

SIMON SAYS

An artist writes himself into the picture
 BY HEIDI ZUCKERMAN JACOBSON

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Simon Evans's work when he and I were both living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Idiosyncratic efforts on paper filled with quirky, explanatory text and awash in Scotch tape, they gave me the type of pause that I associate with an artistic discovery. As I moved in closer to read each declaratory phrase and measured assertion, I began to think I was reading some sort of manifesto for the young 21st century. A list of "stars around us: pre-history stereotypes, everyday cowards, friendships with vampires and fuckups." And things that result in your placement in a "fish bowl: you think you are original, [a] least meant compliment, you are friendly with the homeless."

Evans's work is ripe with issues: the challenges of sex, the neutrality of Switzerland, and the "people that you must be nice to." Filled with complex and distinctive systems like charts and graphs (both pie and bar), his work is a way of figuring out the world and what place he fills in it. The drawings are also highly personal. The artist describes their function as "me trying to figure things out and feel better about things." Simultaneously self-therapeutic and diaristic, the idea is that once things are recorded, perhaps they can be moved past, allowing one to begin to focus on other things.

He uses humble materials that can be found around the office or home: tape, Wite-Out, and printer paper. After text, Scotch tape is the most prominent element of the work. It covers up text, objects, dirt, mistakes, and other stuff that the artist wishes to remain hidden. By trapping things underneath or in between, the tape has a sort of embalming effect. What cannot be seen is sealed and contained, at least temporarily. His medium, as well as his content, is both in and of the world, grounded in reality. Far from mundane, these pieces highlight the continuing possibility of a poetics of the everyday.

ABOVE:
Big Ghost, 2013.
 Found paper and
 mixed media on
 paper,
 84 1/4 x 109 1/2 in.

OPPOSITE:
 Evans in his
 Brooklyn studio
 with Thibault,
 an Italian
 Greyhound, 2013.

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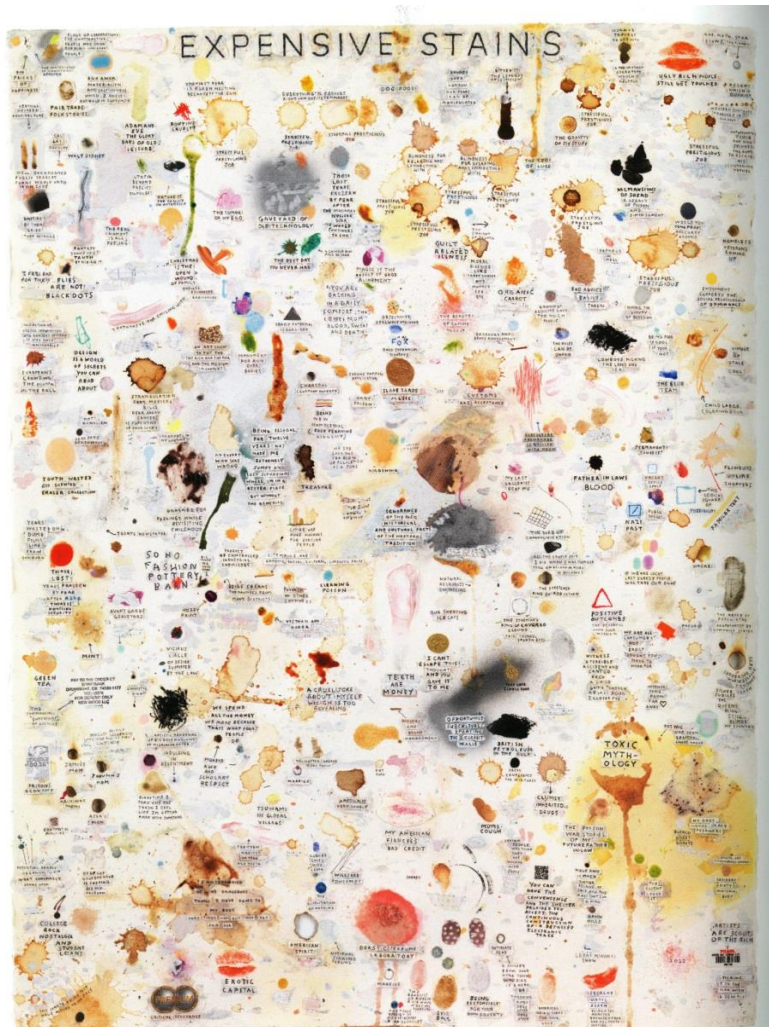
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Both poetry and humor can be found in his drawings. The humor is dark and unintentional. In fact, it makes Evans nervous when people laugh when viewing his work. But, of course, people laugh for all sorts of reasons. When, for instance, things are so devastating that there is nothing else that can be done. Maybe the act of laughing mirrors the act of writing? Laughing at or with something erases the pain and lets you move on to the next place. The poetry results from the startling and profoundly satisfying manner in which Evans combines words. In a recent e-mail to me, he offhandedly used the phrase “the urban matrix of planet Earth.” The words he uses reflect his materials—mundane, humble, and ubiquitous—yet it is through their combination that Evans’s particular genius emerges.

