

SUBTLETY AND SHEETROCK

An artist reflects, mark by mark

BY SCOTT INDRISEK

Ernest with Jewelry,
2013. Wood, glue,
gesso, chalk, and
nylon, 40 x 12 x 12 in.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:
Matthew Kirk in his
Queens, New York,
studio, 2015.

Chill Out and Laugh,
2014. Chalk, acrylic,
ink, graphite, and
tape on Sheetrock,
resting on wooden
shelf, 48 x 72 in.



KIRK'S MIXED-media-on-Sheetrock paintings—often presented as diptychs or triptychs, leaning on narrow, purpose-built shelves—are buzzing tangles of abstract mark making. The 37-year-old artist makes them in the low-ceilinged basement of a house in Ridgewood, Queens, the sort of cozy space that looks like it once hosted someone's grandfather's woodworking shop. When I visit in the spring, the studio is cluttered with panels in progress, as well as an assortment of sculptural assemblages hewn from bricks, string, and insulation foam. "I'm not sure what I'm doing with that," Kirk admits, "but I bring home and end up hoarding a lot of cut-up pieces of wood and things I find on the street. Sometimes I'll build things that I draw, or vice versa—they act as background props." Kirk made one simple piece in the corner by joining a purple sheet of foam to a green slab of the same. He has ambitions to return these found-object hybrids to the streets where he first came upon them—perhaps posting a "curb alert" on Craigslist and seeing who responds ("Free foam sculpture on the corner of Onderdonk and Flushing!"). The weird objects would recirculate among a network of strangers. It's a lack of protectiveness and preciousness that seeps into the rest of Kirk's practice: He's driven to make artworks that aren't rarefied, that can have a place in the humble and everyday world.

The artist has never had much use for traditional stretched canvas. (He also regularly works on paper, and some of these pieces will be on view at the outsider-art focused Intuit center in Chicago beginning in September.) Kirk used to paint and draw on cardboard; one day, lacking material to work on, he found some discarded Sheetrock slabs outside his former studio in Long Island City. Without gesso, the grayish surface of the construction material becomes its own ground—and one that's not entirely fixed. Exposed to the elements, the Sheetrock tends to yellow a bit—it "gets a tan," Kirk says, which, far from bothering him, seems to stir his affection for the accidental and unexpected. Since then, he's also painted and drawn on wood, as well as expanses of chalkboard-treated Masonite.

