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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
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## The Embarrassing Truth

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



Not Necessary, 2008

'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.



Blank Check, Blow Hard, Tight Ass (2007)

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 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.'<sup>1</sup> 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'<sup>2</sup> (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.'<sup>3</sup> 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.)

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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 Jake 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'.<sup>4</sup> 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 true 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 pat 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.'

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, better glances, the joy of surfaces (and superficiality?), dislocation, flatness, light bulbs, linealure, being literal, allusive and vague (i.e., human), the embarrassment of art and sex and combinations thereof, disillusion, poems, (America and hyenas aren't). (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 pictures and talked about them well. He was at once very interested in the craft of his photos (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 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 hestess 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."<sup>5</sup>

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.'<sup>6</sup> 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.'<sup>7</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa Vanina Pavone, 'Innocent Accidental Unintentional Indulgent. Never: An Interview with Matthew Brannon', *Uovo*, April 2006, p. 154

<sup>2</sup> Email from Matthew Brannon to the author, 30 September 2008

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, email from Matthew Brannon

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Pavone, p. 150

<sup>5</sup> Saki, 'The She-Wolf', from *Beasts and Super-Beasts*, London, 1914

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Pavone, p. 148

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