Much of his work is about a nontraditional pursuit of security. Evans voices concern about the tenuousness of much of contemporary society and fear for the safety of the people about whom he cares. He has said that “making art is safety” and explains that it fills him with a safer, somehow less existential set of things to worry about: considering composition, the next picture, what it will look like, what he is feeling. “When I’m considering those things,” he says, “I don’t worry about other things as much.”

More than any previous body of work, “Edible Landscape,” Evans’s upcoming show at James Cohan Gallery in New York, can be seen as a kind of landscape exhibition. Evans has always been preoccupied with the world in which we live, obsessed with its inadequacies and inequities. The inclusion of *edible* in the title may be a sly reference to our contemporary obsession with what we eat and its pedigree. This reference gives insight into Evans’s abiding interest in identifying demarcations within the only recently acknowledged class system in the United States. Born in Great Britain, Evans started making artwork while living in San Francisco, where he had moved as a professional skateboarder. Around the time of his first one-person museum exhibition in the U.S., which I curated at the Aspen Art Museum in late 2005, he returned to Great Britain, and then lived and worked in Berlin for five additional years. He returned to the States, this time to New York City, during Occupy Wall Street and the Willem de Kooning exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Evans was deeply affected by these two seemingly disparate events, and that impact reverberates in his most recent work.

Evans is less interested in facts than in feelings. What does living life *feel* like? So much of his work is about the relationship between himself and the world, the space in between people and things, and how and why these spaces are created. He has



Expensive Stains, 2011. Mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 1/4 in.

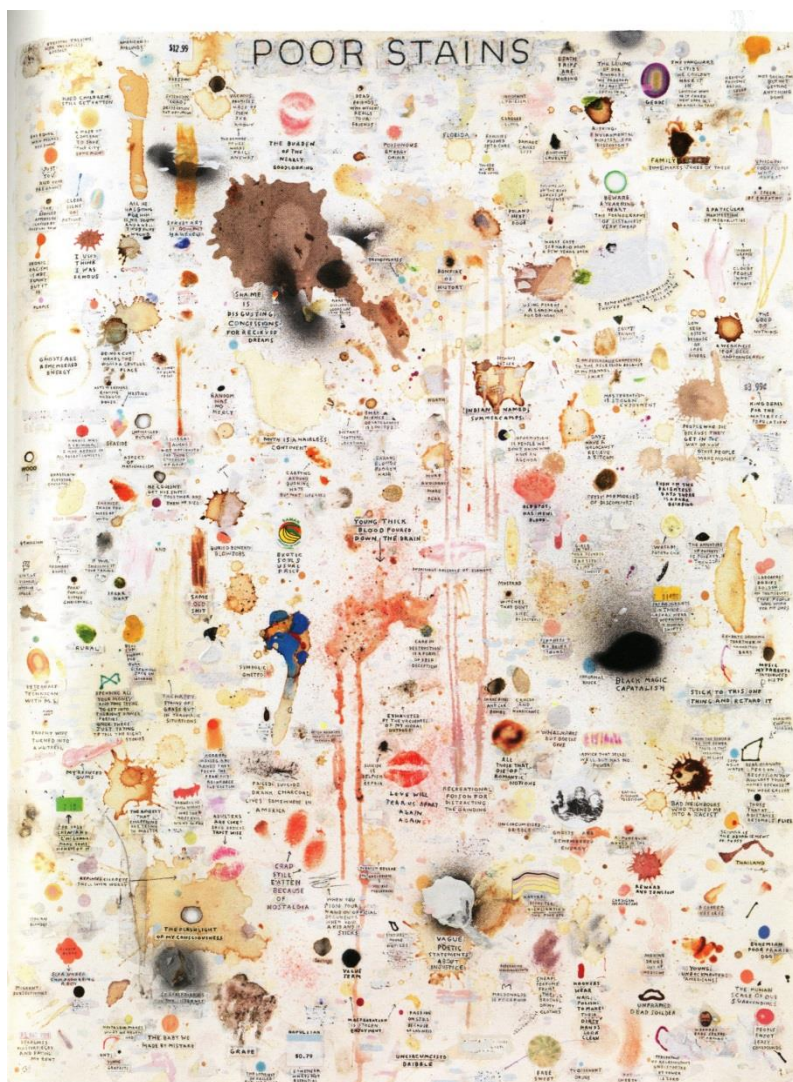
OPPOSITE: *Poor Stains*, 2011. Mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 1/4 in.

