve printed with the words “World Peace” in multicolored handwritten letters—online. The first time I wore it, a barista at my co-working space asked me about it. “It’s so”—she seemed to be grasping for the word—“happy?”

In the summer of 2016, Funk and Ross bought tickets for the West Coast leg of the Dead & Company tour, and started to make Grateful Dead–themed merch to sell on Shakedown Street. Soon, the Instagram account @fromthelot, which documents Dead memorabilia and paraphernalia, began featuring Funk and Ross’s designs. “Every time the account would post, we’d get, like, a hundred and fifty new followers,” Ross said. (They now have more than thirty thousand.) Some of these followers would purchase Online Ceramics shirts online, on the brand’s lo-fi Web site, which links to Ross’s favorite L.A. yoga studio and the sign-up page to an organic-produce C.S.A.

There was something reassuring about the bustle of the L.A. studio, its limited, modest mode of production. (The designers buy unprinted, plain-color T-shirts from Los Angeles–based purveyors, for five to ten dollars each.) In one of the shacks, an assistant was busily screen-printing, while, in the room where we sat, a new employee, A. J. Kahn, a bespectacled twenty-two-year-old U.C.L.A. art-school graduate, his arms peppered with stick-and-poke tattoos, was organizing dozens of freshly tie-dyed shirts in large mounds, according to size. “Our T-shirts are very touched,” Ross said. “They’re being handled many times.”

As Kahn sorted the T-shirts, conversation turned to the D. A. Pennebaker documentary “Monterey Pop,” from 1968, which took as its subject the 1967 Californian music festival of the same name, and allowed a glimpse into the emergence of countercultural hippiedom. Kahn had been reading about the alternative school that Joan Baez established in Carmel Valley, in Monterey County, California. “It was, like, two-month sessions, and fifteen kids would just read and talk about concepts of nonviolence and how to avoid participating in the war,” he said. Ross looked awed. Kahn continued, “Residents who lived there for years came down on Baez and took her to court, talking about how, like, she was trying to set up a circumstance where Monterey would become the next Haight-Ashbury. There was this intense divide.”

Ross shook his head. “It’s too bad. Monterey sucks.” He paused for a moment, considering. “I mean, I like Monterey. Monterey’s awesome.”

Photograph Courtesy Online Ceramics

Satenstein, Liana, “Why Is Emily Ratajkowski Obsessed With This Cult Hippie Label?,” *Vouge.com*, January 14, 2020

VOGUE

Why Is Emily Ratajkowski Obsessed With This Cult Hippie Label?

By Liana Satenstein | January 14, 2020

Photo Collage by Hannah Tran / Photo: Getty

Emily Ratajkowski has been looking ultra groovy lately. Parts of her wardrobe, mostly her shirts, appear to have entered a psychedelic time warp, as if she were a flower-child Rumpelstiltskin from 1968 who magically awoke (with every hair intact) in the back of a Volkswagen beetle bus parked in a SoHo parking lot in 2020. Take last night: Ratajkowski and her husband, Sebastian Bear-McClard, were spotted front row at the Lakers game in Los Angeles, wearing a pair of tie-dye T-shirts. Bear-McClard wore a muddled light purple incarnation with a cartoon frog that read in cheerful cursive script, “The problem is we think we have time.” Ratajkowski, meanwhile, wore a tie-dye T-shirt version that was cropped, along with a Moncler blue puffer coat, faded jeans, and white stiletto boots. The hand-dyed garments were not from a Grateful Dead enthusiast’s eBay page, but rather from the cult-beloved Los Angeles–based label Online Ceramics. And it’s not the first time the duo has worn the label: Back in November, Ratajkowski posted an image on Instagram of her and her husband wearing hoodies from Online Ceramics, often lovingly abbreviated to “OC.” They both wore the now sold-out blue Apple logo hoodie that is inscribed with the phrases “Haunted Wagon Inc./ Mushroom House/ Turtle River.” Ratajkowski wore hers with a black blazer from her own line, Inamorata—and it doesn’t stop there! Before Christmas, she posed for the camera in an Online Ceramics long-sleeve shirt that read, “Sun Brand/ You can learn a lot from staring at the sun.”

So how did EmRata, with her 25.2 million followers, learn about Online Ceramics? After all, it’s a small-ish brand with a bare-bones website that appears as if it survived the great GeoCities crash. And yet, it has a rabid following. A bit of backstory: Online Ceramics was created by Elijah Funk and Alix Ross, two Grateful Dead fans who got their start by creating bootleg Deadhead garb. (They even had a collaboration with John Mayer on a hoodie.) In addition to their own label, Funk and Ross have also made merch for the film distribution company A24, which has worked on Safdie brothers–directed films such as *Uncut Gems* (2019) and *Good Time* (2017). Bear-McClard produces films with the Safdies, meaning he has mostly likely gotten his hands on that good ole Online Ceramics garb, which probably trickled down into Ratajkowski’s own closet. Pretty far out, right?

Tharpe, Frazier, “Online Ceramics x A24: How a Partnership Between the Hottest Film Company and a Fire T-Shirt Brand Came to Be,” *Complex.com*, November 19, 2019

COMPLEX

Online Ceramics x A24: How a Partnership Between the Hottest Film Company and a Fire T-Shirt Brand Came to Be

By Frazier Therpe | November 19, 2019

Image via Online Ceramics

Alix Ross and Elijah Funk are hard guys to pin down, not that you can blame them. Their t-shirt brand Online Ceramics, has been steadily gathering awareness and momentum since they founded it together three years ago after first linking up in an Ohio art school. The name stems from their initial desire to be sculptors, but since its launch, OC has quickly developed a reputation for tees notorious for trippy, macabre imagery and text that stems from their shared Grateful Dead fandom, and unique dye jobs that give each shirt a fresh DIY feel.

