

**DARK SYSTEMS** is artist Evan Gruzis's first book of collected ink paintings. Wayfarer-toting ghosts, palm trees and sunsets populate Gruzis' New Wave Noir world. His adept manipulation of inks will keep you guessing what it is you are really seeing, and what complexities "seeing" might entail.

EVAN GRUZIS DARK SYSTEMS

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## LOOKING AT LOOKING

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DUCE  
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Evan Gruzis's surreal combinations of apparently disparate pop culture artifacts challenge us to rethink the way we look; or, as the artist is fond of saying, “the way we look at looking.” Gruzis’s subject matter and style are accessible to anyone at all familiar with American youth culture and advertising, imbuing his work with a quasi-universal appeal. His reverential references range from Hollywood’s golden age to the more recently nostalgic 1980s and 90s. However, Gruzis’s *take* on the fashionable products, familiar logos and hackneyed graphic design elements he depicts are not as easily decipherable as the contents of the representations themselves. Although the work is entrenched in the visual vernacular of pop culture, Gruzis does not resort to the language he so beautifully appropriates in order to hammer down a definitive comment on, or critique of, consumer culture and materialism. This would be too simple; and Gruzis is not simple. Though refreshingly accessible, Gruzis’s body of work cannot be described as effortless. Beneath the slick and perfected renderings of comfortingly familiar iconography lies a shrewd, ironic, and at times disquieting, reframing of the spirit of pop culture.

In his recent series of small-scale ink paintings, Gruzis recycles specific quotations of ‘California cool’ which include Ray-Ban sunglasses, palm tree filled sunset scenes, retro graffiti tags, and vinyl LPs. The formal elegance and extreme technical control that Gruzis exerts over ink and brush give the paintings an undeniably studied seriousness. The final outcome produces a direct impact and sustained sense of immediacy. His obviously attentive and, perhaps, even obsessive rumination over mundane examples of pop culture begs the question: what, exactly, are we to make of this random assortment of iconic imagery? Clearly it is designed to entice, but whom and to what end? We search for editorial guidance, be it condemnation or endorsement. Amazingly, Gruzis seems to both laud and mock infatuation with materialism as well as appreciation for clichéd representations of beauty. An ironic vein runs through Gruzis’s work. His imagery employs the same alluring strategy as an advertising icon, but it delivers a mixed message: it wants us to buy, but has nothing to sell. The paintings themselves are highly refined and so well-crafted that they seduce the viewer into engaging on an intellectual level with imagery that would usually be dismissed as banal. Gruzis challenges us to relish in the fascination of a painting that seductively gives itself while remaining obstinately aloof. This ultimately involves reconciling the attraction/repulsion tug of war between beauty and insipidness in pop culture. By imitating the slick, alluring style of advertisements that promote the possibility of instant cool through consumerism, Gruzis lures us

past the threshold of superficial seduction and into an unfamiliar, more profound (if uncanny), place. Gruzis creates an uncomfortable liminal space where we are able to indulge our desire for material objects while simultaneously experiencing a gnawing awareness of the vapidness of consumer culture.

This sense of liminality that unites Gruzis’s oeuvre is reinforced visually by his signature pictorial approach and compositional decisions. The flat gray and black tones that typically comprise the background of Gruzis’s works alternately impersonate the diffused glow of a spotlight and a trompe l’oeil airbrush effect<sup>1</sup> wherein light fades seamlessly into dark. Both scenarios are oblique, flat and disorienting. Though the objects are rendered with hyper-real perfection, there is no realistic sense of gravity or dimension, which causes everything to appear emphatically and unapologetically flat. The lack of internal hierarchy and narrative structure within the compositions make it difficult to tease sense out of Gruzis’s deceptively legible works. The imprecise surroundings give the paintings a dreamlike quality in which everyday objects punctuate the composition, but for no logical reason. As in a dream, we are unsure of the significance of any particular reference. We do not know whether the imagined scene is merely a random mélange of imagery culled from the reservoir of our subconscious, or from a stockpile of magazine advertisements. Sunglasses, faceless tuxedoed men, and geometric forms all hover together, eerily suspended in time and space. In effect, Gruzis extracts and reclaims beautiful, if clichéd, snip-its of Americana which trigger associations of coolness, romance and prosperity and decontextualizes the familiar imagery. By reframing icons of American pop culture Gruzis tests the validity of a specific notion of beauty when it is relocated to a vapid, yet intriguing, dystopia.

