

Eric Mack

Vogue Fabrics



Willow within the Form of Prose, 2016

**Albright-Knox Art Gallery
February 18–June 18, 2017**

Eric Mack's paintings and sculptures interweave purchased and found materials, abstract painting, soft sculpture, wearable fashion, display devices, and expanding notions of beauty. In his first solo museum exhibition, Mack (American, born 1987) presents works from 2011 to the present that abut, but do not resolve, resplendent forms with improbable functions.

What we know about fashion created prior to the invention of photography comes almost entirely through its depictions in art. If you want to understand how the ancient Greeks perfected the woolen drape, how the Medicis wore their wealth, or how sumptuary laws in Elizabethan England constructed visual clues of class distinctions, it is necessary to turn to visual art—most cloth evidence has rotted away. But this long-standing documentary connection conceals inherent schisms in art's relationship with fashion. Most artists working prior to the mid-nineteenth century aspired to some level of timelessness that transcended fashion and other such transient aspects of the everyday. For example, the influential eighteenth-century painter Sir Joshua Reynolds counseled artists, "Working in stone is a very serious business, and it seems to be scarce worthwhile to employ such durable materials in conveying to posterity a fashion of which the longest existence scarce exceeds a year."¹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire famously rejected this position and pressed artists to be fully and completely open to their own time—a radical idea that would be taken up by the Impressionists. He celebrated the fugitive nature of fashion, adornment, and makeup and how, as forms of trickery, they enabled the classes to mingle. Jules Champfleury, Baudelaire's

contemporary, urged painters to depict “present-day personalities, the derbies, the black dress-coats, the polished shoes, or the peasants’ sabots.”² The twentieth century saw art and fashion cooperate on projects both rich and superficial—from Soviet Constructivist artists’ designs for practical *prozodezhda* (production clothing) to the “lobster dress” and other collaborations between Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dalí and, more recently, artists’ ubiquitous pop-up branding for stores like Uniqlo. However, influential writers were still largely dismissive of any artist who made work suitable for décor or other uses. For example, critic Clement Greenberg declared that, “When the abstract artist grows tired, he becomes an interior decorator,” and “decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting.”³ According to this argument, the use of art as adornment of the home or body was one of the many ways it could be compromised, signaling its capitulation to the commercial demands of the market or simply its subordination to other mediums.

In his work, Mack seems to grapple with these ruptures through his direct engagement with clothing, sewing, and fashion’s cycle of novelty, outmodedness, and eventual decrepitude. “Everything gets done, everything ends. Everything is gonna be vintage in some secondhand shop,” he has said.⁴ Clothing is ultimately and inherently linked to the human form, and however abstract they appear, Mack’s works always smuggle the body into the exhibition space. This is accomplished through evocation—here a sleeve that once contained an arm, there a swath of fabric that suggests a skirt or a trouser leg—but also in less obvious ways. Nearly every work in *Vogue Fabrics* is constructed largely out of carefully selected fabric and features formerly functional domestic objects, such as blankets, area rugs, a window shade, a bamboo garden trellis, a clothing rack, and a drop cloth. A skirt waistband has been married to another piece of cloth and scarves pieced together to form an extended hideout for a beach umbrella in *Newdaline*. In *People say that I’m so funny and I’m like no I’m not I’m just a hot ass mess and y’all be laughing at me.*, an overcoat flies from a flagpole, while



Newdaline, 2016

an orange fiberglass ladder becomes a clothes rack in *The Elevator*. A piece of fabric is arranged on top of *The Elevator* like a skirt, and as a result, the ladder's legs read as improbably anthropomorphic. Mack's works operate as sculptures in the round, but some, like *No Compute/All Mines*, also act as room dividers—becoming both more painterly and furniture-like in their own right. In all of these instances, the artist has largely prevented his materials from accomplishing their intended use, but he has maintained, and even highlighted, their former functions and connections to the human body. There is a kind of romanticism to Mack's frequent use of semitransparent materials; at times they evoke the improvised dressing room at a sample sale, and at others they suggest the intimacy of the boudoir and the comforts of home.

