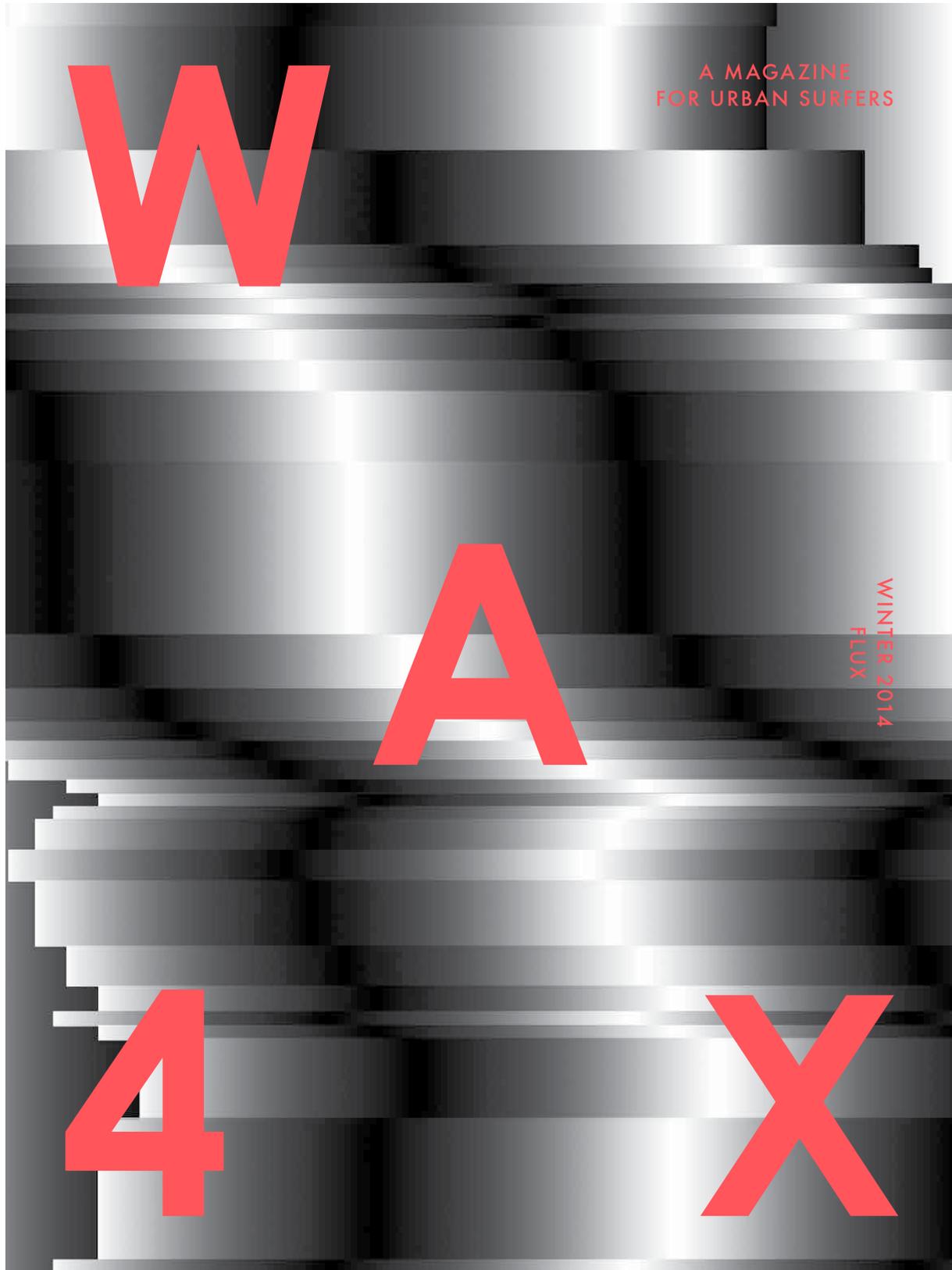


OFFICE BAROQUE

Chris Sharp, 'Matthew Brannon: The artist and writer on unlikability, his favorite moments in literature and the attractiveness of frustrated content', Wax Magazine, Winter 2014





Photography by
Naho Kubota

WINTER 2014

Matthew Brannon

The artist and writer
on unlikability,
his favorite moments in
literature and
the attractiveness of
frustrated content.