Recently though, they’ve been gaining traction in a whole other lane as a merch arm for the ever-popular production company A24. Excitement for A24 films reached a fever pitch during *Hereditary’s* promo run—and when t-shirts with lush, vibrant font and eye-popping stills from the movie dropped, it exploded. Since then, Alix and Elijah have made merch for *Hereditary* director Ari Aster’s second feature film, *Midsommar*, a retroactive pop-up for *The Witch*, as well as the Robert Pattinson-Willem Dafoe headtrip *The Lighthouse*. As A24 develops an increasingly rabid fanbase off of quality consistency alone, Online Ceramics has enjoyed a parallel trajectory as their tees find placements in stores like Union and Dover Street Market—and when those trajectories intertwine, must-have merch for every stylish film-nerd is born.

After months of email-tag, Alix and Elijah finally have some free time to hop on the phone with Complex—from a parking lot in Virginia, no less, hours before they’ll do another one of their lo-fi parking lot pop-ups. (In addition to turning what they’ll tell me is a lifelong obsession with film into making official movie merch, they’ve also translated their Grateful Dead fandom into a gig touring with Dead & Company, designing and selling gear for them as well.) The duo are everything you’d expect the masterminds behind this brand to be: palpably

passionate, genuinely living and breathing what they do to a point where at one instance, they trailed off mid-answer during our convo to admire a passerby’s fit. Read their interview with Complex, where they detail their relationship with A24, what’s in store for 2020, working with John Mayer and which films they wish they designed merch for.

So how did the relationship with A24 begin?

Alix: Well first and foremost we’ve been a fan of A24 for years, but two years ago when Hereditary dropped—they showed it at Sundance a few years ago and it like broke the internet. And a few friends of mine shot me the trailer and they were like, “Dude, this is like going to be like the dopest movie of the year.” I watched the trailer and I immediately texted the trailer to Elijah and I was like, “Dude, we have to, have to, have to make movie merch for this movie.”

We’re huge fans of horror movie merch and like just movie merch in general. But I was just like, we have to do whatever we can in our power to like get ahold of A24 to do a t-shirt for this movie. And so we basically were DMing Ari Aster, we were DMing A24, just like cold DMing. I have a few friends that are like in the movie industry. So I put out all my feelers and I even got connected with someone at A24 but she wasn’t necessarily the person we needed and that kind of fell through.

And then like a week before *Hereditary* came out, we had the graphics pretty much ready and we were just like, fuck it dude. Like let’s just bootleg this. We’re just going to draw up these shirts and like, we’ll get a cease and desist letter and we’ll stop making it. We just wanted to have the merch for ourselves. We still hadn’t seen *Hereditary* but we just knew we had such a gut feeling about it.

Elijah: It was right in our vein of what we enjoy from a horror movie.

Alix: So we went ahead and we were like, okay, let’s just drop it. But then the twist was we were hanging out with our friend Will Welch who is the editor-in-chief of GQ and we mentioned we really want to do this merch. And he was just like, “Damn, you guys should have told me a while ago like let me see if I can put you in contact with someone I know there.” And then a few days later, the creative director emailed us and she had been aware of the brand and she was real stoked on us and she was just 100 percent down.

Basically we were about to start printing the shirts and then last second, it became official.

Elijah: We put the logos on it. They sent us some screenshots and we got to put their logo, so it was like really nice.

Alix: And since then, the relationship has just been like, they’ve given us opportunities to do other movies. The next one was *Midsommar*, which was Ari Aster. And we were super stoked to do that. And then *The Lighthouse*, which just came out and like we did *Witch* merch for a Dover [Street Market] pop-up. But yeah, they’re the best people ever. And we are so honored and stoked that they’re down to work with us.

When you guys started the brand, did you ever see yourself getting to a point of making movie merch?

Elijah: Absolutely not.

Alix: I 100 percent did.

Elijah: Not like official probably.

Alix: I mean in my mind, when we started making t-shirts, my favorite t-shirts are movie t-shirts. So I was like eventually, one of my personal goals is to make that an aspect of the brand.

Elijah: Alix has definitely been chasing it. He chased it the hardest for sure. But I didn’t think that we would be like making official movie shirts. I didn’t think we’d be half of where we are now.

Alix: Kind of like how you probably though saw that we were going to eventually be making official Dead stuff.

Elijah: For sure.

Image via Publicist

Alix: I saw that. I like knew I was like, oh we’re going to be doing like we’ll collaborate. Like I’m going to do everything in my power to like at least attempt to do movie merch. And so I did see it happening, maybe not on an official scale, but definitely like always was like, well it would be so sick to do movie merch.

I feel like having those twin goals is the foundation of a good partnership to begin with, right? Like Elijah has one trajectory goal to put you guys on and you have another, and they kind of converge.

Alix: Absolutely.

Elijah: We really pretty much balance each other out pretty well.

Do you even want it to be referred to as “merch” or would you rather it be seen as a “collaboration?”

Alix: I mean I think it’s a collaboration for sure. But I think also—that’s a pretty cool hoodie. Sorry, someone just walked...this dude just walked by with a fire hoodie.

What’s it look like?

Alix: It’s just a classic Steely, but it looks like the cover of one of those volumes. It has like, hobo font.

Elijah: Oh yeah. I kind of like-

Alix: It was just kind of-

Elijah: Those Facebook t-shirts-

Alix: Kind of. It was pretty janky but like, perfect.

Elijah: Sorry, what was the question?

I was asking if you guys ever get stuck on the idea of calling it merch or would you rather see it viewed as a collaboration—or does it not even matter?

Alix: It doesn’t really matter. I think like I love the word merch. Yeah we make merch, and I think merch is cool as fuck.

Elijah: The whole genesis of our brand was making merch really. And honestly, Zoe from A24 sends us quotes she wants us to use, images that we take, and they send the vibe and we [pull] from the trailers. So at the end of the day, like we never want to make something for the movie that wouldn’t be fitting. So we definitely carry their vibe and their energy into what we’re doing. So I would call it a collaboration. Absolutely.

Alix: Definitely. 100 percent an equal collaboration. Like there’s one way where it’s, you get hit up by a band or an artist and they’re like, “We like your style, we want you to do some shirts for us.” You do the shirts, you get your paycheck, there’s no credit involved and they just run the shirts and that’s it.

