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## What to Do About the Artists in Your Studio

If Philip Guston wanted everyone, including himself, to leave his studio, Franklin Evans seems to be inviting everyone in.

by John Yau  
July 3, 2021



Franklin Evans, "pigmentpolymersplatspace" (2021), acrylic on canvas, 70 x 68 3/4 inches (all image courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

"I believe it was John Cage who once told me, 'When you start working, everybody is in your studio — the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas — all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave.'"

I was reminded of Philip Guston's statement about influence when I was looking at the painting "iowapaintnotes" (acrylic on canvas, 45 1/2 by 41 3/4 inches, 2021), which is one of eight paintings and three works on paper included in the exhibition *Franklin Evans: fugitivemisreadings* at Miles McEnery Gallery (June 24–July 31, 2021).

Evans has divided "iowapaintnotes" into a crazy quilt of different-sized rectangles that both overlap and abut each other. Each one alludes to a painting by an artist, some well known, others seemingly by the artist's friends. The arrangement is non-hierarchical. The name "Philip Guston" is painted in the fourth rectangle down, aligned with the painting's left edge. Two red fields with black dots are signed "Yayoi Kusama." The thing is, the images above Guston's and Kusama's signatures only vaguely resemble the respective artist's work, which means they are not citations but instead Evans's riffs on their work.





Franklin Evans, "Iowapaintnotes" (2021), acrylic on canvas, 45 1/2 x 41 3/4 inches

While Guston thought the point was to have everyone leave his studio, Evans memorializes the time when he was at the University of Iowa, where he earned his MFA in 1993. Together, the sections — almost all of which include a signature — are like the notes and postcards that might have hung on the wall in his studio at the time, except Evans's alter ego changed, misremembered, and turned things upside down. That slippage is crucial to Evans's project.

In "misreadinglandscapeintoart" (acrylic on canvas, 53 1/2 by 49 1/4 inches, 2021), Evans brings together bundles and stacks of stripes, for what look like aerial views of a white tray of watercolors, color charts, and Kenneth Noland "targets." These become suns, and echo — to this viewer at least — Arthur Dove paintings. Again there is a deliberate slippage, this time between abstraction and representation.

Is Evans commenting ironically on Noland's abstractions? I don't think it is as simple as that. He seems interested in undoing the categories and the boxes we use to identify something or, to extend this line of thinking, someone's identity.

By juxtaposing some of the landscapes with the abstractions, particularly along the painting's right and left side, Evans underscores the sense that these different elements may or may not fit together. Having to reorient these views in the mind's eye produces the sense that Evans's miscellany is undergoing change. This is a reminder that we cannot possibly process the barrage of images we encounter in our daily lives, much less make a reassuring order out of them.



Franklin Evans, "Joysdivision" (2021), acrylic on canvas, 30 3/4 x 32 5/8 inches

As with "Iowapaintnotes," Evans both pays homage and arrives at his own interpretations of different artists' works. One of his teachers at the University of Iowa was John Dilg, whose exhibition *John Dilg: Flight Path* is currently at Eva Presenhuber (June 3–July 21, 2021). Evans has taken one of Dilg's signature motifs, a mesa framed by two trees, and painted the scene in pastel stripes, colors and marks that Dilg has never used.

The one artist that Evans keeps returning to in this exhibition is Henri Matisse. In "joysdivision" (acrylic on canvas, 30 3/4 by 32 5/8 inches, 2021), Evans expands in a number of ways on Matisse's innovative painting "Le bonheur de vivre" ("The Joy of Life," 1906). In addition to alluding to Matisse's idyllic painting, Evans's title refers to the punk rock band Joy Division and the Nazi concentration camp



brothels the group based its name on, as well as the strategy of dividing the painting into parts and motifs, which are repeated, enlarged, overlaid, and rearranged.

What keeps our attention is Evans's use of different techniques, which reflects his resistance to settling into a stylistic groove. In "pigmentpolymersplatspace" (acrylic on canvas, 70 by 68 3/4 inches, 2021), phallic shapes extend in from the painting's four sides. Along the bottom left edge, images of Matisse's fauvist "Self Portrait in a Striped T-shirt" (1906), the artist's only self portrait where he is not standing or holding a brush, has been cropped, stretched, and rendered in blue.



Franklin Evans, "franklinfootpaths15to20" (2020), acrylic on canvas, 78 x 57 1/8 inches

Are there faces in some of the elongated shapes? What are the red discs with black dots in the center that Evans has overlaid in parts of the painting? Is this a vision of a world imploding, a comment on the liquidity of paint, or a reminder that reproductions and images seen on a computer are distortions, and that much of our experience is removed from the actual? I would propose it is all of these possibilities and more.

In the three works on paper, Evans uses watercolor, ink, and graphite on gridded paper to explore pixelated views, abstraction, and legibility. For "selfportraitwithmatisse" (15 1/8 by 11 1/4 inches, 2019), he divides the grid into different-sized rectangles. The rectangle nestled in the upper left-hand corner contains a hand he has drawn in pencil, underscoring his commitment to being directly engaged in the making of his work.

In the lower right-hand corner, we see a grid of different blues and grays that evokes what I believe is the artist's self-portrait. Poised between resemblance and abstraction, the face neither coalesces into an image nor disintegrates into the unreadable. Between these two images are pixelated references to one of Roy Lichtenstein's blond women, as well as different pixelated references to Matisse's Fauvist self portrait, rows of circles marked with a vertical line or, in the adjacent rectangle, marked by a series of spoke-like lines.

Evans recognizes that we live in a world where we must constantly translate what we see. It is this chaotic plethora of images and the confusion of competing messages and distortions that he addresses in his work. You might think it is art about art, but it is much more than that.





Franklin Evans, "selfportraitwithmatisse" (2019), watercolor, ink and graphite on paper, 15 1/8 x 11 1/4 inches

Franklin Evans: fugitivemisreadings continues at Miles McEnery Gallery (520 West 21st Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 31.

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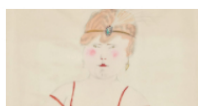
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John Yau has published books of poetry, fiction, and criticism. His latest poetry publications include a book of poems, *Further Adventures in Monochrome* (Copper Canyon Press, 2012), and the... [More by John Yau](#)

