

ERIC N. MACK *interviewed by*
 CHRISTOPHER NIQUET
photographed by DANIEL KING



In works he defines as fabric collages, artist ERIC N. MACK uses a wide array of mostly discarded textiles. Made from materials as varied as worn clothing, blankets found in art spaces, and photographs torn out of magazines or books, his assemblages challenge the notion of what a painting is and how their presence transforms the spaces they are exhibited in. Not easily categorized as ready-mades, sculptures, or paintings, his arrangements interrogate the concepts of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Over the last year Mack has had exhibitions at both the Simon Lee Gallery in London and the Brooklyn Museum, and was recently named the recipient of the Rome Prize and Italian Fellowship in visual arts from the American Academy in Rome. We caught up with him after the news was announced to talk about his relationship to the work and the community of creatives that inspire and challenge him.

CHRISTOPHER NIQUET: What are your first memories of art, and what did it mean to you as a child?

ERIC N. MACK: Art has always been connected to color and exuberance and was at first abstract. I would visit art museums as a small child with my parents. However, early image memories include framed posters from art exhibitions and museum gift shops that decorated some of the rooms of my grandmother's house. There were Romare Bearden's jazzy collages and Jasper Johns' number painting in the den, and in my aunt's room, there was a Diego Rivera of a figure embracing a calla lily. In my grandmother's room, there was a Matisse of a water glass with fish inside and a painting by Kandinsky called "Sea Battle," somewhere in there. I remember

being lost in these images trying to understand them.

CN: How old were you then, and how did these images impact your imagination as a child?

EM: I was maybe five or younger because I remember it being a time of not being able to read the titles. It was entirely non-verbal, radiant, and felt. It's a connection I still have with these images, almost reflective spatially of the rooms that held the images. This gold fish in the ellipse of a water glass would project itself in my grandmother's bedroom.

CN: Were you curious about other works of art as a child, and when did becoming an artist start to take shape in your mind?



EM: Yes, very. I would make drawings and temporary sculptures with household objects. I was always encouraged to make art, and my mom eventually took me to drawing classes, where I would spend time drawing still lifes. It was a way for me to strengthen my skills. I remember my older brother drawing from comic books and making characters, and my grandmother kept a sketchbook until she died. I remember my parents drawing seldomly, but when they did I was delighted. When my dad would take me to the doctor's office, he would sometimes draw each of our portraits on the chalkboard in the kids area, and I remember being impressed.

CN: When did the pleasure from drawing transform into the desire to create art?

EM: I think it was in high school when I learned I could take more classes in diverse disciplines to broaden my skills. Clay-modeling, painting, photography, and printmaking were all mediums I explored there. I think it starts from pleasure, a degree of self-indulgence, and audacity too. I found that my most consistent subject was myself, so I focused on self-portraiture. You end up learning a lot about the world just by drawing in observation.

CN: By the time you graduated high school you were set on studying art in college, right? How did your work evolve in this new structure?

EM: I was obsessed with the idea of New York and studying at The Cooper Union. This was a time when I was working on my portfolio. I was making work to push expectations. Around this time, having been practically raised on music videos, it was a solid aspiration of mine to become a director like Hype Williams, Little X, or Chris Cunningham. In school, I was encouraged to work with images from rap culture and Black culture, with subculture expressions like punk rock music, but also to explore those subjects through form and tactility.

CN: The encouragement that you received makes sense looking at the work you produce now, but I am sure it was challenging then. How did you find your way?

EM: I didn't choose one medium. I was always in-between, taking elements from the disciplines of painting, sculpture, and photography. I was and still am decidedly not a designer. I really wanted to make something new. It felt like these mediums were kept so far apart for that to ever happen.

CN: How did exploring new disciplines as well as a new city impact your sense of self?

EM: It felt like I was embracing disparate parts of the city and absorbing them. I was using what I learned as tools, like thinking of commercial skills as principals of what makes art.

CN: How did this new environment influence your production or your general outlook on the art world?

EM: I was immediately immersed, wanting to know the language of the city by going to gallery shows, museums, and spending hours at the library. I was curious about what made the art world turn because it wasn't quite the art history I was being taught. I had and still have a desire to make something that feels new, something invented by me.

CN: What was your community like at the time? And how did you interact with the art world besides visiting museums and galleries?

EM: I am so lucky I found my community immediately. So many of my connections have been serendipitous. There is a long list of artists and makers that are peers of mine, showing in the most competitive museums and art spaces around the world. I see this as a huge affirma-

tion. I was taught by leaders in the field, which helped me to feel accepted in the art world or to feel an aspirational understanding. Meeting Leslie Hewitt at The Studio Museum in Harlem's open studio and then being enrolled in her first drawing class at Cooper a year and a half later felt fated.