Then the other way is, “We really fuck with what you’re doing. We want to do an official thing where it says your name on the shirt and it says our name on the shirt and it’s like bringing each other up.” I mean, we have a special woven label that goes in with anything that’s A24, so I see it as a partnership collaboration style. We both are committed to exposing each other.

And what’s the process on each collab typically? Are you in talks with just A24? Or are you in direct contact with, say, Robert Eggers or Ari Aster about the themes of the film and talking out what the drop should look like?

Elijah: Generally, Zoe is like a middle person. She’ll report back and forth and be like, we like this, Robert doesn’t like this, let’s maybe try this. And sometimes at the end of the day they’re like, actually the original one is kind of the one that we liked. There’s a line of communication open through all people. We’re not sitting in a room with Ari Aster and making these t-shirts, but there’s definitely lines of communication.

Alix: They’re definitely involved, specifically Robert Eggers has been more vocal. I think Ari may not care as much about the merch. Not that he doesn’t care. I just think he’s kind of like down with what we’re doing. And then Robert’s also down but I think he just has such a specific vision for his vibe.

Elijah: He’s a historian. The way he makes his movies are so particular to those eras that—so on the last Lighthouse shirt, on the corner at the bottom, that’s the Lighthouse that’s this like ‘60s kind of Art Nouveau font that we used. And at first they were like, “Ooh, we don’t know if Robert’s going to like this.” And then they’re like, well actually it flies.

Alix: Yeah, he’s so particular even, so his films are just historically so accurate down to every last bit. They’re perfect films in that sense. So yeah, he’s particular about how the shirts are, but it’s cool. We really like that. We like it when we make something and then someone has like a really sick suggestion and isn’t just like, oh it’s perfect. It does look cool when someone exposes a perspective that makes it even better.

A24 puts out a lot of movies every year. Are you guys only gravitating towards the more horror-ish releases? How do you decide which movies you want to collaborate on?

Elijah: I mean, there was one in particular that we actually passed on that was less horror, but I don’t think that we’re not particularly set on horror at all. Even though I would say that Alix and I generally enjoy horror movies a lot. It’s not like the only movies we watch and it’s not the only thing that we care about. So we’re absolutely open to, I mean, pretty much anything as long as we feel like we enjoy it. We never want to pigeonhole ourselves in any way with this project. We always want to leave all channels wide open.

Alix: I mean right now, I’m not going to say anything, but we’re definitely in talks about doing merch for things that aren’t horror movies. So it started out with horror. I mean Midsommar, I don’t even think is categorically a horror film, but Lighthouse isn’t really a horror film either. They’re twisted movies for sure and they are maybe horrific in some sense, but I don’t think they would be technically considered a horror movie by like a film student. I would be stoked to do merch for all kinds of movies, all genres, really.

You mentioned that you guys were fans of A24 before working with them. What is it about them that you responded to?

Alix: I mean, I just have really always been a fan of independent films and I feel like A24 and a few other distribution and production companies have given real artists a chance to show their voice in a time when I feel like it’s important. I think just giving artists an opportunity to distribute their work in a wider platform is really amazing. And A24 I think is kind of like one of the companies at the forefront of doing

Image via Online Ceramics

that for movies.

One thing that I really love about A24 is that it's become this thing where their fans aren't specifically only fans of the movies, they'll just see whatever has the A24 brand on it now. And it's interesting how that extended to the merch because The Lighthouse shirts dropped before most people actually saw the movie, but there was still excitement for them.

Elijah: Yeah, I noticed that for sure. I mean there's some bands that put out records that totally don't sound like their other records, but people love it. It's like you just trust that brand, you trust the decisions made by those people and A24 has a marker of quality across the board. So there's an understanding that it's probably at least going to be at the end of the day engaging, even if you don't like it. But I mean there's certain movies that aren't my favorites but I can definitely walk away talking about them.

What's your guys' favorite A24 piece that you've made thus far?

Alix: I think my favorite is the Lighthouse hoodie.

Elijah: I think my favorite is probably the Witch stuff. It kind of gave it a little bit more liberty and I feel like it looks a little bit more like Online Ceramics proper and I think that's kind of fun.

Alix: The A24 merch, it's the one [thing] that we make that I actually rep all the time. Like, I wear it. Like, I'm actually wearing a Lighthouse shirt right now because I'm so stoked on it. Even though we love what we're making and we're super stoked on all of it, there's just some kind of mental thing with wearing something I've made and I know Elijah feels this way too. But with the A24 thing, there's a separation involved that makes me feel proud to wear it or something.

Alix you mentioned that you had always had a vision for the brand heading towards movie merch. Are there any A24 movies or just any movies in general that you wish you could have had the chance to make merch for?

Elijah: I loved Eighth Grade. I loved that movie a lot. I have a hard time sometimes with movies, just making it through them. And I was the most engaged I've been in a movie in a long time actually.

Alix: We talked about doing mid90s merch and I wish we would've done mid90s actually. That would have been fucking sick. We had just started the relationship at that point. And it was on the table as an option, and I kind of wish we would have followed up on that, but that's okay.

Jonah strikes me as a fan of you guys too.

Elijah: I'm pretty sure he's familiar.

Alix: I think he knows who we are.

Elijah: I'm still like super duper stoked that we got Hereditary. That's huge.

Alix: Good Time for sure. Good Time would have been fire.

There's still time for [Uncut] Gems. That could be amazing.

Alix: I know. We'll see what happens with that.

Switching gears, I loved your shirts with John Mayer this past summer as well. What was it like collaborating with him?

Elijah: Amazing.

Alix: That was really cool. [Another A24] I've just thought of: The Bling Ring would've been fire.

Elijah: I mean it was funny, like when we first started working with him, he was kind of like, okay, let's make some distance after this. And then like I think we all liked working with each other so much and it's so fun that we just keep doing it. And that was really sudden, we were on tour with the Dead and he was just like, “Hey would you want to do the merch for my tour?” And it starts in like two weeks.

So it was pretty intense. But like the actual process of doing it was really fun. He's super engaged. Like probably the most engaged that any popular musician is with the direct line to merchandise. I would go as far as to say that that's definitely true. He is active in the design process. So I really respect that about him because he really cares about his overall vision. He works on set design, he works on his merchandise, he does all that shit.

