



FRANKLIN EVANS

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MILES
McENERY
GALLERY

511 West 22nd Street
New York NY 10011

515 West 22nd Street
New York NY 10011

525 West 22nd Street
New York NY 10011

520 West 21st Street
New York NY 10011



BRAINSPACE: RECENT WORKS BY FRANKLIN EVANS

By David Ebony

The hypercultural is an immediate side by side of different cultural forms. In the hypercultural space, in the hypermarket of cultures, there is no “hiking”: different cultural forms, ideas, sounds and smells are offered up as borderless hyperspace. ... The hypercultural space involves no transition or transit. Hyperculture produces a singular “here.” If heterogeneous contents lie adjacent to one another, there is no need for the “trans.” Contemporary culture is marked not by the trans, the multi or the inter but by the hyper.

—Byung-Chul Han, *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalization*

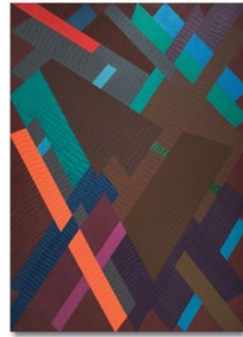
Seeing, or rather experiencing, Franklin Evans’s newest paintings (as well as a mural-size installation work in progress) during a recent studio visit called to mind the words of the Seoul-born Berlin-based philosopher Byung-Chul Han. In his 2005 book *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalization* (English translation, 2022), he describes the world of hyperculture as an expansion of spaces that can be accessed according to aesthetic principles—spaces that are part of the realm of play and semblance, which he says promise “more freedom” than spaces of force, law, and power.¹

The spaces in Evans’s paintings appear to be expanding, amid a spatial and temporal evolution that is dense, intense, and hyperactive. Obsessive layering and overpainting of elongated clusters of narrow, colorful, evenly spaced bands in many works, joined by repeated images of heads and fragmented figures in others, result in rarified, spatial compression. The bands of color in the striped canvases may suggest directional movements—up, down, side-to-side, or zigzag motions. More often, however, they imply self-contained networks of passages, pathways, or metaphoric tunnels to another place, time, or dimension. The cumulative effect is of a singular “here,” just as Han suggests. A sense of freedom predominates in this imaginative and idiosyncratic realm that the artist refers to as “brainspace.”

¹Byung-Chul Han, *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalization*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Medford, Mass.: Polity Press, 2022), pp. 24-25.



Daniel Buren, *White Acrylic Painting on White and Anthracite Gray Striped Cloth*, 1966, Synthetic polymer on canvas, 7' 5 3/4" x 6' 5 5/8" (228 x 197 cm). Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Bequest and the Philip L. Goodwin Collection Funds (both by exchange), Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY



William T. Williams (b.1942), *Texas Lady (Shimmer Series)*, 1973, Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 inches (213.4 x 152.4 cm)

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Formally, Evans's works correspond to the geometric, hard-edge compositions of abstractionists such as Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, and Daniel Buren, as well as to the more "baroque" arrangements of geometric forms in paintings by William T. Williams, an artist Evans admires and directly quotes in several of his works. Unlike those artists, however, Evans adheres less to systematic formulae, schematic composition, color code, or even technical execution. His open approach ultimately enhances the sense of freedom that arises in each endeavor.

Evans's work is process-oriented, with an improvisational, open-ended, and provisional quality that is part of his concept of the "perpetual studio." He works on several paintings at once, and he occasionally places the canvases on the floor to be trampled at certain stages in the process, providing the finished works with a weathered, vintage patina. Evans recently presented a full-scale painting installation titled *perpetualstudio* in the exhibition *What a Wonderful World* (2022-23) at the MAXXI Museum in Rome. Sue Scott, whose New York gallery hosted one of Evans's earliest *perpetualstudio* installations, in 2009, referenced the MAXXI work in her essay for the recent book *Mothers of Invention*. She notes that Evans sees "in the push and pull between abstraction and representation, a way to deal with biographical issues such as queer identity, his Mexican heritage on his mother's side, his

²Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal, and Sue Scott, *Mothers of Invention: The Feminist Roots of Contemporary Art* (London: Lund Humphries, 2024), pp. 132-33.

life as an artist, and his background in economics and finance. ... Each contiguous installation is an extension of his studio practice and continues exploration of what he sees as his 'brainspace.'"²

A self-proclaimed maximalist, Evans loads his compositions to the bursting point—with many lines, colors, abstract shapes, and figurative elements activating the surface. Contradictorily, all elements seem to thrust out of the confines of the picture plane and pull the viewer back into this boisterous and seemingly anarchic brainspace. In a recent series that Evans refers to as *someofsomeofall*, however, a sense of order ultimately prevails, indicating a sort of ad hoc, incomplete compendium of painterly and personal introspection and exploration.

