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MATTHEW BRANNON: *CONCERNING VIETNAM*

OPENING RECEPTION: TUESDAY, MAY 1, 6-8PM
ON VIEW MAY 1 - JUNE 16

Casey Kaplan is pleased to announce Matthew Brannon: *Concerning Vietnam*, the artist's second solo exhibition rooted in an ongoing, research-based exploration of the Vietnam/American War.

Six large-scale, unique works on paper, punctuated by a new series of ephemera-sourced paintings, chronicle the political and cultural narratives of a complex history. Brannon's graphic style lends itself to a visual deconstruction of decisions made and fallouts endured between the years of 1954 and 1973. With traditional silkscreen printing techniques as well as hand-painting, the artist layers hundreds of screens in an intricate network of overlapping and boldly colored objects. Image and language intersect in evocations of dual meanings and underlying narrative.

Tackling an anthology of collected information, Brannon sets the stage in 1954. From the aerial, first-person perspective of Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidential desk, as seen in "Concerning Vietnam: Oval Office, April 1954", the artist creates a panorama of imagery relating to the origins of American involvement in Southeast Asia. Over-sized dimensional letters spelling out *DIEN BIEN PHU* (the locale of the culminating battle of the French War in Vietnam) looms over a detailed map of Indochina. Two cartoon vultures, from the 1967 Disney film "The Jungle Book," are perched on the letters in reference to Opération Vautour (the NSC's nonstarter plan to rescue French troops in Vietnam). Brannon translates his research into both literal and personified objects that are at once floating in space and grounded with cinematic perspective. A row of dominoes, branded with the names of countries, illustrates Eisenhower's oft-quoted rationale of the Cold War (positing that political events in one country will cause similar events in neighboring countries). Connections exist from one image to the next, each element part of a holistic whole in addressing history.

Processing information with a chronological logic, Brannon jumps forward to 1967 with Lyndon B. Johnson. Set as the anti-war protests reach a fever pitch, "Concerning Vietnam: Oval Office, October 1967" addresses Johnson's role amongst a fierce backlash from the American and international public. A composite of rally signs exists as a banner spanning the width of the composition. Words of protest are coupled with an airdrop 175lb 'general purpose' bomb (the problematic panacea of U.S. military strategy). In the forefront, an actual house of cards labeled with the words *Marigold*, *Sunflower*, and *Pennsylvania* refers to the failure of three secret peace talks to open channels of communication between the U.S. and North Vietnam. Brannon's signature methodology of years past, based in antithetical pairings of consumerist and pop-cultural idioms, does not falter despite the labyrinth of material. In Brannon's work, discreet information is never discreet.

In 1973, the deck of cards falls as Richard Nixon's presidency unravels alongside some of his greatest triumphs: his landslide reelection in 1972 and the signing of the 1973 peace treaty. In "Concerning Vietnam: Oval Office, January 1973", the Agreement on Ending the War & Restoring the Peace in Vietnam serves as a gravitational force and conceptual disturbance in the center of Nixon's desk. Orbiting the signatures of the agreement are objects ranging from a football helmet and a model B52 Stratofortress, alluding to Nixon's fraught machismo, and an unplugged extension cord i.e. the severing of war funds. Set against a black background, the objects speak to a moment for celebration that was overshadowed by one of opacity and bewilderment. For Brannon, it is this psychological haze of contradicting emotions that forms the basis of his undertaking in historical narration.

Shifting from the decision-makers to the personal plights of those on the front lines, Brannon presents “Concerning Vietnam: Bell UH-1D Iroquois, Cockpit (II)”, a massive two-sheet work on paper. The presidential viewpoint of the desk is translated to that of a helicopter pilot’s dashboard. Against a shocking purple-and-pink psychedelic background, the viewer is met with a landscape of dials and switches — evidence of the billions of dollars the U.S. invested in military technology and firepower. The reality of warfare is countered by hints of innocence in the form of personal items left on the window ledge and stacked on an empty seat, humanizing the narrative.

Approaching his research as a visual artist, Brannon is attune to peripheral material found along the way. A new series of ephemera-sourced paintings are interspersed amongst the silkscreens. Memorabilia such as Newsweek, TV Guide and LIFE magazines are photographed, printed onto archival paper on a 1/1 scale, and embedded within pigment rich oil-painted linen panels. The works serve as lush colorfield paintings and frameworks for the litter of American culture, existing as both object and carbon copy. Sourced from various locales, each object contains its own trail of ownership, and Brannon’s intersection between personal narrative and historical significance continues.

ARTIST STATEMENT

I never met John Kennedy. But I had a dream I did. He told me how much he liked what I was doing.

I never met Lyndon Johnson but I recently re-edited transcribed audiotapes so that it read as if I was interviewing him and he was responding. I liked what he had to say.

I did get close to Richard Nixon once, but we never shook hands. My parents wouldn’t let me.

It’s one thing to be an artist when your twenty-five it’s another when you’re forty-five. To continue to make art about subjects that interested me at a young age becomes, with age, inevitably uncomfortable. And so it was that a few years back I shifted my attention to something that, at the time, I felt was far far away from contemporary concerns -- to a subject that had always interested me but that I really had very little understanding of. And perhaps that was what interested me most.

I’ve chosen the very conventional form of paint on paper in which to discuss one of the most controversial topics in U.S. history. I’ve translated my underlined pages and piles of notes into framed images of my own making. This exhibition is my attempt, as an artist, at history, biography, and psychoanalysis of a trauma central to the American identity. The project seeks a broader, more complex understanding of the decisions, actions, and consequences of the U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. Research is its horizon.

- MATTHEW BRANNON, NEW YORK, APRIL 2018

Matthew Brannon’s (b. 1971, St. Maries, Idaho) work can be found in permanent collections such as the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Museum of Modern Art, New York. Brannon has been the subject of solo exhibitions at venues including the Marino Marini Museum, Florence (2013); Portikus, Frankfurt (2012); Museum M, Leuven, Belgium (2010); Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York (2007); and Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2007). Group exhibitions include The Lulennial II: A Low-Hanging Fruit, Lulu, Mexico City (2018); Manchester Art Gallery, England (2017); Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2013); Cortesi Contemporary, Lugano, Switzerland (2013); Palm Springs Art Museum (2013); Bergen Kunsthall, Norway (2012); 15th Tallinn Print Triennial, KUMU Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia (2011); Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York (2010); and The Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2008). Brannon lives and works in New York.