Alix: He doesn’t have a stylist.

Elijah: He doesn’t have a stylist. He is out there, finding us on the internet, being like this shit’s dope, let’s run this. That’s so rare in the music industry. Usually, Live Nation or someone just comes in and hires like bottom barrel designers. I’ve been that designer before that’s just like picked out for a project and they’re like, make it look like a metal tour. Like “big shirt” is his idea straight up.

The Big Shirt’s amazing.

Elijah: That was his idea. Curfew Boys was his idea. The photo face thing was his idea. He has a really clear vision of where he wants things to go and how he wants them to look. And in that way, that was probably the deepest collaboration that we’ve had on merchandise. In comparison with A24.

Going back to A24, how do your clothes and merch reflect what they stand for?

Elijah: I think that there’s definitely a similar thread in the way that A24 exists and Online Ceramics exists. I think that they put out movies that they want to put out, they believe what they want to do and they do it their way. We have consistently done exactly what we wanted and done it our way. And we both believe in doing it in a high-quality sense. It’s not like I just want to do whatever I want. It’s, let me chase what I would like to do and do it correctly. And that’s exactly what they’ve done. And they put out really beautiful movies and we’ve done our best to put out really beautiful shirts and merchandise and objects.

And it’s like a marker of like artistic quality that I think we, both parties, strive for. It’s not just like let’s just do this and make a quick buck. A24 will take a risk. We will take a risk, we’ll put out a shirt for a movie that’s not even out yet. We’ll put out things that we believe in because we think it’s cool. Not because we genuinely like this is going to sell a shitload of t-shirts.

Sometimes we are like, “this one is not going to sell” and we know it and that’s okay because that’s what we feel like doing and that’s how you know someone’s doing it because they have correct intentions.

Alix: I think with A24, they’re a company that have real faith in art.

You guys are having a great year. What’s it looking like for 2020?

Elijah: We’re getting into it.

Alix: We have some cool things planned.

Elijah: Some really exciting fun things that I think carry on the tradition of what we’ve been doing but also expand upon it in really new and exciting ways.

And how are you absorbing everything? Is it getting overwhelming or is it still fun?

Elijah: Still fun.

Alix: Definitely fun.

Elijah: We hang out all day with our friends and make things that we love and we’re barely at the end of our twenties. That’s like the dream. It’s definitely pretty intense sometimes and it’s definitely a lot of work. But luckily we’re all kind of like crazy and we all work pretty hard and we have a really good crew that manages to keep going.

Since you guys said you were big horror fans, what are some of your favorite all-time favorite horror movies?

Alix: Dude, shit, hold on. Elijah has to go first.

Elijah: I’m going to give you three or four: I like Carrie and I really like Rosemary’s Baby. I Drink Your Blood and probably the original Halloween.

Alix: Texas Chainsaw Massacre. The OG. Suspiria [OG]. And Saw 2.

Have you guys ever thought about doing something like going back to say Texas Chainsaw and just making T-shirts for that even if there’s no peg?

Alix: 100 percent, 100 fucking percent.

Elijah: If I could get the rights to Rosemary’s Baby, like are you joking me dude? That’s like-

Alix: Yeah, we would go hard. That might be some 2020 shit. We might try to reach out to see if we can get something like that happening.

Varian, Ethan, “Life, etc.: The music of the Grateful Dead lives on. So does its fashion influence,” *LATimes.com*, June 20, 2019

Los Angeles Times

Life, etc.: The music of the Grateful Dead lives on. So does its fashion influence

By Ethan Varian | June 20, 2019

Brandon Lee Campbell of Interstellar Dye was among the many vendors selling tie-dye shirts in a parking lot outside of the Hollywood Bowl before the Dead & Company concert in early June.(Patrick T. Fallon / For The Times)

A few hours before the Grateful Dead reboot band Dead & Company took the stage for its first show at the Hollywood Bowl earlier this month, hundreds of concertgoers transformed the venue’s parking lot into a kind of tie-dyed bazaar. Unofficial vendors lined the perimeter of the lot hawking homemade wares that ranged from customized tour T-shirts and stickers to edible goodies with varying psychoactive properties.

Deadheads first began selling bootleg merchandise at scenes like this — known as “Shakedown Streets” to the initiated — at least as far back as the 1980s. From the beginning, the Grateful Dead was famously lax in enforcing its intellectual property rights and trademarks, allowing fans to create their own designs using the band’s expansive iconography.

Over the past few years, as the revitalized Dead & Company has filled arenas across the country, a new generation has begun putting its own spin on the “lot art” tradition. Having built influential followings on Instagram, these younger Heads have unwittingly helped turn the Grateful Dead aesthetic into a bona fide fashion trend, which is now crossing over into the worlds of streetwear and even high fashion.

Varian, Ethan, “Life, etc.: The music of the Grateful Dead lives on. So does its fashion influence,” *LATimes.com*, June 20, 2019

Among the most popular of these DIY designers is Los Angeles-based Online Ceramics. Founders Elijah Funk and Alix Ross, both 29, combine the Dead’s skeleton-and-roses imagery with an experimental punk ethos, adding their own unique symbols and characters into shirt designs.

“We’re bent through a new lens,” said Funk in an interview alongside a small mountain of tie-dye tees outside the Hollywood Bowl. “We’re a new generation with other influences and access to all different types of music and information.

“I feel more inclined to put in weird references and cartoons or try new things because I never felt the need to make anything that looked official.”

Funk and Ross, former art students originally from Ohio, began selling Dead-inspired apparel online shortly before following Dead & Company on its first tour in 2016. (The band now consists of Grateful Dead members Bob Weir, Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann, with John Mayer, Oteil Burbridge and Jeff Chimenti.) Mayer, the band’s guitarist, spotted the graphic tees on Instagram and began posting about them himself, eventually persuading the band to offer limited runs of Online Ceramics gear on its official site.