**MARA HOBERMAN** Curator, Hunter College Art Galleries  
**JOACHIM PISSARRO** Bershad Professor of Art History at Hunter College & Director of the Hunter College Art Galleries

<sup>1</sup>Gruzis does not use airbrush (see page 11 of the interview) and thus has us question our first glance impression.

## EVAN GRUZIS JOACHIM PISSARRO MARA HOBERMAN

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**JOACHIM PISSARRO** Technique is seemingly paramount in your work, would you disagree with that?

**EVAN GRUZIS** No.

**JP** It is a feature of your work that places you in the class of hyper-skilled artists. I don’t know if you feel comfortable with this, but some people might call you a genius. Are you okay with this?

**EG** That sounds fine. (*Laughs*)

**JP** But seriously, you are grappling with the notion of image making through a super-skilled, supercharged style. You are referencing, it seems to me, the old master technique of grisaille, and the chiaroscuro technique inherited from the 17th century, starting maybe with Caravaggio and onward. Even though you’re applying this to a contemporary visual vocabulary, the level of pure skill and art historical context is not absent from the make up of your images. So tell me, what kind of relationship do you have with this problematic?

**EG** I don’t think of my technique in a historical way, though there are time proven methods of making a seductive image, and I don’t know if my pieces are even as technically tight as some examples of graphic airbrush design from the 80s. Mine are a little bit looser than that, but they do reference that tightness and attempt at perfection.

**MARA HOBERMAN** That’s interesting that you bring up the airbrush. I was going to ask you—do you ever use one, or are you imitating the effect with paintbrush and ink?

**EG** No, I do not use an actual airbrush.

**MH** So you are able to achieve the effect of a tool, but by hand. That is very impressive and it fits with what Joachim is describing as your technical genius. Your level of skill with brush and ink is certainly one of the most outstanding aspects of your work.

**EG** I think the technique stands as a counterpoint to the oblique purposelessness

of the images. My work may reference posters and other graphic commercial imagery, but for no reason other than that they should be appreciated as visually appealing imagery. In other words, these are not product vehicles, but hollow gestures that create a feedback-loop between a familiar aesthetic and the desire for meaning. Looking at Ruscha, for example, is part of how I got to where I am. I think I’m very different, but there is a similar feeling of celebrating pop culture purely as pleasing aesthetic design.

**JP** Very interesting.

**MH** I’d like to propose another art historical point of reference for your work, if that’s all right. I’m going to make a connection to Dali and also Surrealism in general. The pop culture references in your drawings—the records, Ray-Bans, and graffiti for example—are rendered in a hyper-real style, but they float in surreal, nonsensical environments in a way that is reminiscent of Dali or Magritte. In addition to the general absurdity of the compositions, I see other Surrealist references in your work, such as the repeated image of the clock. Like Dali’s clocks yours are also apparently dysfunctional. Are these intentional references?

**EG** That’s a really specific question and I don’t know if I’ve thought about the particularity of the clock as an art historical reference to Surrealism. But I do want to reference irrationality, for instance. The digital clock is zeroed out, it’s not set and so there is no time. That in and of itself signifies to me a type of irrational state of “no mind”, as they say in Zen Buddhism. Maybe it’s more Dada. Anyway, I’d like to get back to you on that one. That’s a good question.

**MH** What is the source material for your work? I am wondering if you look to particular magazines, movies, or advertisements for inspiration or if the subject matter comes to you more spontaneously. I would imagine part of the point is that the recurring motifs in your work—the sunglasses, palm trees and so on—are practically unavoidable source material since we are all bombarded with images like these on a daily basis, like it or not.

**EG** I think the point reference is a very broad impression of popular culture, and that I’m using these generic signifiers like banal graphic design, recognizable classic sun glasses, tuxedos and palm trees as my simple language. I think once we look

more closely at the work you'll see some more specific references in there, but I think the imperative is to just look at pop culture and media as a pervasive and ubiquitous influence. This notwithstanding, I'm filtering my imagery through a specific aesthetic, this dystopic L.A. and New Wave Noir kind of thing. The viewer might see the influence of books like *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis, and films such as 'Sunset Boulevard' and 'Body Double', for example. So while some of the symbols in my work are generic, there is a specialized style I'm playing with.

**MH** So the references that comprise your work are cultural artifacts that are out there all the time and you're just picking and choosing from a reservoir of visual stimuli. My next question builds off of that notion. When looking at your work, I want to know what the connection is between the various elements of the composition, or if the selection and placement of—as you've just called them, "signifiers"—is a purely aesthetic decision. How do the tuxedoed male figures, Venetian blinds and palm trees, for example, all fit together? Is there any commentary there or is it just aesthetics?