In conversation with
Chris Sharp

I — TRANSITION

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?

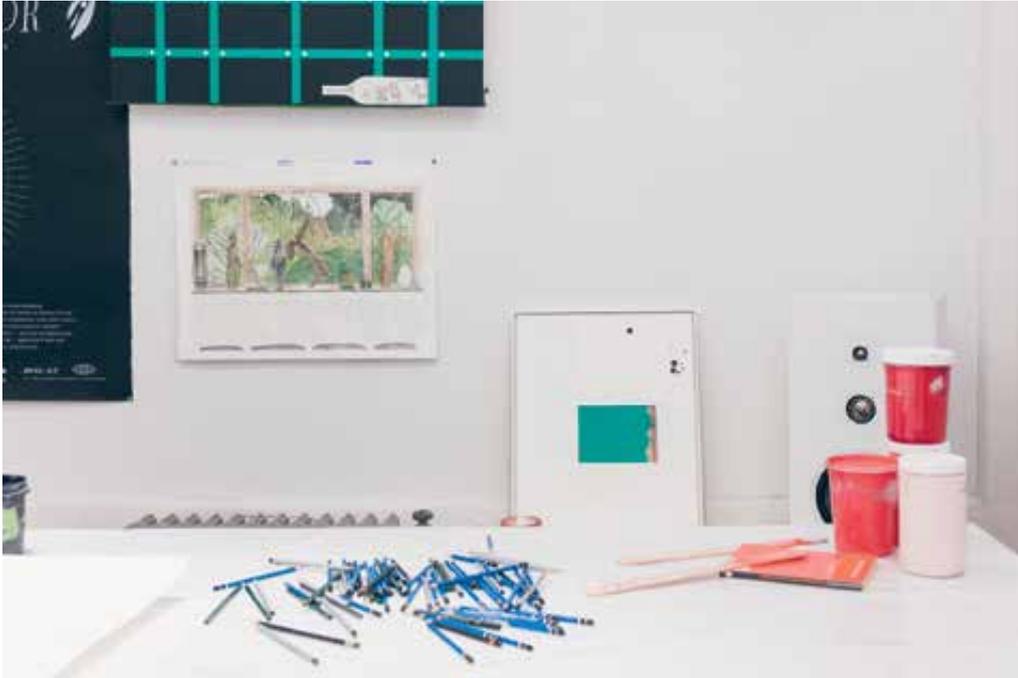
MB: Between the pages is definitely where my mind is. Literature always retains its one-to-one radicality. Ideas or feelings a hundred years old can feel personal and direct through language. In many ways the text in my work has always been its

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?

MATTHEW BRANNON



I — TRANSITION



Stills from Brannon's film *Leopard*, featured at David Kordansky Gallery, November 2013 – January 2014.

MATTHEW BRANNON



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.

I — TRANSITION

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 whomever's children's 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