focused recently on what he calls “the privileged nowhere-ness that technology has afforded us.” *How to Get Lost Part 2*, 2013, is made out of silver paper overlaid on a Google map and is about the idea of the individual disappearing, which the artist says “seems to be in between the edges of things nowadays,” and describes the work as being a “crude rendition of technology and drifting.” In an early piece, he included his phone number in the hope not only of making himself available to others but also of making a connection, of not just being an anonymous figure creating art. The only person who called did so in the middle of the night to express his displeasure with, and skepticism of, Evans’s work.

One often finds ghosts in the work, literal as well as metaphorical ones. In 2011 Evans created a limited-edition sweatshirt that featured a hand-bleached spot above the phrase “Bleach Kills Ghosts,” printed in the artist’s distinctive hand. In art historical terms, he has talked about Abstract Expressionism haunting Manhattan and suggests that “all museums are haunted houses, I think.” Among the recent pieces are large

BOTH IMAGES: SIMON EVANS AND JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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abstract collages such as *Big Ghost*, 2013, composed of myriad scraps of paper found on the streets, their anonymous fragments of image and text placed alongside notes he has taken while working on other pieces. With this new use of found writing, Evans is able to bring the voices of others into dialogue with his own, as if corresponding across space and time. As the poet Jack Spicer once put it, “that is how we dead men write to each other.”

Notes, 2013, has a rawness and messiness found in the artist’s earliest works. Composed of his notes on yellow paper, it is an honest exposure of the artist and is particularly revealing—although all of his works are. A text box at the upper right has some of the most open space in the work and includes what can be read as a mantra of sorts: “Mistakes are what purgatory is for.” The text is a quotation from poet Charles Bernstein. Evans says, “Yellow is the color of being alive for me.” Through the process of making work, he has realized how transitory everything is: not just time and space but also opinion, belief, and nomenclature. Evans is chronicling his journey through life, one thought and experience at a time (and sometimes combining one

long stream of them together).

In *Skyline*, 2013, each found receipt is transformed into a skyscraper as well as a bar graph and, finally, another kind of “haunted house.” Evans transforms the receipts for purchased items into things that haunt us, a “specter city” that is both everywhere and nowhere, the ephemeral home in the 21st century. This work relates to *How to Succeed in America*, 2013, which incorporates real money (in itself an illegal act) and tells the prison story of someone’s father with an autobiographical component that confuses the identity of the narrator and calls the veracity of the story, as well as of its teller, into question. Here the ghosts are the father, away in prison for 10 years, as well as the proverbial holy one, implied by the mention of the father’s having found Jesus.

The recent work also includes some topographic maps, typical of Evans’s stylistic practice yet here expressing a more transitory feeling, such as that associated with small tourist maps. They also address the flexible, evolving, and non-static nature of a point of view. *Subculture Promenade*, 2013, is a map of Columbus Avenue in New York as well as a study of subcultures, referencing Evans’s own subcultural past and questioning the possibility of being sub- or countercultural in this time of homogeneity. The map includes ads for “therapy,” an “infinite time inducing toy,” “drugs,” “gourmet hamburgers,” and “hip hop property.” One “Terribly Familiar Place” says “Detail Center. Transcendence is the most specific thing that can be rendered.” The

sense of being haunted by his past is especially evident in this work. It is also felt in *The Hell of Addiction*, 2013, an elaborately drawn, bird’s-eye view of Harlem that addresses “the gentrification of bad habits” as well as the “typical urban whimsy of the beautiful illness of the artist with alcohol/drug problems. Me.”

Evans has said that he is trying to frame his own artistic project as the human project in general. *Carrying Around Death*, 2012, is a long list of R.I.P.’s including “R.I.P. Dash Snow,” “R.I.P. The tomb of the unknown soldier because of DNA,” and “R.I.P. 13 dead in Syria because of a car bomb.” The drawing is made of a letter-size sheet of paper, which was folded into sections and kept in Evans’s pocket as he worked on it. For nine months he recorded death as he encountered it—through memorials, radio mentions, conversations, and the like—recent deaths alongside those from the past. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “You cannot do a kindness too soon, for you never know how soon it will be too late.” As Evans rightly knows and shares, life is ultimately about the passage of time, about what we did and didn’t do, and how those choices haunt us, as well as how and where we lose or find ourselves along the way. MP