With Mayer’s support, Online Ceramics evolved into something of an in-demand streetwear brand, available at boutiques such as Union on La Brea Avenue and Dover Street Market in the Arts District. Funk and Ross, along with fellow Dead-inspired designer Philadelphia-based Jeremy Dean, even scored features in taste-making style publications such as GQ and Highsnobiety.

It wasn’t long before the fashion establishment picked up on streetwear’s penchant for tie-dye.

“We saw it from many designers in their lines this spring,” said Roseanne Morrison, fashion director for trend forecasting agency the Doneger Group. “It was pretty universal, from Prada to MSGM.”

Morrison said that designers are harking back to 60s-era fashion in part as a reaction to the constant tumult of politics and current events. “The whole hippie attitude is really impacting our social media and culture,” she said.

She added that the crafty authenticity of tie-dye also reflects a larger trend toward more handmade styles. Morrison pointed to designer denim brand R13, which has begun adding the Dead’s instantly recognizable skull and lightning bolt “stealie” patch to jackets and shirts.

Online Ceramics, started by former art students, has evolved into an in-demand streetwear brand, available at boutiques like Union on La Brea Avenue and Dover Street Market in the Arts District, as well as a parking lot before a Dead & Company concert.(Patrick T. Fallon / For The Times)

Funk said that although he never set out to become a fashion influencer, he’s not surprised by the renewed interest in Grateful Dead style, noting that culture has a way of continually revisiting the past for inspiration.

“This time it’s just been branded a little more from the inside and less by people from Gap or whoever to sell tie-dye shirts,” he said. “This has come from people who are here and are in this world.”

Kyrié Joyce, a 29-year-old artist from Brooklyn who will be selling shirts outside Dead shows throughout this summer tour, credited Funk and Ross with inspiring fellow artists to experiment with new styles and influences.

“Everything [in the lot] looks so different — it’s a personal style that you infuse with the Grateful Dead,” she said, “and it speaks to different people.”

Ruben Perez, 36, a Koreatown apparel

Kyrié Joyce, a 29-year-old artist from Brooklyn who will be selling her own shirts outside Dead shows throughout this summer tour, picked up an Online Ceramics T-shirt before the concert at the Hollywood Bowl.(Patrick T. Fallon / For The Times)

designer who sells shirts and stickers outside shows, used to play in punk and metal bands before a “peaceful evolution” brought him to the Dead. Like Online Ceramics, he incorporates that harder-edge background into many of his designs. One shirt depicts the band members hanging upside-down beneath the words “Shakedown Street” displayed in a skate-punk font, an homage to the classic album art from Venice hardcore legends Suicidal Tendencies.

Perez, who goes by “Rubenowsky” on Instagram, said the platform has facilitated an international network of people interested in the lot art scene. One popular account, called From the Lot, has gained over 46,000 followers posting designs from the past and present.

“Now there’s all kinds of dudes and women making stuff,” he said. “And having the community on Instagram really keeps everyone connected.”

In Southern California, many Deadheads are expanding this newfound community offline. Sean Heydorff, 46, a graphic designer from Pasadena, founded L.A. Dead Night in 2016. The monthly hangout features local Dead tribute acts at Pasadena’s Old Towne Pub.

“We all get to be Deadheads — the bar lets us be us,” he said. “It’s much like [a Dead show] but more condensed and one night only.”

Most in the lot seemed to welcome the fashion world’s current infatuation with the Dead, with few appearing concerned about whether the trend eventually will pass. For Funk of Online Ceramics, it’s the scene Deadheads have built around the band’s shows that will not fade away.

“I always say that it feels like an anime convention, where people finally get to be around others who love anime too,” he said. “It’s the same thing here. You get to really feel something with another person — it’s this cool secret club that you get to be a part of.”

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

It’s Hip to Be Hippie: Why Fashion is Obsessed with the Grateful Dead

From zany flower power-printed T-shirts to tie-dyed tank tops on the runway, dressing like a Deadhead is suddenly in. But why now?

By Jacob Gallagher | April 6, 2018

Concertgoers in all their tie-dyed and short-shorted glory attending a late-’80s Grateful Dead concert in Berkeley, Calif.

“HIPPIE STYLE ALWAYS comes back,” explained Elijah Funk. He should know. Mr. Funk, 28, and his friend and business partner Alix Ross run Online Ceramics, a two-year-old Los Angeles-based brand that has gained currency for its Grateful Dead-inspired T-shirts. The designers and their work were recently showcased in a GQ Style magazine spread, and their shirts (whose trippy graphics feature, say, a peace sign passing through a basketball hoop or a sun wearing sunglasses) are sold at boutiques like Union in Los Angeles, next to high-end wares from designers like Raf Simons and Thom Browne.

Online Ceramics’s success is part of a larger Deadhead infiltration of higher fashion. Tie-dyed pieces from designer labels like Amiri, Saint Laurent and Balenciaga are pouring into stores for spring, denim cutoffs are back in and decades-old Grateful Dead shirts are fetching hundreds of dollars at vintage stores.

Gallagher, Jacob "It's Hip to Be Hippie: Why Fashion is Obsessed with the Grateful Dead," *WSJ.com*, April 6, 2018

John Mayer arriving at LAX in a Grateful Dead T-shirt back in 2015, the same year that he joined Dead & Company.

"The Grateful Dead has gone very mainstream," said Darryl Norsen, 37, a longtime fan and writer based outside Boston, who's penned a Grateful Dead column for the music site Aquarium Drunkard since 2013. When Mr. Norsen looks at the crush of Grateful Dead fashions showing up out there, even on unlikely celebrities, he just wonders where they all were 20 years ago. Back then, a few of his friends were quietly screen printing bootleg T-shirts, but the Deadhead influence on clothing "certainly wasn't [being felt] to the extent that it is now."

So how did the Dead go from hide-it-from-your-girlfriend lame to cool enough for a full-blown GQ spread? Some credit is due to Dead & Company, the psuedo-revival of the band (with John Mayer subbing in for Jerry Garcia) that has been touring since 2015, but there's a lot more to the story than that.