**EG** It's not really a commentary.

**MH** Maybe I can rephrase the question. Is it fair to say that your work is intentionally absurd? I find the paintings dreamlike in the sense that when you are dreaming things just bubble up from your subconscious and can appear with or without context.

**EG** I think there is absurdity in both the images and in their combination, but at the same time in the overall body of work there's repetition—a certain type of figuration, for example. Certain images do carry a weight and I want to remake them. One piece of literature that I've always come back to is *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut. In the novel, he includes all these pen and ink sketches that are completely bizarre. They are illustrations set literally within the text of the story. I think of my work as that type of imagery but without the text—just these disparate images that come from an unseen narrative.

**MH** Your paintings definitely have that quality, although they're so pristinely realized that they also can't seem totally random, if you know what I mean. There is a certain tension there. The realistic painting style is so perfectly executed that it imposes a sense of rationality that is hard to reconcile with the randomness, or absurdity, of the composition. This leads me to another question about your artistic practice. Do you have the composition set in your head when you begin a painting or does it come together as you're working?

**EG** It's pretty much set. The nature of the material is that you don't really know how the water is going to flow on the paper, or how the ink is going to move. So a lot of composing a work means using mistakes and just embracing unique things that happen accidentally. I always start with a composition sketched out, but then a lot happens between when I start and when I decide it is a finished piece. It can change completely from what I expected it to be.

**JP** It seems to me that you want the viewer to be enjoying him or herself, but at the same time you're a little bit afraid of letting that happen. Hence you send a paradoxical message that is very Brechtian. My problem with this (it's a problem with you and with Brecht at the same time) is that if I were to say there is a very appealing, seductive, infectious aspect to your work, you would shake it off and say, "hey, just don't get in too close here... I want you to retain your distance as a viewer." I sense that you prefer to maintain a distance between the viewer and the plot (in the case of Brecht) or the imagery (in the case of your paintings). I'm not saying you completely go that way, but it seems to me that you are perhaps slightly afraid of letting the viewer be seduced by, and fall in love with, the illusion you create.

**EG** Well, I don't know if I'm fearful of anyone loving my work! (*Laughs*) But on the point of theater, to me one of the most interesting aspects of that space is the drama of the staging—the lights, the music—and how these elements come together to form an aesthetic outside of the plot, that is to say, outside of the content of the play. And so, really the drama of the image (or of the play) is what I am focusing on. I want to seduce the viewer, but at the same time the subject of the paintings appears vapid and often oblique, because the real subject is the seduction itself. It is an indirect way to meaning. I want to get the viewer to look at looking and think about why they are seduced by something that is vapid, or potentially vapid. I want to quell the fear of there being no content with a seductive representation of light.

**JP** I'm very interested in your expression here, and I quote you word for word "look at looking." You look at the way people look, and that's absolutely the sense that I have. It seems to me that the subject matter of your work is in fact slightly removed. At a secondary level you have the act of looking at a particular aesthetic object, whether

it be drawn from the billboard or a palm tree, or music magazines, or accumulations of all of the above, or from your dreams as Mara was pointing out earlier on. To me your work seems like a concoction of all these different layers. And I think you would agree that the subject matter of your work is this act of looking at particular aesthetic objects, which you call vapid, but nonetheless are aesthetic media-based objects. What I find interesting here is to compare this aspect of your work to an artist you may or may not like, I don't know, Louise Lawler. Lawler proceeds exactly the way you do. Her subject matter is the way collectors incorporate and look at works of art within their own peculiar collections. She frames the artwork within the context of a private collection in such a way that the curtains have as much importance as the Jasper Johns. But basically she is interrogating the act of looking aesthetically within the interior of a particular collector. You are not examining that aspect, but you're looking at a much broader scene, one that we face every day: pop culture, magazines, and billboards. So what I find interesting here and what I want to know from you, Evan, is—is it just subject matter, or is it something else, and are you being cynical about it, or to a certain degree not letting yourself identify with it? Or is it not a little bit of both?

**EG** I don't really see my work as cynical. I look at it more as a non-hierarchical view of art and pop culture. As Lawler points out, contextual boundaries in real life are totally permeable. We see these objects everyday, and they exist in our minds contemporaneously. For all of these elements to be in a body of work together is, for me, completely appropriate. I don't identify with the subject matter outside of being familiar with it through my own culture, and I'm hoping that familiarity extends to the viewer. This is why I try to keep my references broad.

