BETTINA FUNCKE IN CONVERSATION
WITH BEN MORGAN-CLEVELAND
September 2013

Bettina Funcke: Seth told me that sometimes a plywood piece would be in the studio for a year before it was done.

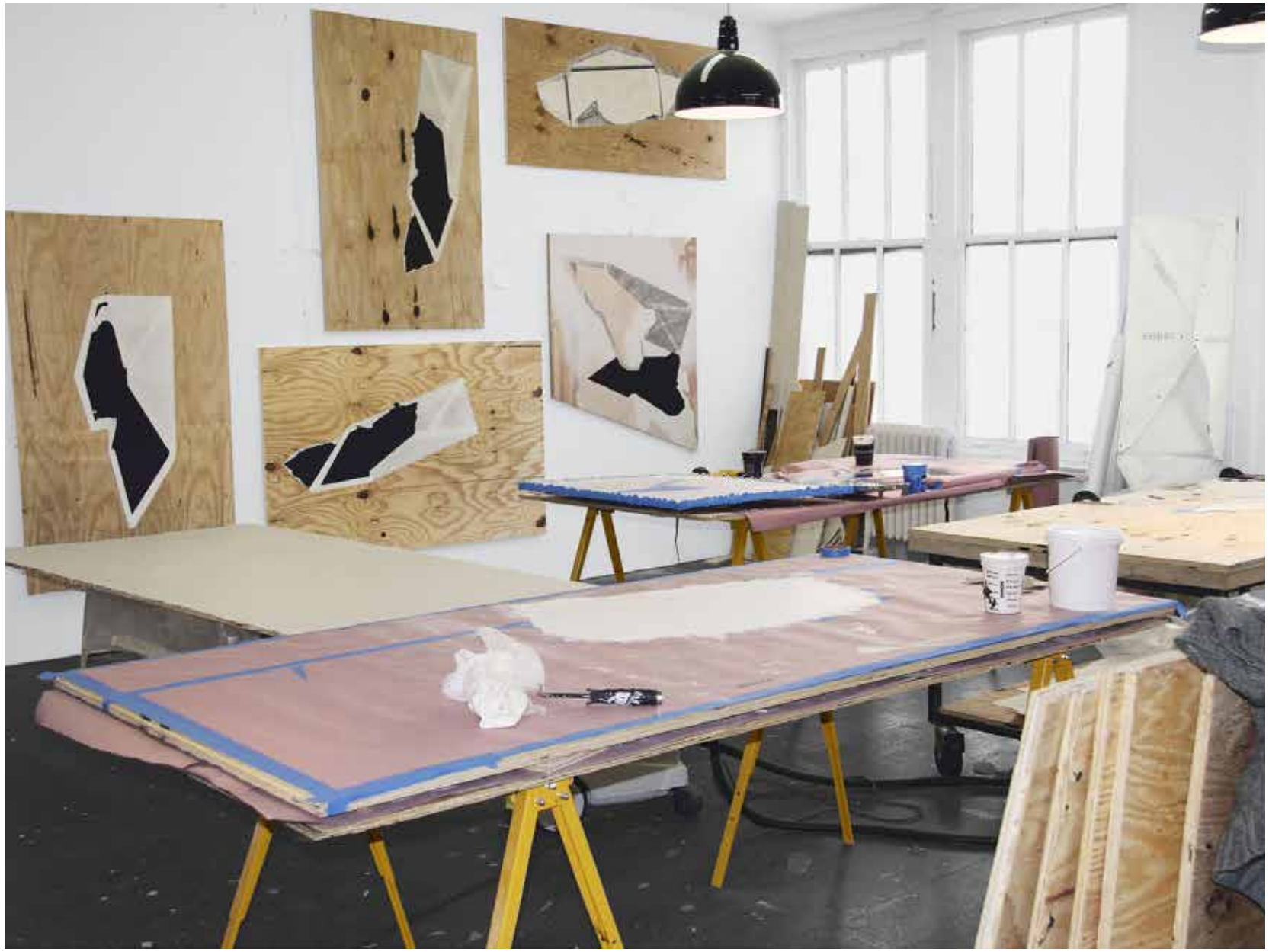
Ben Morgan-Cleveland: Yeah.

BF: Why does it take so long?

BMC: Because it's hard. And you want to be open to creativity and chance, and it's not totally prescribed. They're paintings, so they're kind of organic, and every move you make opens up all these other possibilities, every parameter stays pretty open.

BF: So what would happen? They're so layered, and it's hard to understand how they were made, when you look at them. First you would get the wood. These here are the early—the dirtier ones.

BMC: Yeah, the plywood at this point was really shitty, which was good. But that was just luck. Later on, it was harder to get shitty-looking plywood.



