

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 –

JAN TUMLIR WRITES
MATTHEW BRANNON

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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 laden 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.

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