



Esau McGhee
Untitled (How Does It Feel)

September 9 - October 20, 2018

Esau McGhee: Untitled (How Does It Feel)

Interview with the artist by Claudine Isé

CI: So with this new body of work...are we looking at what you'd consider to be paintings?

EMG: I mean, one could always say we're looking at sculptural work at the same time. These can be considered paintings, but not quite, and also sculptural works, but not necessarily anything that one can outwardly reference sculpturally, you know? Are they paintings? They're influenced by painters, definitely. But...are these paintings? Nah, nah, I wouldn't say that they were. I mean if anything, one might ask themselves, is it a graffiti show? All these things, there are strong references to painters, painting, graffiti, sculpture...and I'm not sure if it's important to put it into that context of whether it's painting or not, whether it's painting or sculpture or graffiti. There's a reference to all those things in here -- they are what they are. They are works. They are the show, which is Untitled (How Does It Feel).

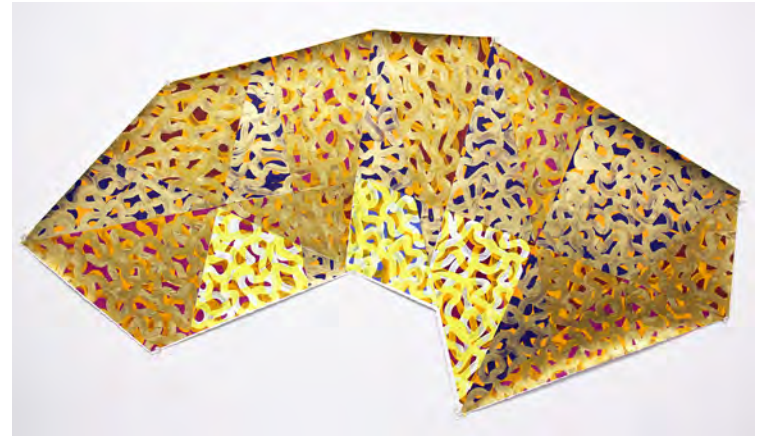
CI: I'm not terribly interested in pinning them down as paintings either, except for the fact that I *am* very interested in the gestural marks that appear on the surfaces across all of the pieces in the show. Are they made with a brush?

EMG: They're made with a tool.

CI: Can I ask what tool?

EMG: It's a graffiti tool.

CI: Okay. So, to me, at first these marks appeared to me as visual barriers to the collaged material underneath them, but the longer I look at these lines the more mesmerized I become and the more I can see in them, different things kind of vibrating and hovering. As I was thinking through this I became



Untitled Gentrified Urban Skyline #2, 2018. Screenprint and ink on archival paper, dimensions variable.

aware of my own attempts to describe these gestural marks and how that involves language, and my own desire to pin language onto a gesture, onto a bodily movement that you've made onto the surface.

EMG: I think what I'm doing with some of them is going back to an earlier language that friends and I would try to communicate with each other, via graffiti, via like, what we called the wicked hand style, coming out of Philadelphia, where the tag is extremely prevalent. Not the piece, but the tag, where it becomes about someone's name, but then there's layers and layers on top of that. How we used to communicate and challenge each other in how we communicate. There was so much that followed just a single letter, and it was repetitious, and it was just like, this beauty. I'm still working it out. I've been working at this mark making, this layering, this depth, because that's what I was ultimately looking for, this extreme level of depth where it's not just about surface. It becomes about a history...

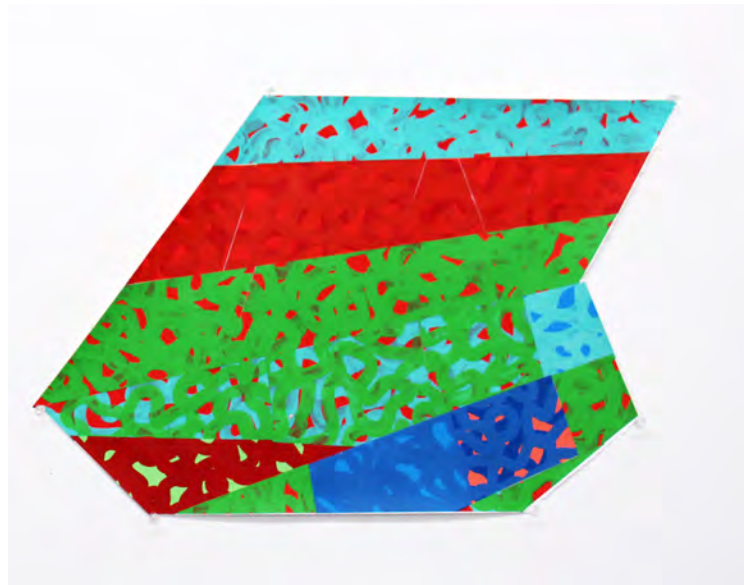
I don't give you the body in a traditional sense.

Whether that's a black body or a brown body or any body. Because that, for me, becomes problematic because then people start talking about violence upon the black body and this and that, these ideas about Blackness. One could always make the argument that Blackness or any social construct outside of Whiteness is developed to kind of continue Whiteness in itself. It just justifies Whiteness, and we're furthering these social constructs. I'm trying to push the envelope somewhat beyond this whole physical thing, you know? I've referenced the physical body in a consumable fashion before, but I'm not into that contemporary cannibalism so that people can consume the black, brown, or the female body. Why I gotta make work about being black? That's just it, I'm just making work about *being*. And I want everyone to be able to look at this, period.