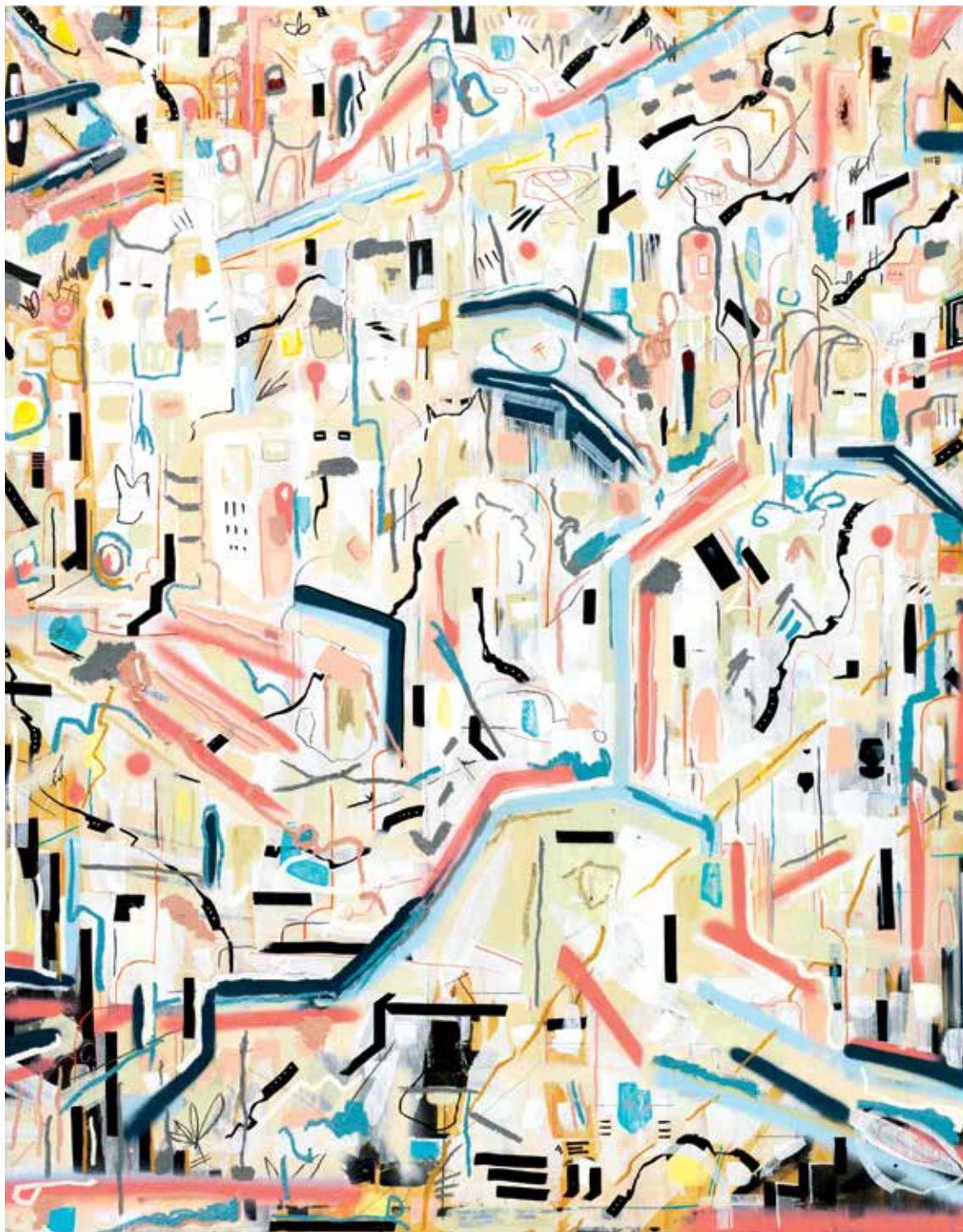


The surfaces of these works are often augmented with lengths of string or strips of blue tape; he's prone to piercing them with staples, or shooting Sheetrock with a BB gun, violently bedazzling the paintings with small, embedded gold pellets. Kirk's mark making is intense, a jittery storm of scribble, anxious lines, swaths of color or the occasional loose, gestural streak of white paint. The works can recall a more claustrophobic, geometrically fixated Cy Twombly; they share a similar energy with more recent paintings by Joseph Hart.

Kirk's compositions occasionally resemble aerial maps, with things like factories, crosses, or human figures delineated in a kind of visual shorthand. He has a fondness for painting made before the advent of proper perspective—or painting that simply disregards naturalism—the sort of “super flat” works where it appears that “everyone is standing on top of each other's heads.” He'll place semi-recognizable elements in his paintings, but almost as an afterthought—any specific references



FROM TOP: SCOTT INDRISEK; MATT GRUBB, MATTHEW KIRK, AND LOUIS B. JAMES



High Road, 2013.
Chalk, oil stick,
spray paint, and
acrylic on
plywood, 60x48 in.

might just be a cognitive leap on the part of the viewer, as with pareidolia, the tendency for the mind to conjure human faces from abstract scenarios. “It has a new kind of depth, since it’s not representational,” Kirk says. “You can pick out shapes, make your own point of reference—you can follow different lines and just hang out in there.”

The paintings have an improvisational air about them, mainly because he lets them linger in the studio, adding and tweaking. An enormous plywood piece wedged at an angle between the floor and the ceiling is a work in progress that began

its life as the floor of a cabin Kirk built in his Long Island City studio, funded by a successful Kickstarter campaign. (Those who donated to the cause are receiving bric-a-brac shipments from the artist: tiny sculptures made from inner tubes, tape, photos). Nothing seems permanently fixed. With the chalkboard Masonite paintings, he says, “I end up smudging certain areas... if something ends up going away, then it’s gone—and that’s fine.” Kirk works for an art-crating firm, and he marvels at how quickly works by Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat have become decrepit, due to their reliance on cheap house and spray

paint. In terms of his own practice, Kirk seems refreshingly laissez-faire when it comes to legacy. “I like that the work has its own life, it goes on,” he says. “I’m just walking around, sometimes messing with it, but it can exist freely. I’m not in the business of trying to control these guys.” Occasionally, outside forces intervene: He shows me one older piece whose composition is interrupted by a subtle green form traced in crayon. The culprit? Kirk’s son, Axel, now seven and more in the habit of sketching superheroes than abstractions. “I was going to let him have it,” Kirk says, laughing. “I brought him downstairs: ‘Look at this! There’s crayons on the ground. I don’t think I use crayons. Do you know anything about this?’ And he said, ‘Yeah, those are mine. I was drawing on your painting. I was making it look better.’”

Whereas Kirk admits he was initially intent on imbuing his work with the imprint of his unique heritage—he’s half Native American on his Navajo father’s side—he’s since allowed for a wider of spectrum of inspiration. “I’m influenced by the colors and patterns found in turn-of-the-century Navajo rugs. I like to look at photographs by Edward Curtis,” he says. “But I’m just as influenced by the architecture I see on any given day, or the paintings and other artworks I’m privileged to see at my job as an art handler.” In fact, it was in that capacity that Kirk was introduced to David Fierman, of New York gallery Louis B. James, which will show him alongside Nora Griffin at Expo Chicago in September, followed by a solo exhibition in the spring of 2016. “In addition to his two-dimensional work, what struck me was Kirk’s elegant handling of the detritus of the art handling industry: abstract wooden sculptures made from old crates, intricate weavings done with the cotton strapping,” Fierman says. “Since then he’s created humble poetry out of discarded pieces of rusted metal found on the side of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, altered only with a string to give it tension.”

Part of this refreshing intuitiveness might be due to the fact that Kirk has not formally studied art. “I didn’t go the traditional art school route, and I feel similarly about my heritage,” he says. “I learn what I know through books and articles and talks with my dad. I guess as I’m as much a self-taught Indian as I am an artist. I paint how I feel—and I think that can make some people more uncomfortable than my heritage does. I don’t want to analyze where it comes from too much; it exists as a pure part of me.” **MP**