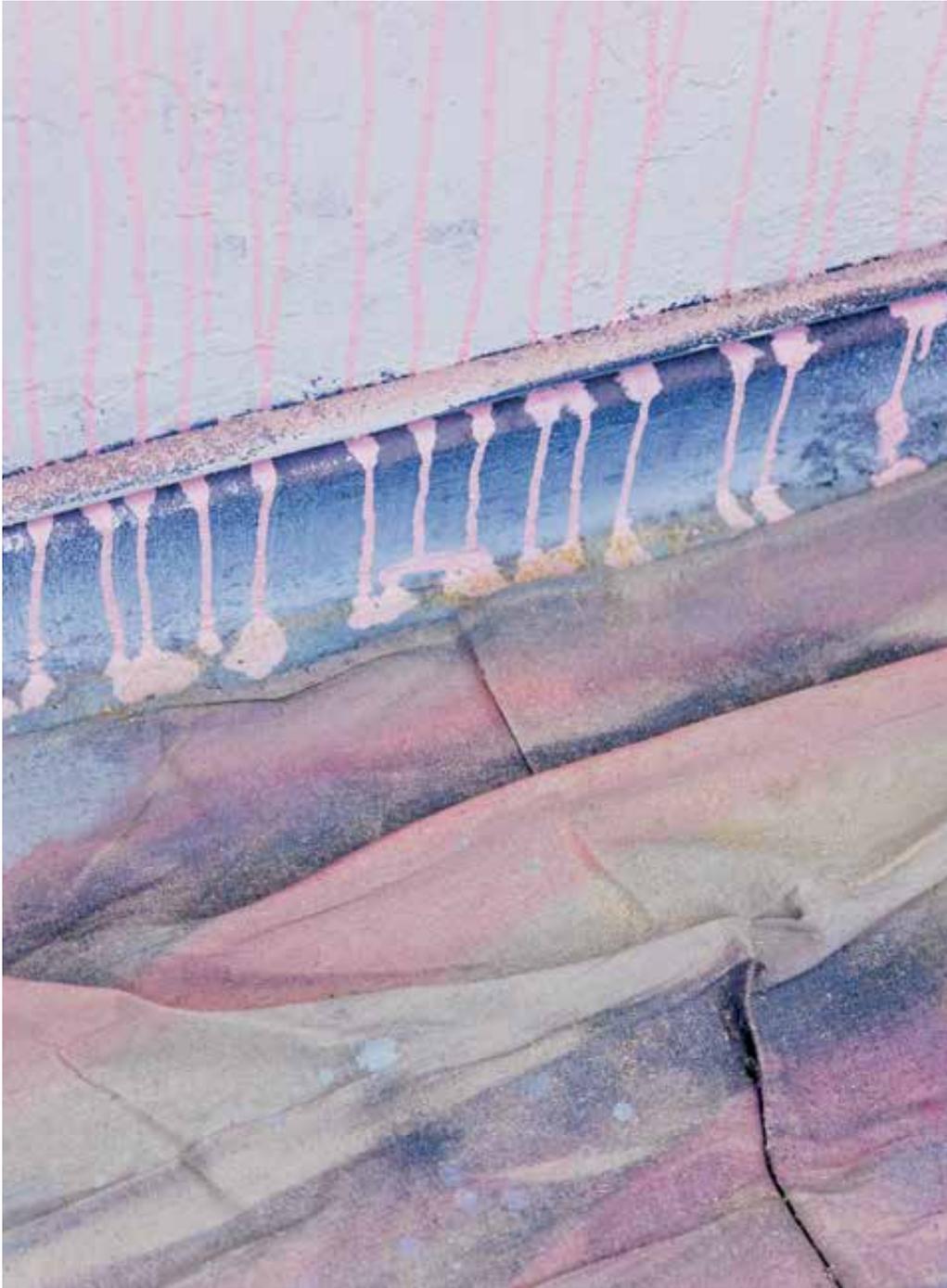
like I can't get behind a given artist unless the work has a real, fundamental problem—and not necessarily in the world, but in itself—that it is trying to solve, and when I say *real, fundamental problem*, I mean, not borrowed, not some chic and fashionable malaise lifted from the super mall of contemporary 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 you 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*.

MATTHEW BRANNON



I — TRANSITION



Sexual Tension, 2013. Silkscreen on canvas, Wool, Wood, Steel. 95" x 70" x 1" in.
Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. Photography: Cathy Carver.

MATTHEW BRANNON

*Unlearn, 2012. Wood, enamel, acrylic, high-density hand carved foam, silkscreen on paper. 58.5" x 41" x 6" in.
Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photography: Cathy Carver.*



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