

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to announce *Concerning Vietnam*, an exhibition of new work by Matthew Brannon. The show will open on September 9 and remain on view through October 21, 2017. An opening reception will be held on Saturday, September 9 from 6:00pm until 8:00pm. The result of several years' worth of ongoing research and formal experimentation, *Concerning Vietnam* features unique large-scale prints, sculptures, and installation-based objects in which Brannon applies his inimitable graphic style to the psychological, political, and cultural impact of the Vietnam War.

Matthew Brannon 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. The vocabulary and voice developed in the prints—arch and erudite, with a sharply psychoanalytic bent—has provided the center for an expanding world of objects and narratives. Since 2015 Brannon has exclusively turned his attention to the Vietnam conflict, conducting exhaustive research for what he projects will be a ten-year engagement with the historical material associated with this generation-defining trauma.

Concerning Vietnam represents Brannon's most comprehensive display of work from the project to date. It includes several silkscreen prints that depict, from a first-person perspective, sites of command represented by the desks and intimate domestic spaces of the American and, for the first time, Vietnamese power brokers who directed the course of the war. Rendered by the artist in his studio, these are among the largest and most intricate prints he has made; in some cases they span two sheets of paper and require the use of hundreds of screens. Images of everyday things like eyeglasses and cigarette packs appear larger-than-life, creating cinematic inversions of foreground and background in which otherwise unremarkable objects take on a looming (and often sharply comical) significance.

While many of the details in the prints are directly inspired by historical accounts (a 1967 letter from Ho Chi Minh to LBJ emerging from the former's typewriter, for instance, or images of fighter jets and bombers strewn across a White House dining table), others represent creative additions introduced by the artist. Among the latter is a vintage Howard Johnson's menu that appears in a depiction of Richard Nixon's Oval Office desk, and that alludes to Operation Menu, a covert U.S. bombing campaign conducted between 1969 and 1970.

Such forms arise from Brannon's willingness to confront the messy business of narrating history and to incorporate his own aesthetic judgment in the composition of these "primal scenes" in the

American psyche. For this reason, the facts that provide the foundation for each work are only part of the story; just as important are the artistic decisions, both conscious and unconscious, that give the facts their particular visual expression (and renewed impact). In two large-scale prints depicting the cockpits of American helicopters, Brannon introduces notes of pathos and vulnerability—an empty bottle of Pepsi, a letter addressed to “Mom”—in spaces otherwise indicative of the technological force with which the U.S. unsuccessfully tried to overwhelm the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front. As images of presidents’ private quarters allow viewers to assume the physical and emotional points of view of men who exerted broad influence over the war, here they are prompted to inhabit the perspectives of those who actually faced the prospect of bodily harm. While the leaders at the top, propelled by neuroses and power complexes, call the shots, it is young men in the primes of their lives who step onto the battlefield, their cockpits becoming sites haunted by libidinous drive and the perverse attractions of early death.

A series of unique, hand-painted letterpress prints, each entitled *Short-Timer Calendar*, further puts the yearnings and fears of the average American soldier in succinct graphic form. “Short timer” is military slang used to describe someone with less than 100 days left on his tour. During the war, some would draw calendars, often lewd, to count down their time. Brannon’s research led him to compose fictional renditions based on 1960s pin-up photos and found photographs. Their eroticism is tinged with wartime anxiety: a reclining nude woman has been divided into 100 numbered sections. Beginning with her extremities, the soldier-“artist” would color in one section per day, zeroing in on the desired goal. Calendars left unfinished beg questions about whether tragedy caused the interruption, or the war ended, or the record was simply lost.

Rather than make broad generalizations or definitive statements, Brannon condenses the scope of the Vietnam War itself into finely-tuned forms that embody the contradictory feelings of the era. The sculptures installed in the center of the gallery function as the visual equivalents of dreams or jokes or Freudian slips, opening shortcuts to the latent drives that animated American culture in the late 1960s and early 70s. Most prominent is a wooden sculpture, over 20 feet long and exactly 6 feet, 4 inches tall, which spells out the word “SAIGON”. Based on street-sign-lettering used in Vietnam’s capital during the French colonial era, the work combines the formality of a municipal monument with the intimacy and off-handed feel of something that has been cut out with scissors. The bottom of its letters are cut off so that they appear to sink into the ground, and the supporting hardware that connects them to the wall is clearly visible, so that despite the word’s looming presence, the prevailing mood is one of vulnerability. As the place names of war linger in the memories of those who fought them, language continues to act as a palpable force, crystallizing the effects of conflict on the body and mind.

Artist Statement

When I was young you'd meet people who'd been in World War I. Like many Americans, I was born during wartime.* And like nearly all Americans I was born far far away from the war itself. But unlike previous generations, the war from which my generation sprung was rarely spoken of. It just happened; it nearly tore the country in half, but no one said much of anything. Volumes would be written, action movies made, but across dining room tables the nation over, little was heard. World War II would blare in your ear like a polished trumpet, but Vietnam? – hell, you'd have to ask.

I've chosen the very conventional form of paint on paper in which to discuss one of the most controversial topics in U.S. history. I've translated my underlined pages and piles of notes into framed images of my own making. This exhibition is my attempt, as an artist, at history, biography, and psychoanalysis of a trauma central to the American identity. The project seeks a broader, more complex understanding of the decisions, actions, and consequences of the U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. Research is its horizon.

Libraries now hold long aisles of books on the wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Countless hours of audio, personal correspondences, and volumes of declassified documents are now readily available to anyone who is interested. After reading tens of thousands of pages on the subject I still feel I've only scratched the surface. Hollywood too has done its job to process the very real events into emotional narratives with manipulative soundtracks and memorable dialogue. My project, *Concerning Vietnam*, uses the slower, more persistent and fixed space of visual art in order to approach the subject—to talk about what's difficult to talk about in a manner that complicates rather than simplifies.

–Matthew Brannon, New York, Summer 2017

“In the fabric of human events, one thing leads to another. Every mistake is in a sense the product of all the mistakes that have gone before it, from which fact it derives a sort of cosmic forgiveness; and at the same time every mistake is in a sense the determinant of all the mistakes of the future, from which it derives a sort of cosmic unforgiveness.”

–George Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, The Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures, 1950

* I was born in the initial wake of the Pentagon Papers, just after Operation Lam Son 719 in Laos, in the midst of the final offensive by U.S. ground force operations, deep into Nixon's

“Vietnamization,” and right at the turning point from Nixon/Kissingers’s 1969-1970 attempts to “win” the war to their 1971-1973 strategies of exit.

Matthew Brannon (b. 1971, St. Maries, Idaho) 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). Recent group exhibitions include *True Faith*, Manchester Art Gallery, England (2017); *Trapping Lions in the Scottish Highlands*, Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2013); *Brannon, Büttner, Kierulf, Kierulf, Kilpper*, Bergen Kunsthall, Norway (2012); *In the Name of the Artists – Contemporary American Art from the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art*, sponsored by IGUATEMI, São Paulo Biennial Pavilion (2011); *For Love Not Money*, 15th Tallinn Print Triennial, KUMU Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia (2011); and *At Home/Not at Home: Works from the Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg*, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York (2010). Brannon lives and works in New York.

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