**JP** There is a kind of Adornian cultural critique underpinning your work; and in fact, besides the gentle, and maybe superficial, critique there is also an element of self-identification and of seduction. I feel there is a game of attraction/repulsion around those elements that you are critiquing. How do you see it?

**EG** That's a hard question. I don't know if as an artist you can really address culture and your relationship to culture without letting yourself be seduced by it, and then trying to, in turn, seduce the viewer through your experiences with it. And I don't think that analysis and seduction are mutually exclusive pathways. For me, the duality of complicity and criticality is productive. I think that when we, as viewers, look at art, we think of the artist and their work in a comprehensive manner: "who is this person, where are they from, what is the context of their work, what are their influences?" All of that goes into reading a piece. So, as an artist, I aim to look at myself not necessarily objectively, but to take a distanced, comprehensive view of my practice. I conceptualize the gallery space as a scene of an art gallery in which my work is the backdrop. So, maybe there is a something like a pretense of Adornian *pseudo-individualization* in the work. Yet, seduction is important and I think that to keep the viewer—and myself—engaged, a certain appeal is necessary. This is the vehicle for the conceptual aspects of the work.

**MH** This leads me to bring up an example of a specific instance where I am intrigued by but not quite sure how to interpret one of the particular signifiers in your work, and I am curious to hear your thoughts. When I am looking at the image of the faceless, anonymous male figure that appears in many of the paintings, I'm torn between seeing this figure as a surrogate for the artist or as a mirror for the viewer. Or, actually, now that I say this out loud, maybe it is both and that is precisely the point—that we are all implicated in the absurdity of your constructed environments.

**EG** The figure is represented through a splatter effect, so it's not a true rendering of a figure, but rather an allusion to non-physical being.

**MH** It's sort of violent too; the "splatter effect" looks like an explosion.

**EG** Yes, it is violent and in some of the pieces heads literally are exploding. This breakdown of matter and self is sometimes played off of the formal symbol of the tuxedo. Overall, I think of it more as an allusion to a vague notion of spirituality. I'll depict a glowing figure whose eyes are covered by a black censor bar or who is wearing sunglasses, and this creates an absurd situation with very culture-specific imagery. The intent is to reconcile absurdity and spirituality in the same drawing, which is a satirical gesture, I suppose.

**JP** I'd like to take us in a completely different direction now. I think in response to an earlier question from Mara, you said that you use mistakes or accidents in your work, and I find that extremely interesting. Are you recognizing this quote?

**EG** Yes.



BOUQUET OF FLOWERS IN AN URN (AFTER JAN VAN HUYSUM) 2007 Ink on paper 28" x 20 1/4"



PERFECT 2008 Ink on paper 28 3/8" x 20 1/8"

**JP** Did you say it?

**EG** Yes.

**JP** Okay, I want to pick up on that, if I may, because it really surprised me.

**MH** Yes, it's shocking really. I'm glad we are going back to this point.

**JP** Same here, so we both have the same reaction. Your work, to me, looks hyper-controlled and when you said that you cannot always control the ink, the reference I had to your work earlier on—which is that of color field painting, especially of people like Morris Louis—absolutely came to the fore. I thought about the way you apply the ink—the liquidness of the pigment on the paper is very Louis-like, very, “Let it be, let it flow.” So my question is how do you reconcile the passivity of the physical way that one senses the liquid was just let be (left to be absorbed by the paper) versus the impression that you are a hyper-controlled artist. There's a sense of tension, rather a contradiction, between the passivity of the liquid doing what it does to the paper versus the highly disciplined look of your finished paintings.

**EG** Well, you can put on a freshly pressed Armani suit, but still be having a bad hair day and there's nothing you can do about it. There's an organic reality to the materials and sometimes you can control them, but often you have to surrender and let go. That's a joke answer, but it's true. I try to let the ink do what it's going to do.

**JP** So obviously there must be times when the ink does things you really don't want it to do.

**EG** Yes, that's true.

**JP** So, is there a lot of destruction in your work?

**EG** No, that was what I was saying earlier. Usually I try to say, “Okay this was going

to go *here* and that has to complete *this*, but now what is going to reconcile this unexpected passage in the work as opposed to what I was planning?” I have to be able to say, “This is going to be a different piece that I had started with.”

**JP** So for me, this is the single most surprising revelation within our discussion of your work so far.

**MH** I agree, but maybe we are talking about different mistakes. I'm imagining a big blob of black ink that suddenly falls somewhere you didn't want it to land. Is that what we are all talking about? Then what? Do you just say, “Oh, I'm going to put an LP there now?”