In works such as *tapescape2twofour* and *tapescape2008atdilig* (both 2024), the bands of color often resemble long strips of masking tape still attached to the canvases. The surfaces are basically flat, but subtle drop shadows here and there—among the tools in Evans's arsenal of subtle *trompe l'oeil* effects—lend many of the works in this exhibition a collage feel. Rigorously abstract, *tapescape2twofour*—a large composition (70 by 50 inches) with long, compact rows of colorful bands defining large triangular shapes—nevertheless suggests from a distance an aerial view of a cityscape with a traffic-jammed intersection and labyrinthine overpasses and underpasses. I like to think of this particularly mapped-out brainspace as a "brainscape."

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Superhighways of color bars—roads to nowhere and everywhere—form elongated chevrons on either side of the canvas that press toward each other near the upper center in a tense exchange. Here, Evans elicits this maplike reading by means of a quasi-Cubist visual language, or perhaps by offering a dialogue with Orphism, as in early 20th century modernist abstractions by František Kupka, or Robert and Sonia Delaunay.

Allusions to art history abound in Evans's work. Like an archeologist of modernism (as well as of recent developments), he mines art history in novel ways. References to Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Stuart Davis, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Barnett Newman, Norman Lewis, Kerry James



Judy Pfaff, *Grasshopper* (installation view), 2016,
Multimedia, CR 10, Linlithgo, NY



Jasper Johns, *Between the Clock and the Bed*, 1981,
Encaustic on canvas, three panels, 6' 1/8" x 10' 6/8"
(183.2 x 321 cm). Gift of Agnes Gund,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

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Marshall, Frank Stella, and many other artists haunt Evans's compositions in fragmented reiterations of familiar images and in re-creations of iconic signatures. This is not ironic appropriation, however; Evans's strategy aligns with the art critic Leo Steinberg's description of Rembrandt's adoption of images and motifs from other artists in his introduction to the 1978 book *Art About Art*. "As I see it," Steinberg writes of Rembrandt, "he did not crib, quote or borrow from need; he adopted from an over-plus of generosity. He did not copy to supply a want of imagination, nor to mock or parody—you can see that the transcription was made with reverence and affection."³

In his work and in conversation, Evans is generous in acknowledging his appreciation for the great modernists, as well as for many peers—among them, Dana Schutz, Inka Essenhigh, James Siena, Charline von Heyl, Dona Nelson, Jackie Gendel, Elena Sisto, and especially Judy Pfaff, whose process-oriented sculptures and vast installations, such as *Grasshopper* (2016) at CR-10 in upstate New York, resonate with Evans's own brainspace.

The art-historical references in *tapescape2008atdilig* are of a somewhat personal nature. In this rather intimate work (28 by 20 inches), a quiltlike cross-hatching of colorful lines in the lower part of the composition recalls Jasper Johns's recurring linear geometric patterns in Johns's 1989 painting *Between the Clock and the Bed*. Johns, in turn, borrowed the motif from the 1940-43 Edvard Munch painting of the same name. The patterning also alludes to the striped floors of one of Evans's early

perpetualstudio installations. On the upper right is a triangular space crammed with repeated images of a bird, the gracefully delineated heads and beaks accentuated by touches of translucent pastel hues. The bird motif is a direct reference to the painter John Dilg, one of Evans's mentors and an influential teacher at the University of Iowa, where Evans earned his master of fine arts degree. In this way, Evans's work can be seen as self-reflective and autobiographical.

In several other works, Evans manages to suggest a narrative or impart an autobiographical statement without using conventional figures or traditionally defined social spaces. In *tapescapeesuecott* (2024), for instance, at the center of the composition, the bird motif borrowed from Dilg recurs above a sideways image of a schematic head with an elaborate headdress—derived from a work of pre-Columbian art. These delicately etched images appear against a network of colorful, irregular crosshatch lines that one might find in a rag rug or a Gee's Bend quilt. This luminous palimpsest alludes to Evans's student days at the University of Iowa (Dilg) and his Mexican heritage (pre-Columbian art), while the geometric stripe patterns refer to details of an early iteration of the *perpetualstudio* at Sue Scott Gallery in 2009, as indicated in the work's title.

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Evans's special variety of intense, hyperbolic narrative is in full bloom in *compressionscape* (2024), a large work (68 by 69 inches) in which layered clusters of various human and animal heads jostle one another for visual predominance. Fragmented quotes, apparently cribbed from Pablo Picasso or German Expressionist portraits—small, large, upright, and upside down—emerge from the dense, sensuous, and unruly atmosphere. Across this hedonistic expanse, jaguar heads materialize in several places as if peering through the thick forest of signs and signifiers, triumphant creatures in this unique jungle brainscape. Protectors, transformers, and gods of time and the underworld, jaguars were central to pre-Columbian religion, especially in Maya culture. The jaguar images, a stand-in for the artist (a self-portrait of sorts), recur in many of Evans's works. The repetitions in this composition (and indeed throughout his oeuvre) establish intricate networks of roadways, tunnels, corridors, conduits, alleyways, and even meandering forest pathways. Ultimately, they provide metaphoric transport to another place, time, or dimension, with the destination being a singularly inevitable "here." ■

David Ebony is a contributing editor of Yale University Press online, *Art in America*, *Snapshot of the Art World*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*, among other publications; he is also the author of numerous artist monographs. He lives and works in New York.

³Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, *Art About Art*, introduction by Leo Steinberg (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 28.



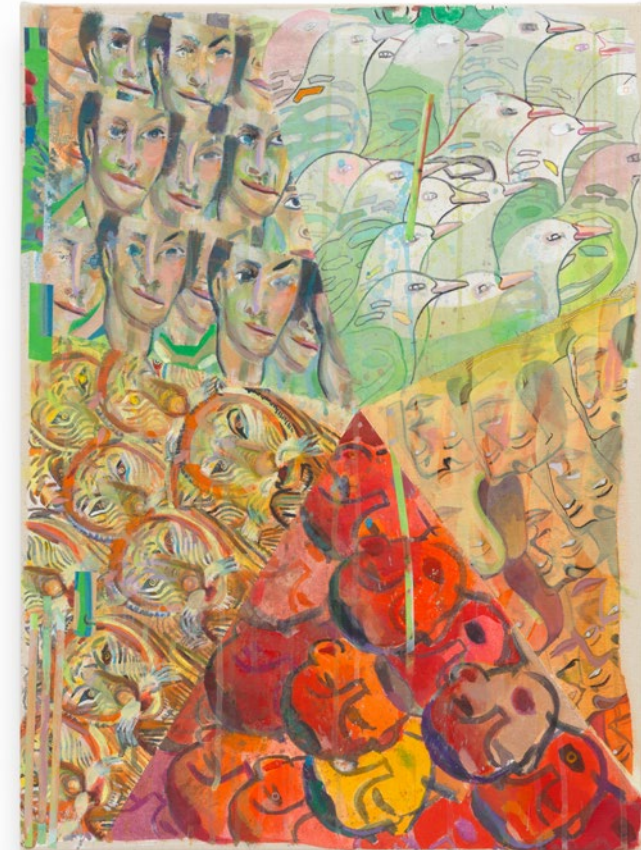
colormemoriescape, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 35 inches
102 x 89 cm



compressionscape, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
67 1/2 x 63 inches
172 x 160 cm



neuralnetoffive, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
28 x 20 inches
71 x 51 cm



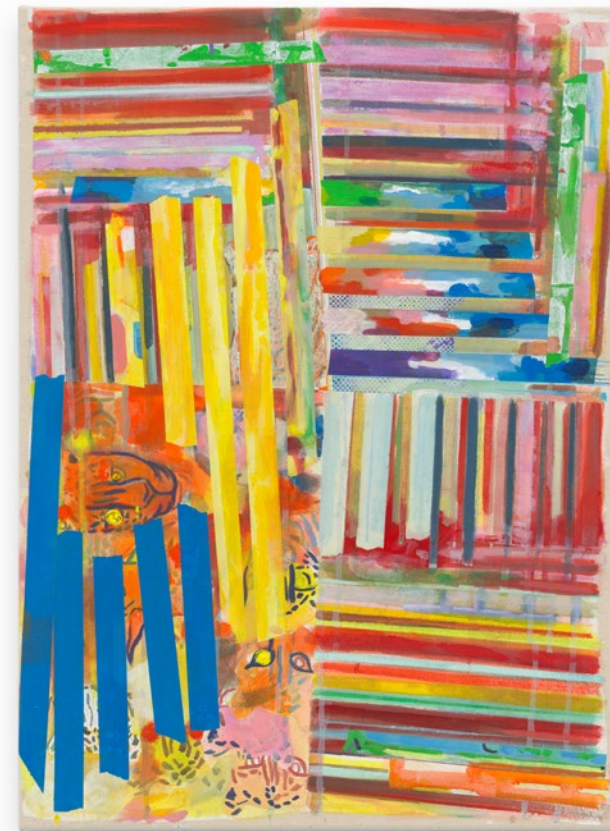
neuralnetoffour, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
26 1/2 x 19 inches
67 x 48 cm



signscape, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
69 1/2 x 51 inches
177 x 130 cm



tapecatscape, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
26 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches
67 x 50 cm



tapescape2008atdilig, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
28 x 20 inches
71 x 51 cm



tapescape2twofour, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
70 x 50 inches
178 x 127 cm



tapescapemomaps1gny, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
28 x 20 inches
71 x 51 cm



tapescapestuescott, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
28 x 20 inches
71 x 51 cm



zigzag93selfie2now, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
52 x 45 inches
132 x 114 cm



zigzagtapescape, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
64 x 52 inches
163 x 132 cm



zigzagtilt, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
52 x 45 inches
132 x 114 cm





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Miles McEnery Gallery
520 West 21st Street
New York NY 10011

tel +1 212 445 0051
www.milesmcenery.com

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