In 2015, Mason Warner, a Philadelphia-based graphic designer and devoted fan (he traveled with the original band from 1989 to '94) started @FromTheLot, an Instagram account dedicated to cataloging the many bootlegged, fan-made Dead T-shirts, some dating back decades. Today, @FromTheLot has nearly 28,000 followers ranging from Sarah Andelman, who owned the now-closed iconic Parisian fashion boutique Colette, to Atlanta Hawks forward Miles Plumlee to film director Max Winkler. Showcasing many versions of dancing bears, skeletons and lightning-bolt-emblazoned skulls (the band's famous "Steal Your Face" logo), Mr. Warner's scrollable archive exemplifies how Dead iconography has found a second life on social-media platforms.

This Deadaissance isn't just happening on the internet: Last year, film director Amir Bar-Lev released "Long Strange Trip," a 238-minute documentary (now streaming on Amazon) covering the Dead's career. A romantic vision of the life on the road, the film portrays blissed-out fans in tie-dyed tops, floral shorts and pale bluejeans. Any given frame of the movie could be pinned to the mood-board of a designer intent on turning out hippie-dippie designs--see Russian designer Gosha Rubchinskiy's swirling tie-dye sweatshirts, J.W. Anderson's above-the-knee jorts or Missoni's rainbow-plaid trucker jacket.

Such labels are clearly hoping to tap into the carefree ethos of the Dead. When we're chained to our smartphones and bombarded with bleak news alerts and emails from the office at all hours, laid-back liberation appeals. "It is a fun little break from stuff that otherwise might make you pretty bummed out," said Jeremy Dean, a graphic designer who's been making Dead-inspired T-shirts since 2012.

When Mr. Dean started out, he made the shirts for himself: "I just wanted to wear something weird and goofy," he said. Apparently, others do too. When he releases shirts that riff on, among other things, the Dead's Steal Your Face logo, they sell out in a matter of hours on his website, he said.

What Mr. Dean and his peers are offering, particularly to a younger generation that wasn't there the first time around, is a wearable token of the Dead lifestyle. Jerry's gone. The '60s are never coming back. Your cellphone keeps buzzing with that message you should've replied to days ago. But when you slip on a tie-dyed sweatshirt or one of Mr. Dean's grin-inducing T-shirts, you can feel for a moment like you're on the road, without a worry in the world.

Hine, Samuel, “Online Ceramics Makes Wonderfully Tripped Out T-Shirts for Deadheads and Fashion Freaks,” *GQ.com*, November 11, 2017

Online Ceramics Makes Wonderfully Tripped Out T-Shirts for Deadheads and Fashion Freaks

One of the most original T-shirt brands of the Shopify era is collaborating with John Mayer for Dead & Co’s fall tour.

By Samuel Hine | November 11, 2017

Elijah Funk, left, and Alix Ross RYAN LOWRY

This summer, the Grateful Dead had a full-blown cultural moment. A critically acclaimed Grateful Dead documentary, *Long Strange Trip*, dropped on Amazon Prime. Dead & Company, the band led by John Mayer and Bob Weir, went on a countrywide summer tour. And one of their most mythologized sets, Cornell 5/8/77, was finally unearthed and released—the perfect point of entry for those, like me, who were long intimidated by the Dead’s daunting discography. It all coincided perfectly with fashion’s retro moment and DIY obsession, too. Stoked by Mayer, a cult style icon in his own right, bootleg Grateful Dead T-shirts became status symbols, Deadheads came out of the woodwork, and tie-dye was suddenly everywhere. Nothing that was happening was new, necessarily, but each event and micro-trend culminated in a Grateful Dead vibe that was impossible to miss. And that’s how a small two-man T-shirt operation called Online Ceramics blew up almost overnight.

Online Ceramics was founded in LA last year by Elijah Funk, 27, and Alix Ross, 28, who hail from Ohio and met at art school there. Their T-shirts draw on recognizable Grateful Dead bootleg motifs: skulls, Dead lyrics, dancing bears, and epic tie-die abound. But their graphics are enormous and intricate, and include their own characters—goblins, jesters—along with druggie iconography and phrases that channel a sort of cosmic mindfulness. Upon closer inspection, some of their T-shirts aren’t Grateful Dead-related at all, but actually have more in common with DIY punk T-shirts. As word started getting out about the next-level T-shirt brand and its delightfully shitty website, Online Ceramics picked up their first fashion account at Union Los Angeles. And last weekend Funk and Ross caused a minor situation at ComplexCon when they parked in a nearby lot with tees and hoodies and put their location on Instagram. They were there to sell their biggest drop yet: a collaboration with John Mayer, with whom they designed a hoodie for the fall Dead & Co. tour, which comes to Madison Square Garden for two nights starting Sunday. The hoodie won’t be at the merch stand, though—you’ll have to meet up with Funk and Ross somewhere in the city on Monday. (So pay attention to @onlineceramics.) Before they hit the road, I called them up to get the full Online Ceramics story.

GQ Style: So when did you start making T-shirts? I assume it started as a side-hobby.

Eljah Funk: It just started for fun a few years ago.

Alix Ross: Before we started Online Ceramics, Elijah and I were both really interested in sculptures, and interested in contemporary and fine art. We both had aspirations to be artists, to be represented by galleries potentially. Elijah had an

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opportunity to design a T-shirt for our friend who has a brand, and it kind of evolved from there. And we did T-shirts because T-shirts sold, and it was like, wow, our weird ceramic sculptures don’t really sell [*laughs*]. But we could take $90 of T-shirt blanks and turn that into $300, which at the time was a lot of money to us.

EF: And I’ve been making shirts since I was like 12, and I tried to deny it—I was like no, no, no, I’m an artist, I don’t want to make T-shirts. And then it just kind of fucking happened. And it was like OK, I guess this is what we do. We don’t have to be modern sculptors.

Is that where the name Online Ceramics came from?

EF: Yeah. We were going to open an arts store basically, for books and ceramics and stuff.

AR: We just thought it was really funny. I bought the domain like a year before Elijah even moved to LA because I thought it was hilarious that that domain wasn’t taken. It’s like cars.com. I thought if anything someone would buy it from me in the future.

EF: We thought it was really funny too because we’re obviously not just making Grateful Dead T-shirts. When we started we made three Dead bootlegs. And we were like, oh my god, it’s so funny to have a name that has nothing to do with that. Zero. And it works.

