

By Glen Helfand

Contemporary life is defined by divided attentions, multitasking and conflicted reactions. We must respond to constant streams of flowing information, technological innovation and colliding reference points. Nathan Baker's position as an artist embraces a notion of cognitive dissonance: an uncomfortable in-betweenness of social and psychological conditions. His seemingly abstract works embrace the absurdity of trying to make visual or logical sense out of the world we live in. A conglomeration of media and approaches, his pieces manage to convey an activated sense of placelessness. His work exists somewhere between drawing, painting, photography, sculpture and performance. He purposefully offers no central visual point of reference, but neither does he call upon a fixed media identity. Fittingly, he works in studios in both Brooklyn and Berlin.

Baker views specificity and tidy interpretation with suspicion. He creates with the intent of representing and communicating a productive state of confusion. His work is a reiteration of the way he sees the world and his awareness of a random confluence of factoids and art history. In his own writings, he's compiled online references on topics as various as making X-rays using Scotch tape, the history of the cravat, and memory improvement aids, these disparate elements sticking, cohering into something that makes elusive sense.

The large-scale works in his *Excavated Inkjet* series convey the look of something drawn and gestural. While there is ample evidence of the artist's hand, his materials and process rely on the industrial, and they defy genre. Baker begins with digitally printed backgrounds composed of solid black fields or slow gradients from black to white, or sometimes color. Printed on a material that straddles the line between photo paper and painting canvas, he literally builds upon an ambiguous, digitally synthesized foundation. On this stratum he engages a process of removal, generating marks using tapes, sandpapers and other makeshift tools to lift ink from the surface. The material is backed with adhesive; like wallpaper or cheap interior signage, it can be applied to various surfaces, taking on a different identity in each configuration and application. In this way, he further blurs the distinction between image and object.

Aspects of the format suggest the striped works of Daniel Buren, an artist Baker greatly admires, merged with the conceptual frameworks of Sol LeWitt's wall drawings. Baker harnesses the tension between control and chance; he acknowledges the influence of his training in photography, which imparted a sense of managed effects of lighting, and staging, digital manipulation. He counterbalances this with an interest in allowing for the anxiety of unknown

outcomes.

“All I know is that I have a print and I’m pulling tape off of it,” he says. “Other than that, I have to deal with it on an improvised basis.” There are areas in his recent works made by the pressure of his feet, knees, hands and body. He walks, crawls, sometimes dances on his surfaces. The works are intentional, indexical records of their making. The results of his actions are evident, almost photographically, in the image.

That kind of record, however, is a bit suspect in an era when images are instantaneous and easily altered. At the heart of Baker’s practice is the fundamental question of the image: What material characteristics do images contain? How are images made? And what does it mean to look upon something as artificial and constructed as a picture? As Baker has written: “If a gesture is made with an implement (paint brush, pencil, camera, shotgun, etc.), can that gesture be considered ‘pure’ and autonomous from the tool that was essential to its making?”