While many works in *Vogue Fabrics* were created for the exhibition, it features one work from Mack's student years that he sees as foundational for his current practice. *Panther and NY* is an assemblage made from the stretcher for a shaped canvas, a standard-sized piece of white pegboard, and a velvety fragment of canary-yellow stretch fabric that Mack embellished with iron-on rhinestone transfers of a panther face and the Statue of Liberty, the latter labeled "FREEDOM" in broken diamanté. This semi-transparent, iridescent fabric, which Mack purchased because it evoked "clubby, spandex, throwaway fashion," is both woven with a repeating chevron pattern and printed with a faint blue illusion of spray paint.⁵ Drawn taut over the stretcher and the pegboard, it operates in the place of canvas. While Mack acknowledges the sly homage to Frank Stella's chevron-patterned shaped canvases from the early 1960s,⁶ in creating *Panther and NY* he also aimed to challenge a disposable-by-design run of fabric to be "held for a moment in stillness." He explained:

I loved the fact that the chevron pattern would meet the holes of the pegboard, which appears to be measuring the stretcher, and that the truth of the actual holes would simultaneously function as an image, flattened with this transparent fabric. And that it would do so with this coy relationship to the frame; here the paint is what secures the fabric to its structure.⁷

This was the first time Mack used a chevron pattern, which now makes an appearance in the form of stitching patterns on the moving blankets he often uses as a substrate. It was also the first time he used pegboard, a favored material today. Designed for commercial functions—to hook displays of tools or toys, for example—pegboard is easily purchased in uniform dimensions. But for Mack, the material operates as both pattern and the functional means to generate painting. His recent paintings on pegboard actually began as stencils he used to create uniform patterns on fabric. As closely as Mack's printed spots rhyme with the Benday dots of Roy Lichtenstein and the Op patterns of Larry Poons (in the Albright-Knox's *Orange Crush*, 1963, for example), they appear first

and perhaps foremost, as polka dots—a reading improbably far from their functional origins.

Fashion has permeated Mack's life since his childhood. He would sometimes help out in his father's discount clothing store when he was growing up, his sister is a clothing designer, and he closely follows runway shows online. In a text about designer Nicolas Ghesquière for *Flash Art* magazine, Mack admiringly described how “the technology of the garment allows the wearer to feel visual information: the garment as a way of thinking, congruent to the structures of painting. Remodeling the rules of perspective as something that you wear. Fragility as a true desire. How will we equip ourselves to interpret the everyday?”⁸ In the same issue, Mack also declared his intention “to create a group of paintings with allure and seduction equal in value to a garment” and proposed that “reputable fashion houses” trade a garment with him for a comparably valued artwork in order to help him assess “the hybridity of painting as an active dimensional gesture.”⁹ These statements and this project reveal an artist using fashion to elaborate an intimate approach to painting, a desire to frame everyday life.

Mack also admires the abstraction in clothing designs by Andre Walker and the example of urban-made fashion once modeled by Daymond John's 1990s sportswear megabrand FUBU (its name an acronym of “For Us By Us”). Indeed, Mack painted the brand's logo on *For Us By Us*, on view in *Vogue Fabrics*. This reference to FUBU, a ubiquitous icon for black empowerment in fashion that has become a practically dormant brand, feels uncomfortably dated in the context of such inventive new artworks. And the staging of this very emotion of rejection is an easily overlooked aspect of Mack's practice. Although truly old fashions are ripe for recuperation, our unconscious distaste for the recently outmoded—the FUBU logo or distressed materials, for example—is essential to the swift turns of fashion and representation itself.¹⁰ Through Mack's artworks we glimpse the possibility of approaching such signifiers with new eyes and mining them (for very real inspiration and empowerment in the case of FUBU) without revulsion or nostalgia.

