

ERIC MACK: A PAINTER WITH NO BOUNDARIES

THE ARTIST'S WORKS ARE
ALL SET TO TRANSFORM
THE NOTION OF PAINTINGS

BY FRANCA TOSCANO



Eric N. Mack
"The Endless Seed of
Mystery", 2018
Acrylic, dye, ink and paper
on moving blanket
195.6 x 224.8 cm
(77 1/8 x 88 1/2 in.)



By his own description, Eric N. Mack is a painter. But don't expect to see a rectangular canvas hanging on the wall with patterns and shapes painted all over it in oil or acrylic.

Mack's works are clusters of used fabrics, worn garments (often worn by him), ripped-up rags and moving blankets, arranged in complex configurations and displayed on ropes and rods. He also uses printed images and words in his art: photographs and texts pulled out of magazines and books that become components of his three-dimensional compositions. His works are, in effect, a cross between painting and sculpture. They're also a dialogue between fashion and sculpture.

Mack was born in Maryland in 1987. He has a BFA from the Cooper Union in New York and an MFA from Yale University. In 2015, he completed the prestigious artist-in-residency program at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Last year was a momentous year for Mack: he got his first solo show at the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York, and became one of four artists to win the Artists' Award at the Baltic Center for Contemporary Art in Gateshead. "It's a beautiful opportunity for an up-and-coming artist with an amazing language," said the artist Lorna Simpson, who was responsible for choosing Mack as one of the winners.

Modern Painters recently caught up with Mack for a conversation about his life and career.

You were recently signed on by the Simon Lee Gallery in London and are putting on a show there. Can you talk about the exhibition and the works you are including in it?

The exhibition is conceived like an outfit: a diaphanous dress paired with a supportive combat boot — if that makes sense?

I named the show after Misa Hylton, the famed hip-hop stylist, as an embodiment of the complex selection process that comprises identity. Also, considering amongst other things the concept of 'styling' as subject — at its height, it retools the readymade to conjure significance through form — affirming and

Eric Mack

Eric N. Mack
"Blue Duet I", 2018
Bleach, polyester and silk
organza
249 x 274 x 284.5 cm
(98 1/8 x 107 7/8 x 112 1/8 in.)

COURTESY ERIC MACK AND SIMON LEE GALLERY PHOTO: JAMIE STOKER



"The Thorn / The Veil / The Face of Grace", 2018
Dye and paper on moving blanket
172.7 x 182.9 cm
(68 x 72 1/8 in.)

COURTESY ERIC MACK AND SIMON LEE GALLERY PHOTO: MATT GRUBBS



"Implied Reebok or Desire for the Northeast Groover", 2016, Reebok windbreaker, checkered kitchen pants, mixture of found fabric fragments, leather, quilted moving blanket, metal belt buckles, dried orange slice, crystal dragon decal, dye, and acrylic, 218 x 226 cm (86 x 89 in.)

COURTESY ERIC MACK AND SIMON LEE GALLERY PHOTO: JOHN MCKENZIE

"Domestic Umbrella as
Backyard Band", 2016
Canvas umbrella,
wooden dowels, Asian
folding fan, metallic
tartan, corduroy plaid,
cotton, dye and acrylic,
with grommets and zip
ties
299.7 x 269.2 x 238.8 cm
(118 x 106 x 94 in.)



COURTESY ERIC MACK AND SIMON LEE GALLERY



"The Thorn / The Face of Grace",
2018.
Dye and paper on
moving blanket
172.7 x 182.9 cm
(68 x 72 1/8 in.)

denying systems of value regarding beauty. I'm interested in the more indirect ways that gestures of the hand can alter meaning.

I've been thinking about the nature of mood boards, which are used to map aesthetic singularity. Images from newspapers, music posters and fashion editorials are a given. By throwing them together into the dye process, I see if that material condition can unite them and how the physical absorption of the dye could allow for the images to signify together — framed by a blanket.

You had your first solo museum exhibition last year at the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. How did the exhibition go, and has it had an effect on your career?

I was happy with my exhibition at the Albright Knox, which was entitled "Vogue Fabrics." It was something between organized chaos and mediated acrobatics. I think the show really displayed a range of experiments in form. My hope is that the viewers moved through the space, guided by saturated color, familiar structures and heavily painted surfaces.

Your paintings often consist of used pieces of clothing, rags, blankets, as well as magazine and book pull-outs. What led you to abandon the conventional materials of painting, meaning the canvas and stretcher? Was it an intellectual decision, or something that grew organically out of your everyday practice? And why do you call them paintings?

I have always been connected to objects through a consideration of material significance: how an object could contain emotion or speak to a previous use. The various materials that make up an individual work aren't so important beyond their singular relationships within the work. I exercise my understanding of painting by finding surrogate structures that speak to a relatedness. Ghosting the wooden stretcher bars to create contact between the painted surface — the canvas — and the wall. That's not to say that the stretcher is invisible, I'm saying that it's embodied.

Your works can be reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg, of Sam Gilliam, or of the Turner Prize nominee Angela de la Cruz. To what extent were you inspired directly by those or other predecessors?

All of the artists you name push the limitations of painting in various ways. I've thought a lot about Sam Gilliam in recent years. His outdoor installations from the '70s are so radical. I'm excited you mentioned Angela de la Cruz, I admired her work as a student. I was encouraged by her work to consider how material content can play a role in the breaking of structure.

How did your childhood and formative years, and your family environment, affect your future trajectory as an artist?

I remember visiting museums with my mother. I loved going to work with my dad who worked at the National Gallery in D.C. He also owned a clothing store for years. I grew up with a proper appreciation for Modern art. I can trace my childhood to adolescence through the shows that I saw in D.C. Especially being able to go to the museum alone and really look. Figuring out how I felt in relation to the masterpieces.

Your work is more difficult to market or collect than a painting on canvas or a sculpture on a plinth. How do you feel about that? And what are your views on the Contemporary art market?

I've constructed my work as a critique of bourgeois painting. Allowing for an object that attempts to reveal more about, and is affected by, the world around it. There are several of my works that hang from a curtain rod; those works comment on domestic space. I think the work must present other alternatives. The blankets are a kind of formality.

What's the next big project you're working on?

I'm working on a few large-scale public projects that work directly with architecture. I'm on a quest for true site specificity. MP