CI: To me though, the gestures made by the tool, which is an extension of your hand, which is an extension of your body--I would say that the gesture is an imprint of a body, your body--but it's abstracted.

EMG: It's totally abstract! It's like *Nude Descending a Staircase, #2*, you know, which is a painting I saw as a younger photo maker, and I didn't really understand what I was looking at, but I knew I was going to the Philadelphia Museum of Art nearly every two weeks to look at Duchamp paintings like "Nude Descending." I learn things (from painters) about color and layering and space, but ultimately, that school, and those movements, it's about language for me, and like really trying to...like I think about some of the conversations I hear when people talk. You hear people like, 'why does he have to be so loud,' and they're talking about black or Latino kids on public transit. And I look at that, and I look at the culture and the history of where they came from, and I think, they're just trying to talk above the language.

That's my goal. I'm not going to apologize for being loud, or being passionate, or that my moves might



Untitled Symbol #2, 2018. Screenprint and ink on archival paper, dimensions variable.

seem repetitive, and like, the layering of the paint starts blocking up the screen print that's underneath. I'm not going to apologize for that, because that's me, really trying to make these marks that you can read, and look at, and hopefully look beyond the language. Because I'm trying to speak above it. My voice is important, but what my voice is ultimately trying to do is speak above language. That's what the work is trying to do, is get well beyond all these contemporary forms of representation that we use to encapsulate people and to control them and a system of developing identities that we're comfortable with.

CI: In an interview you did with the website *Inside\Within*, you talked about moving from more-or-less straight photography to the collage work you make now, and said "I started to look at myself as the photographic medium, but sans camera." Can you elaborate on this idea of your body as a camera?

EMG: If one takes away the tech, the phone, the Canon, the Leica, like all these fly-ass cameras that

one might own, film or digital -- if one takes those away and thinks how can I produce that space, that image -- then you become the camera and the printer and the chemistry. It's not about conservation or anything like that, it's just trying to think abstractly about photography. Thinking about myself, my body, as the camera, and also as the printer, the enlarger, all those things.

CI: In this show, are there photographic images in the pieces, like underneath the marks, as part of the collage?

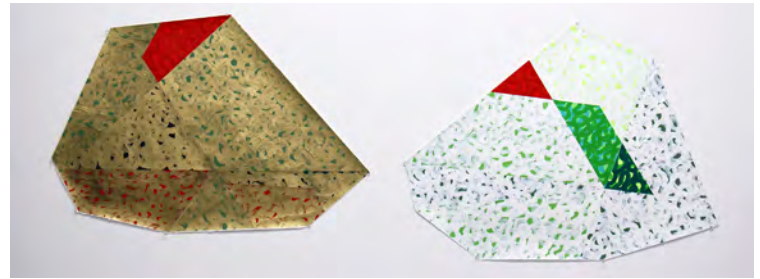
EMG: No.

CI: So it's almost like the truest realization of what you're describing, in that the image has imprinted itself upon you, you have processed it, the processing happens through you --

EMG: Sans chemistry.

CI: Let's talk about your use of color.

EMG: With some of the elements, some of the spaces and color combinations, I was really thinking about color theory and the idea of vibrating lines, like when certain colors start to meet, there's this vibration that goes on. But before that, one of the things I experimented with a long time ago was the idea of the monochromatic. People were like, well you have all these reds, and that's a blue that's involved with it -- that's not monochromatic, because it's a red. I think about how that blue can start to take on characteristics of the red. So it's like how we start to bring ourselves into certain communities and we--as opposed to changing the community, like 'oh, I'm new here, I bought this house, I need to change this community, can you guys not play dominoes on my sidewalk all night?'-- it's like, well maybe you need to do some research and figure out how you



Left: *Untitled Portrait of Racial Transcendence (From Cray to Ape-Shit)*, 2018. Screenprint and ink on archival paper, dimensions variable.

Right: *Untitled Portrait of Privilege #1, Dedicated to The Body That Defines All*, 2018. Screenprint and ink on archival paper, dimensions variable.

can integrate yourself better into this community. So that's why you get these outlier colors that are in there with the red. Maybe it's a reference to gentrification -- I don't know. Ideas of gentrification and race, as opposed to 'I'm coming into this space and changing it,' it's more thinking about the idea of like, what is red doing, or all these different reds. I want to have a better understanding of that, so I can think about how to navigate this landscape, this space, a lot smoother. It's not an issue of blending in, it's an issue of being respectful and taking it in. The monochromatic is bringing things together and hoping, seeing where those characteristics start to transfer into the other.

CI: I love the way you describe this.

EMG: That's why these ideally are portraits for me. Because I even think about myself, I'm thinking about lineage and culture and like, really trying to think beyond this body. Like, thinking about Big Jim, who is my grandfather on my father's side, who had to go somewhere else to be accepted as being a bi-racial man who was extremely fair. And I would see pictures and I'm like, 'yeah that dude's white.' (laughs). And it was like, was he -- was he not -- it didn't really matter because that's the man that Rosa Mae loved, and they were this union that was well beyond the social constructs of race. That's why these are portraits, because we're way more complex than just the surface material that we cover ourselves in.



Untitled Portrait of Unconscious Racial Bias #1, In Remembrance of Your Feelings Left at The Alter, 2018. Screenprint and ink on archival paper, dimensions variable.



Untitled Original Landscape #1, 2018. Screenprint and ink on archival paper, dimensions variable.

*Front and back cover image: *Untitled Original Landscape #1, 2018* (detail). Screenprint and ink on archival paper, dimensions variable.

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Gallery hours: Fridays & Saturdays 12–4 pm and by appointment

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