To a certain extent, Mack wears his heart on his sleeve when it comes to the artists he admires, but his eclectic inspirations are repurposed for his own ends. Mack's use of umbrellas and clothes suggests the inspiration of Robert Rauschenberg's Combines and his 1963 performance *Pelican*, but the draped strings in works like *Come Live with Me, Angel* also suggest an affinity with Jasper Johns's catenary paintings. Mack's sprayed, stained, and drooped fabrics are indebted to Sam Gilliam (who, like Mack, is from Washington, D.C.) but also to the French Support/Surfaces artists of the 1960s and 1970s, like Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, and Claude Viallat, who made the givens of stretcher and canvas both their subject and excuse for wildly creative explorations of color and decoration. Mack's practice is in dialogue with David Hammons's use of clothing to evoke bodies that are absent, lost, or ignored, but also with Paul Thek's sprawling installations, which included many fragmentary and vulnerable bodies as well as efforts to "humanize" the gallery space.¹¹

According to Mack, when he made *Panther and NY* he was thinking of the unlikely family pair of abstract painter Kenneth Noland and his daughter, the polemical sculptor Cady Noland. There is, perhaps, no parent-child artist relationship that produced work with less in common, but Mack developed a theory that linked the intense opacity in Kenneth Noland's stain paintings to Cady Noland's assemblages of readymade elements that refer to American identity, the brutality of man, and the harshness of institutional forms. In Kenneth Noland's work, according to Mack, "the true destabilization ends up being because the frame in his shaped canvases is an irreconcilable or fragmented shape without a point of origin or destination beyond its presence. It becomes a kind of alien." This abstract language of painting allowed Mack to approach the apparent illegibility of our everyday life, which he recognized that Cady Noland "conveyed through objects, framing devices, and architectural modification."¹²

Indeed, the connection Mack insists on between an iconic color field painter and a social critic and sculptor is key to the way he

approaches his work more generally. Like a number of the artists mentioned above who stretched beyond the limits of the frame—Gilliam or Rauschenberg, for example—Mack is nonetheless approaching color, content, narrative, and gesture first and foremost as a painter. While his sculptures engage in three dimensions, they are also in a way contained; rather than generating an immersive environment, each occupies its own visual field. And that is a conscious decision for an artist who enjoys pivoting between framing devices and working to find new ways to treat painting as an object.

Mack's carefully chosen and found materials—whether recognizable clothing or legible paper fragments—are the unique textual elements with which he constructs narrative and introduces further subjectivity into abstraction. An accidental paint drip or tear in a garment becomes pictorial when that fabric is incorporated into an artwork. This is abstraction by means of selection rather than gesture. Actual draped, cut, and sewn material occupies the place of images of fashion in historical painting. And in all the literal folds and seams in Mack's work, where improbable materials join and mingle, one can read a representation of the way we all develop as conscious and self-conscious beings, as subjects: it is only by repeatedly bringing our interior selves into communication and contact with all the other subjects and institutions in the wider world.¹³ This construction of the self is hard work, and it is inseparable from public vulnerability. Mack's exhibition title is a play on the famous fabric retailer and fashion magazine, but it is also an homage to a London nightclub of the same name, which is known for a fashion-centric dance subculture where image and identity are created through performance—the kind of experimental space that seems threatened in many cities. If *Vogue Fabrics* demonstrates that the current and unfashionable, heavy and diaphanous, luxurious and unseemly may occupy the same field, it also insists that such private negotiations become a public conversation.

1. Joshua Reynolds, "Discourse X," in *Discourses on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 187.
2. Quoted in Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 28.
3. Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Leger, and Wassily Kandinsky," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 1, Perceptions and Judgments, 1933–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 64, and "Milton Avery," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 43.
4. Harry Gassel, "Visual Identity: Meet Eric N. Mack, the New York Artist Breathing New Life into Old Clothes," *The Fader*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.thefader.com/2014/06/24/visual-identity-meet-eric-n-mack-the-new-york-artist-breathing-new-life-into-old-clothes>.
5. Eric Mack in discussion with the author, December 16, 2016.
6. Series such as *Dartmouth*, *Notched V*, and *Running V*.
7. Eric Mack in discussion with the author, December 16, 2016.
8. "Fashion is the Weather: Eric N. Mack on Nicolas Ghesquière," *Flash Art* 298 (October 2014), 25.
9. *Ibid*, 26.
10. See Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
11. For example, in Thek's 1971 installation at Stockholm's Moderna Museet, *Pyramid/A Work in Progress*, viewers walked along paths and among a piano, a bathtub, sand, and candlelight, all staged to encourage contemplative viewing. Thek spoke of "turning down the lights, giving people some chairs to sit on, and not having the art restricted in any way"—a far cry from the white cube model that dominated spaces for art-viewing. Quoted in Richard Flood, "Paul Thek: Real Misunderstanding," *Artforum* (October 1981), 53.
12. Eric Mack in discussion with the author, December 16, 2016.
13. This may be associated with a theory of consciousness that Gilles Deleuze described in sartorial terms as "le pli" or "the fold." For Deleuze, the sartorial fold is an allegory for the place where our perceived inner self or consciousness meets the outside world, where our interiority is revealed to the world and constituted in relation to it. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