CN: You studied at The Cooper Union then went on to Yale for your master's. How did these New York years inform the following two in Connecticut?

EM: I went to Yale thinking I was going to escape the anxiety and the pressure of a predatory New York. I was mistaken; New Haven is just a small city in between New York and Boston. I was young, energized, and curious about the space of painting as a medium. I didn't yet feel the burden and the weight of how history was being dictated. There was a hopeful interpretation of the given art historical trajectory. I spent my time in the libraries and the Yale Art Gallery. I took courses outside my discipline in art history with Kobena Mercer and Robert Farris Thompson as well as a memorable course in material culture in the sociology department. Alongside this, I was surrounded by a brilliant and diverse collection of peers in all departments throughout the school of art.



CN: Did these extra curricular courses challenge your art-making process?

EM: There were challenges because of the academic requirements, but I discovered where my work had been or will go. It was a process of collecting ideas, doing research, and deepening the body of work.

CN: Who were the people you were looking up to then, and what drew you to them and their work?

EM: I was fascinated by practices that in some ways anchored me to where I was. I was thinking about alumni—Leslie Hewitt, Michael E. Smith, Anna Betbeze, Peter Halley—and how they had to decode New Haven as a creative site, but also having these drifts that led me to think about Blinky Palermo, Sigmar Polke, Robert Colescott, Michael Krebber, and Cosima von Bonin.

CN: After graduating what was it like entering and finding your place within the art system?

EM: I'm grateful for my friends and professors because they allowed me to enter the art world with a true sense of community and still give me a sense of belonging today. After Yale, my friend and former roommate, Jennifer Packer, moved to Harlem for The Studio Museum residency and told me about a stu-

dio space there. I had that space for a short time, and there I made important transitional works. I was included in "Fore," The Studio Museum's emerging artist exhibition, along with friends and peers, including Kevin Beasley, Sadie Barnette, Jennifer Packer, Caitlin Cherry, Abigail DeVille, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. It felt like we could enter the art world starting from there.

CN: How did these studio spaces change your work? I have always been curious as to how these gigantic pieces came to be.

EM: The studio spaces that I worked in were small. Four years after school, this still worked for me. I could fold the fabric collages, put them in a bag, and sit on them if I needed to consolidate space. I took part in some very transformative residencies such as Skowhegan in 2014, where I installed work in the field behind my studio next to the cow pasture. At The Studio Museum in Harlem from 2014 to 2015, I worked in the studios above the museum. I finally got to expand, moving to the South Bronx, where I found a large space in 2015 and ended up staying there until 2018. I could make multiple fabric collages as well as sculptures there. I could take up space and send it off to exhibitions all around. I shared the space with some friends, and fellow artist Jennifer Packer was there with me the longest.

CN: I have read a lot about your work and sometimes it's described as sculpture and painting and other times as installation. How do you define these fabric works?

EM: I believe the fabric collages synthesize painting and sculpture. Painting is about surface and light, while sculpture is about form in the round as well as a social connection to materiality. These works have perspective on painting and sculpture as well as a command of space. I think these distinctions are not finite and should be updated. I have found it productive to discuss the works as painting because these properties of light and color allow the work to feel more emotive and sensorial, which, as the materials communicate, come from properties of light, surface, and medium specificity. The properties of a transparent yard of silk allow for a spatial tint. If gathered and pleated it creates spatial depth and a degree of opacity.

CN: You had a solo show at the Brooklyn Museum with your large-scale fabric collages as well as a show of your works on paper. How do you see your practice evolving in the future?

EM: My practice is inclined towards change. I look forward to a continued expansion. I want to do more public projects that collaborate with architecture, and I also want

to make things that speak intimately to the interior space. Homes and institutional spaces like museums count too. I like the idea that a work could fit over someone's bed or in an atrium—something that could be lived with and cared for.

CN: You just received the Rome Prize and are about to do a residency for six months there. What are your expectations?

EM: I'm so honored to receive it. I will be doing material research with the hopes of making a public work, using responsive and singular textiles.

CN: Would that be something you'd show in Italy or somewhere else?

EM: I'd like to be responsive to the culture of textiles, so it would make sense to show it in Italy. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's earliest public draped sculptures were done in Rome.

CN: And to make it permanent would be great. Have you ever thought of doing a permanent installation in situ?

EM: I think that would be really important, especially at a site where the work is properly protected and honored.

CN: I look forward to that next step.