Your T-shirts are primarily associated with the Grateful Dead and Deadhead culture. How’d you get into that world, and what other influences are you drawing on?

EF: We’re into a lot of worlds, I think. Dead shirts just look like Dead shirts, you know? Alix is super into yoga and Kirtan and stuff like that. And I’m super into jazz and books and experimental music. So aesthetic wise I think a lot of it stems from a kind of punk background, really.

AR: Totally agree. Elijah was the lead singer of multiple punk bands and played music and all that shit. I was around that scene but wasn’t that heavy into it. Elijah brings that aspect into it, but then I go to yoga every day, and I do Kirtan two-to-three times a week in a public setting. And in those moments I have these visions, and I’ll talk to Elijah about them. The text on the back of our new tour shirt is something that literally came to me during a meditation. It just comes from this spiritual exploration.

EF: It sounds so dumb but to me designing is like jazz, there’s this loose concept, and then as the design builds it snowballs and keeps growing into this whole thing that I didn’t have planned. It kind of delegates itself along the way. And usually Alix will text me some insane phrase in all capital letters, and I’m just like OK, word, here we go. How can I make something psycho enough to match that psycho-ass phrase?

There’s also this druggie element to your designs. Is that borrowed Deadhead iconography or are you guys actually smoking DMT and making T-shirts?

EF: I think there’s a harsh misconception of us that we’re like two stoners that made it click somehow.

AR: We don’t smoke weed! We aren’t stoners.

EF: I mean, I’ll hit a joint every now and then. But I’m not like sitting in my room… it’s tongue in cheek man, it’s irony, it’s playing into this sort of language and dialect and culture. It’s not abusing it, it’s just kind of fun. It’s the hippie thing.

AR: Something on one of the shirts says, “Puffing DMT For Hours.” Like, I’ve done that. I’ve actually sat down and smoked DMT for hours. That’s in the past though. Anytime there’s a drug reference, it’s probably happened, but years ago. And I feel like in putting something like that on a T-shirt, we’re trying to appeal to the high school bad kids. We want the high school bad kids to be on our team.

EF: We want kids to get detention!

AR: The high school skaters, which is what me and Elijah were—we were just troublemakers and rascals.

EF: We’re goofballs. The idea of puffing DMT for hours—it’s funny. Look at that shirt too. It also says “100% Pure Diaper” on it. It’s a joke.

AR: The sentiment is, what can we get away with? What can we put on a T-shirt and someone will still be like, *I’m still gonna buy that.* How far can we push this shit?

EF: That’s what it is. It’s like a tragedy-comedy—I’m going so extreme that it’s almost dark, and it’s funny. I think it’s weird that people take it so sincerely, since we’re busy dudes. Can’t be tripping all day.

It seemed like everyone got into the Dead this summer. What was it like coming out of that?

EF: We’ve both been into the Dead for a long time. That’s kind of why I moved here. I rolled up one day and Alix and I hadn’t seen each other for like two years, and he’s wearing a Dark Star shirt. And I was like, *oh shit, it happened to you too, man!* I was always around it as a kid—my stepdad was really into it, and our house was full of Dead stuff. And I hated it, it wasn’t a cool thing to be in to. But Dead & Co. happened, Fare Thee Well happened, and partially we hap-

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pened. There was a whole internet explosion of everyone making shirts again.

How do you fit into the Deadhead/Lot Life scene?

EF: I think we’re more into it than most other folks doing it. We were on the road 40 days this summer with them. We go deep.

AR: We’re definitely deep into it, that’s a huge part of our situation. But just as much as we’re into the Dead we’re really really into experimental music and more avant-garde artsy kind of stuff.

EF: And magic books and spell books and rocks and sticks and shit. We’re really into like goblins and trolls and that kind thing.

So how have you dealt with the success? Work-wise and, like, attitude wise?

AR: We’re taking it one day at a time. We can only do so much. We have one employee now, which has been really helpful. Up until now we’ve made it all ourselves by hand. Like until right now. We were able to manage this last launch just by the skin of our teeth. And we make it clear on our web site that we are producing all of this by hand and it takes up to 30 days for your package to ship out. And then I work for a contemporary painter, and Elijah has his own freelance design work happening, but in the last few months Online Ceramics has been taking over.

EF: We did nine new things for our last launch, and between that and my freelance things I think I did 40 shirts last month. That’s where I was at. That’s how we’re living. It’s crazy. We’re crazy people, basically.

So what’s the process of making the shirts like? Are you guys tie-dying everything yourselves?

AR: Yeah we tie-dye everything, and we will always be the tie-dyers. We’re never gonna outsource the tie dying because we have proprietary secrets at this point. And so Elijah sends me the files, I burn the screens, we’ll screen print and then tie dye them. As of right now we have probably a thousand T-shirts in my apartment where we pack everything. And my apartment is about 9 x 10 feet. It’s a fucking shit-show. We had to expand into the hallway to do it all. It’s just happening so fast that we’re like, *holy shit.*

EF: It’s like trying to put an elephant in jeans. It’s fucked.

AR: I never thought we’d see a day where we couldn’t pack everything in my apartment.

How did your collaboration with John Mayer go down?

EF: He’s the homie. He’s a really really good dude. Our friend Mason who runs the From The Lot Instagram account, Mayer got hip to that, and basically Mason sent John a package, put some of our shirts in a package, John really liked them, and we met up at a Bob Weir show one night. We’ve been talking back and forth about us collaborating since then, and then he was like, do you want to do Dead & Co shit? And we were like, yeah.

Where are you selling them this weekend? Outside MSG?

EF: Not outside MSG, no. There’re too many cops there.

AR: Yeah we’re going to sell them outside our homie’s house or our hotel. We’ll probably post a location on the off-day between shows.

EF: John really wanted “Brokedown Palace” to be the song the collab was about. And he really wants to nurture this—the fun part for him is getting it out there and promoting it. And he doesn’t want to make it elusive in a Supreme kind of way, it’s not like that, we’re not trying to be like, oh this is exclusive—we don’t give a fuck about that kind of stuff. This is a special thing. If you want it, come get it, we’ll hang out, we’ll have an engagement.