About the Artist

Eric Mack's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, among them, *Making and Unmaking*, Camden Arts Centre, London, 2016; *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, New York, 2015; *Everything, Everyday: Artists-in-Residence 2014–15*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; *Fore*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2012; and *Pushing Painting Paradigms*, Mason Gross Galleries at Rutgers University, 2012. Mack obtained his BFA from Cooper Union in 2010 and his MFA from Yale University in 2012. In 2014–15 he was part of The Studio Museum in Harlem's Artist-in-Residency Program, and in 2017 he will be an artist-in-residence at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Captiva Island, Florida.

Works in the Exhibition

Panther and NY, 2011

Acrylic on velveteen spandex,
wood, pegboard, crystal
iron-on decals, and moving
blanket

95 x 31 inches (241.3 x 78.7 cm)

Come Live with Me, Angel,
2016

Rope, straight pins, acrylic on
plush microfiber blankets,
polyester fabrics, dye,
bleached silk, decorative
bouquet, and aluminum
clothing rack

94 x 300 x 52 inches (238.8 x
762 x 132.1 cm)

Newdaline, 2016

Two aluminum flagpoles,
umbrella, silk, cotton,
polyester, aluminum, wood,
zip ties, and straight pins

108 x 102 x 92 inches (274.3 x
259.1 x 233.7 cm)

*Willow within the Form of
Prose*, 2016

Velour blanket, paper, dye,
acrylic, straw hat, willow
branch pyramids, cotton
window shade, wooden bowl,
rope, zip ties, and bamboo
fence

72 x 172 x 69 inches (182.9 x
436.9 x 175.3 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Almine
Rech Gallery, and Moran
Bondaroff, Los Angeles

Also Mines, 2017

Acrylic dye on microfiber
blanket, glitter, rope, plastic
flowers, and dried orange
peels

72 x 84 x 46 inches (182.9 x
213.4 x 116.8 cm)

The Elevator, 2017

Ladder, assortment of polyester
fabric, curtain rod, broomstick,
and modified garments

144 x 78 x 27 inches (365.8 x
198.1 x 68.6 cm)

No Compute/All Mines, 2017
Acrylic on moving blanket,
carpet, felt, pistachio shells,
grommets, and thread
83 x 180 x 89 inches (210.8 x
457.2 x 226.1 cm)

*People say that I'm so funny
and I'm like no I'm not I'm just
a hot ass mess and y'all be
laughing at me.*, 2017
Aluminum flagpole, acrylic, dye,
cotton tarp, crystal decal,
cardboard, paper, wooden
clothes hanger, and cotton
overcoat
130 x 119 x 167 inches (330.2 x
302.3 x 424.2 cm)

*You Forgot to Answer (Errant
Map)*, 2017
Silk, cotton blouse, velour,
polyester, rope, and thread
86 x 74 x 60 inches (218.4 x
188 x 152.4 cm)

For Us By Us, 2017
Acrylic, dye on carpet, wooden
dowel, grommet, and rope
62 x 43 inches (157.5 x
109.2 cm)

Unless otherwise noted, all works
are courtesy of the artist and
Moran Bondaroff, Los Angeles.

Eric Mack: Vogue Fabrics

Jacob Kassay: OTNY

Willa Nasatir

**Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj:
*Studies for A Minor History of Trembling Matter***

February 18–June 18, 2017

These exhibitions are organized by Senior Curator Cathleen Chaffee.

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Art Gallery**

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