**EG** Well, that has happened, more or less.

**JP** This is fascinating.

**EG** I don't think I ever spilled ink, but...yeah, there is a certain amount of... improvising.

**JP** Well, this is very strange. Suddenly, I feel like you're the one in control talking about your lack of control and this puts me in an odd chair. I find that suddenly I'm on a different level realizing how you work proceeds. And now it makes you much closer to John Cage—his procedures, chance operations and so on—than I had ever, ever thought. Would you disagree with that?

**EG** No, I would not disagree with that. I think Cage's view of the world was that music was always and my view of the world is that beautiful and intriguing images are always. Even in the most banal advertisement or filmic cliché. There is beauty in cliché and that's why clichés exist. The key is to get past the social connotations that denote how to interpret such things.

**JP** This will be an interesting side note, but I just want to throw this in because

you've just spoken about clichés. You mentioned the aesthetics of clichés and there is a wonderful quote by Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the greatest literary critics in Soviet Russia, where he coins a phrase that I think absolutely applies to your work, “The common prose of living.” It is the notion that what goes on in everyday life produces artifacts and cultural phenomena from which we can derive joy and aesthetic appeal.

**MH** Joachim's reference has just that made me think of another interesting aspect Evan's work. You clearly use the “common prose” of a certain group, but it is not a universal prose. What I mean is that your visual language assumes that your audience is part of a specific socioeconomic group and age bracket. Granted most people in the world have seen records, and know what Ray-Bans are, and will get the reference to the cliché sunset, but these images are all rooted in American pop culture. However, in terms of the aspect of beauty that we were talking about earlier, the fact that the objects are rendered so well and so masterfully might possibly make your paintings able to transcend cultural, political, or historical significance. I don't know. I wonder if someone who is coming at your work from a completely different place, from a third-world country, for instance, someone who wouldn't know these references, would still look at this and see it, as we do, as beautiful.

**JP** I like what Mara has brought up and I think it's actually an essential part of your work. I would just reinforce a point by saying that in fact, I think that one of the reasons maybe for the success behind your work is the fact that everybody wants either to be in, or at least to be identified with, this socioeconomic youth group that she has just described and which you clearly reference. Would you not agree?

**EG** I think there is sort of a mimetic coolness in the work, and I think that's what you're picking up on, but I don't know if the viewer wants to be a part of it, per se. I don't have a target audience in mind. I would be very interested to find out how my work reads outside of the culture of contemporary art, if it seems to be a part of the media of a “youth culture” as you say, or if carries more of the generalized mimetic function I intend it to have. In some ways my work depends heavily on its context, like a Richard Prince photograph for example, but ultimately I hope that through my use of materials, its particular handmade aesthetic beauty carries it across contextual borders. That might be the challenge: to beautify ultra-specific cultural objects and styles in a way that makes it about the seduction rather than their significance.

**JP** Do we go on to talk about light and dark in your work?

**EG** Yes, let's.

**JP** I'd like to discuss the role of light in your overall approach. The role of light is very interesting in your work and I sense a bit of tension there. Yours seems a sort of paradoxical approach. I feel that there's a constant kind of ironization towards the perception and depiction of light processes. One is tempted to call your work photophilic—loving light—but at the same time, I'm not sure that you're not also a little photophobic and I just would like to get a sense of where you are with this.

**EG** This goes back to my affinity for theater. Dramatic lighting, overly dramatic posing, silhouetting—these are stark instances of light and dark that are melodramatic. In film, it is the “Noir” aesthetic. All of these things, for me, are pushing this level of the overt drama in the imagery to a point where it's sort of, “Okay, I get it, it's overly postured, but there's something else going on here.” A lot of Noir filmmaking is highly stylized, maybe even overdone, and that's exactly the point. I think that when you over-stylize something, in a way, people understand that there is a reason behind it. The stylization becomes its own thing that can be dealt with separately. Then you can let go of the stylization and look at looking.