AR: We used to have our phone numbers on the website and our Instagram. We were so real about people hitting us up and hanging out. It was so much fun.

EF: We put our phone numbers on T-shirts.

Do you have any dream collaborations?

AR: La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, minimalist composers from the ’60s that are super dope, baller, deep inspirations to me. And I know Elijah is super down with that shit. Meredith Monk is a really huge person. And then Ram Dass would be a really big collab. We also have this low key dream to work with outdoor shops, or Black Diamond climbing gear and Patagonia, we’re super into—

EF: Head lamps.

AR: We really want to do a Black Diamond head lamp. It would be so sick. It would be the coolest head lamp ever. With the strap, Elijah had a really good idea to just put bones on the strap.

EF: [*laughs*]

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AR: It would be so sick.

So you’re not exactly limiting your future moves to tees and sweats. But in the short term, it sounds like you’re trying to figure out how to expand properly.

AR: Actually last night I met with Wes Lang at his studio. He basically has come into our lives in this really cool moment, and he was like, I know you guys are starting to make more money and this and that, and I just want to make sure you guys get an accountant, I want to make sure you aren’t going to make a mistake now.

EF: We’re in our twenties. We’ve never run a business before. We’re artists.

AR: That’s why Wes was so kind in offering guidance. And then as far as creative stuff in the future, that’s what me and Elijah are totally geeking out on. Like if we ever had the opportunity to be the presidents of a fashion company, what kind of lookbook would we make?

EF: Don’t spill the beans!

AR: [*laughs*] we basically want to look at this like a fashion house. What does a fashion house make, what do they do, specifically how do they advertise? We have a really big idea planned for the new year of a photo journal that’s going to be fully conceptually thought out, and all the garments will be made for the photo shoot. Stuff like that, just bigger projects that involve more than putting a shirt online and people buying it.

EF: We’re going to make shirt sequels. Sequels to old ones.

AR: We’re going to get really heavy on the narrative side.

EF: We have characters, characters that we’ve made up. We’re going to bring the characters back into play. It’s like a Dead thing! The Dead have the skeletons, they have the bears. We have a scarecrow, we have a goblin. We want to like basically mirror that, but not just ape it. We have a story, and we gotta tell the story.

GOAT

THE STYLE EVOLUTION OF MOVIE MERCH

WHY ONLINE CERAMICS, RAF SIMONS AND UNDERCOVER ARE GOING MAD FOR THE MOVIES.

By Max Berlinger

The relationship between film and fashion is changing. Fast. While the history is marked by culture-defining moments such as Diane Keaton’s smart ensembles designed by Ralph Lauren for Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* or Buggin Out’s smudged Air Jordan 4s in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, today, film studios and fashion labels are working in tandem to create clothing that’s an unabashed celebration of the movies.

Perhaps the best example comes from beloved indie film company A24, known for flicks such as *Uncut Gems*, *Hereditary* and *Minari.* The studio’s ongoing creative partnership with the tie-dye-loving duo behind Online Ceramics, Alix Ross and Elijah Funk, in particular, has spurred a string of limited edition product that serves as both homage to A24’s cinematic output and standalone style statement.

According to Ross and Funk, the venture started as a lark; they made unofficial merch for cult flick *Hereditary* before they even saw it. As longtime horror movie fans, they had a hunch Ari Aster’s feature film directorial debut would be a huge hit. When Will Welch, editor-in-chief of GQ, connected them directly with the studio, the bootleg merch spawned an official partnership.

Like Ross and Funk’s own designs for Online Ceramics, the brand’s collaborative A24 tees (created for movies including *The Witch, Saint Maud, The Lighthouse* and *Midsommar,* among others) have garnered a cult following of stylish cinephiles. They’re filled with cryptic messages and screen-printed designs chock full of insidery references to the film; overlaid with Online Ceramics’ signature technicolor swirls. Released in small quantities, they almost always sell out, resurfacing on the resale market at a significant markup.

The partnership is niche in a world where mainstream popularity is generally thought of as suspicious. It’s not some branding initiative puppeteered by marketers and algorithms. It’s something more pure: two genuinely creative entities linking up because they share a mutual passion. When you wear a tee produced by an independent film company and an under-the-radar brand, it’s the 2021 way of declaring your own discerning taste: you’re less Marvel, more Malick; less Madewell, more Margiela.

These sorts of alliances can feel transactional today, but it’s easy to see the mutual benefits at play here. Working with Online Ceramics gives the rest of A24’s other branded merch an instant lift, a co-sign from a cult brand worn by fashion editors, artists and celebrities. At the same time, Online Ceramics gets to expand its purview as a brand; while it’s made its connections to music explicit, specifically with its ongoing homages to the Grateful Dead, now, with its ongoing partnership with A24, it’s able to expand its reputation and raise its profile within the world of arthouse cinema.

This collaboration, for all its originality and purpose, has a precedent in the luxury market, most notably with Jun Takahashi’s UNDERCOVER and Raf Simons’ eponymous line. Takahashi has used his seasonal offerings to plumb the horror genre, building collections around Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*. More recently, Takahashi used haunting images from Luca Guadagnino’s remake of the Italian film *Suspiria*, about a prestigious ballet school run by witches. Raf Simons’ love of David Lynch is no secret, tapping film stills from *Blue Velvet* and *Wild at Heart* to infuse his collections with the same feeling of surreal dread that the auteur filmmaker is known for.

But the connection between A24 and Online Ceramics is something different. They’ve each carved out reputations that meld widespread popularity with cultish cool. There’s a real appreciation of one another at play, a certain freedom that feels spontaneous and easy, not like it’s gone through the approval of corporate lawyers. These T-shirts, with their weird energy, are all the things 2020 wasn’t: a celebration of movie magic and the joys of personal style. As the world opens back up, little things remind us of the pleasures this milieu provides: getting lost in a different world in the air-conditioned chill of a theater, rubbing elbows with fellow movie-lovers and the distinct thrill of slipping on a very good T-shirt.