**JP** I like what you're saying and I want to pick up on this again, going back to this “looking at looking.” There is a very modern concept that I want to put forth here. This idea of looking at looking, depicting a depiction, Matisse did it and a lot of other people have done this kind of thing. It carries the name *mise en abyme* in literary criticism and is a concept from Roland Barthes, which he uses to describe signs mirroring signs in the field of literature. I think this is something that your work definitely resonates with. We could tease that further but I don't want to let go what you were just saying regarding light, chiaroscuro, and cinematic and theatrical lighting. So let's go back to this *mise en abyme* question a little later. When looking at your work—in particular the kitsch sunset imagery—I want to bring in a tradition that would, very broadly speaking, begin with say Claude Monet's “Impression, Sunrise” and bracketed on other end by the incredibly powerful, infectious, short films of Tacita Dean, who shoots the sun setting in real time. One artist using painting, the other using film. It seems to me that your work has a kind of affinity with both of these artists. Or, maybe you are totally unconcerned by either of these people's works. But on some

level your work is indebted to that legacy of representations of the sun setting in all its glowing beauty with, as always in your work, a slightly critical aspect thrown in there.

**EG** I think the point of entry for me is reclaiming clichés of beauty, or perhaps simply reclaiming clichés of light. Talking about the sunset, I haven't been specifically thinking about Monet or Dean, but one artist that does come to my mind for me is John Divola. Divola is a photographer who made a body of work in these abandoned houses in Zuma Beach, California in the 70s. The houses were right on the water, and he would do these free-form spray painting exercises inside the abandoned buildings, mixing with the graffiti that was already there. Being a photographer he would shoot these rooms. Anyway, the point is that his work is about interacting with the entropy of the disintegrating houses, but often in these photographs he frames the sunset over the Pacific Ocean in the background. I always found it a hilarious gesture on his part that here's this classic trope of beauty cropped within these photographs about urban ruin as an issue in photography. I like the tension of this contradiction, and I think that in my work it manifests as an attempt to bring an aesthetic beauty to clichéd styles and symbols.

**MH** Interesting, the comparison to Monet. I see Monet—and you'll forgive this very obvious statement—as giving a genuinely personal impression of what he was actually seeing. An attempt that was revolutionary at the time. And Evan on the other hand is reappropriating an overtly clichéd representation. We are so used to this image of the sun setting against a backdrop of silhouetted palm trees. We immediately know that it is beautiful, or that it is *supposed* to be beautiful. Again, it is one of your signifiers; a very loaded image. It's Hollywood. It's Americana. It's an image that is supposed to immediately conjure up fantasies of “the good life” and beauty and romance. But you don't think you've reinvented the sunset as something new, right? It's more about reclaiming a very iconic image.

**EG** Right, it's more the idea of using the sunset as an idea of a sunset.

**MH** And a trigger.

**EG** And a trigger, exactly. It is a signifier for a cultural interpretation of beauty, definitely.

**MH** I'd say you work is very “American.”

**EG** You think so?

**JP** I'm not at all in disagreement with Mara's point, which appeared to be a critique of what I was saying. I was just suggesting a point zero of the Monet, which marks the beginning of the sunset becoming a representation per se of a beautiful moment, versus the time—indeed a very American time, the 21st Century—where that very notion of the representation of beauty becomes complex, multilayered, and problematic. We've talked about this before, how we put “beauty” at a remove; criticize it from afar, and so on. And I love your description of Divola because it fits with all of that.

**EG** Speaking on American-ness in my paintings, we might look to another progression of a different signifier—the American flag—from Jasper Johns to David Hammons. I sometimes use the flag as well, for the idea that here is an iconic and weighted image that is so loaded that you shouldn't use it in earnest. It's a similar thing in art to the sunset, in my mind. And that's exactly why one should use it, and that's why it's interesting. On a larger level, I suppose that the aesthetic I'm going for, this Hollywood Noir meets banal geometric graphicism, is very American. But, it is also a niche aesthetic that represents a distilled, hyper-concentrated type of Americanism. I'm borrowing an absurd aesthetic directly *from* culture to reciprocally access the absurdity *of* culture.

**JP** So, can I just maybe close on this? Of course, I am trying to close the circle, and I had not anticipated at all it would go this way, but it's kind of perfect. The conversation brings us back to *mise en abyme*. When you, Evan, are “looking at looking,” you look at creating kitsch. You look at the notion of creating beauty per se, but of a notion of beauty that is so problematic today that nobody dares touch it, while you embrace all of this head-on. So, in a way, this goes back to this aesthetic conundrum where you are taking as subject matter an aesthetic approach—that of creating a kitsch imagery—and exploring what that means. So, my final question to you, and maybe you don't want to give the answer here, is: ultimately are you ennobling or are you critiquing this industry of creating kitsch imagery?

**EG** I think I'm just framing it. Framing it in a way that's seductive. I guess you could say that my overall project is a living *mise en abyme* of art and culture. ■