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a. Studio view, 2013

BF: What's good about it being shitty?

BMC: It has a lot of texture, a lot of divots, and it's topographic because it's so roughly cut. There are a lot of knots and defects that the factory doesn't bother to smooth out. Or it's stamped with these patterns and words from being shipped around, which is nice, because it goes with envelopes. You know, the higher up the scale you go, the smoother it gets, the less and less it looks like wood or an idea of wood. There was a collector or someone in here, I wasn't here but Seth told me about it, who actually was like: "What's this wood you're using? It's so weird!"

BF: That's funny.

BMC: Yeah, I think some people, rich people in particular, haven't ever seen low-grade plywood or really ever looked at it. Man, look at these. We cut all these early shapes with a jigsaw; there aren't any straight lines.

BF: Tell me what the process is, because I know it's very laborious and lengthy to make these.

BMC: Yeah, super-artisanal. We start by preparing the ground for where you're going to print with this molding-paste surface. We had to get it like glass, like porcelain, and totally level. You have to really build it, and really sand it, build and sand, ten or fifteen layers high. You fix little imperfections and check it to see if it's absolutely smooth. The wood is warped and rough, of course. Because it's, you know, grade D or X or whatever it was, not a high grade of product.

BF: So you make a little white plateau in the shape of an envelope, to print on? How do you get the shape to be so precise? Because it has to match up to the print, right?

BMC: First, he made all these little envelopes—

BF: Seth made these? These paper envelopes?

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a. Studio view showing *Youth Culture*, 2014, in progress **b.** Seth Price," Eden Eden, Berlin, 2014, installation view: *Youth Culture*, 2014, screenprint, ink, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

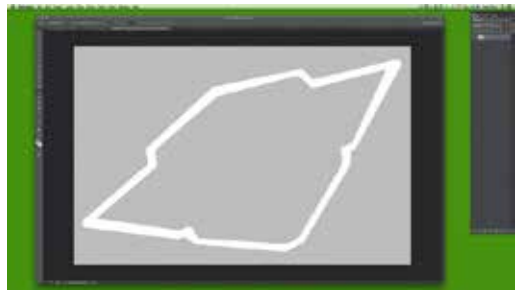
BMC: Yeah, I don't know, he wanted a particular—we couldn't find business envelopes that had the exact right shape. So he made this Photoshop template, this kite picture here. He'd print it, cut it, fold it, glue it, and then tear that open. Then he scanned it into the computer and turned it into vinyl stencils and silk screens. Like, if you look at this envelope here, it directly becomes that painting. And these were also used for the cloth sculptures. So you actually have some garment sculptures that were handmade off the same template that we used to cut vinyl stencils. All from this little kind-of-tossed-off envelope that got scanned.

BF: So then you have a vinyl template.

BMC: It's a mask. Seth would position it on the plywood surface, or sometimes he'd take a photo of the wood and put it in the computer and digitally move the envelope around on top of it. Then, when we had a composition, the vinyl was stuck on the wood. After that we'd use this polymer medium, and we'd squeegee that on with a Bondo applicator, which is typically for fixing a dent in your car. And that was like the beginning of this slow, Zen buildup. Ten or twelve layers go by, and then it needs to be sanded.

BF: So you get this envelope-shaped blank.

BMC: Yeah. Oh, and there was all this waiting. You'd print the envelope's outside edges and then you'd have to wait for it to dry before printing the inside. And all these steps are really laborious, because nothing was ever perfect, the shape of the vinyl is supposed to match the silk screen, and they come from the exact same file, but they'd be a little off. The screen stretches a bit when you push the ink through, or the vinyl stretches a tiny bit when you stick it on. It was always bringing a digital image into this messy situation of actual things, and things not lining up. And then we'd mask the edge and print on the interior of the envelope with different patterns and logos.



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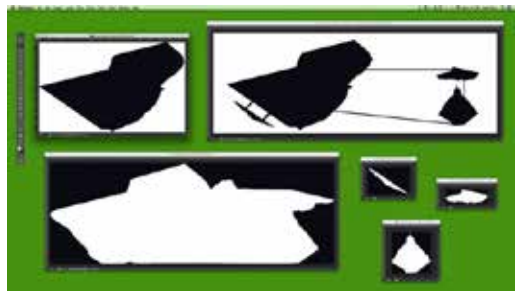

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Spread: Evolution of a plywood work. Photoshop drawing of "Kite" template (**a**) to be printed, assembled and ripped open (**b**), and then scanned to generate files for cutting vinyl masks (**c**), as well as silk screens. **d.** The finished work: *Exploded Envelope with Image Rights*, 2012, screenprint, acrylic, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: And these patterns come from the fabric pieces? Or did Seth make them first for the envelopes? Or for the fashion line?

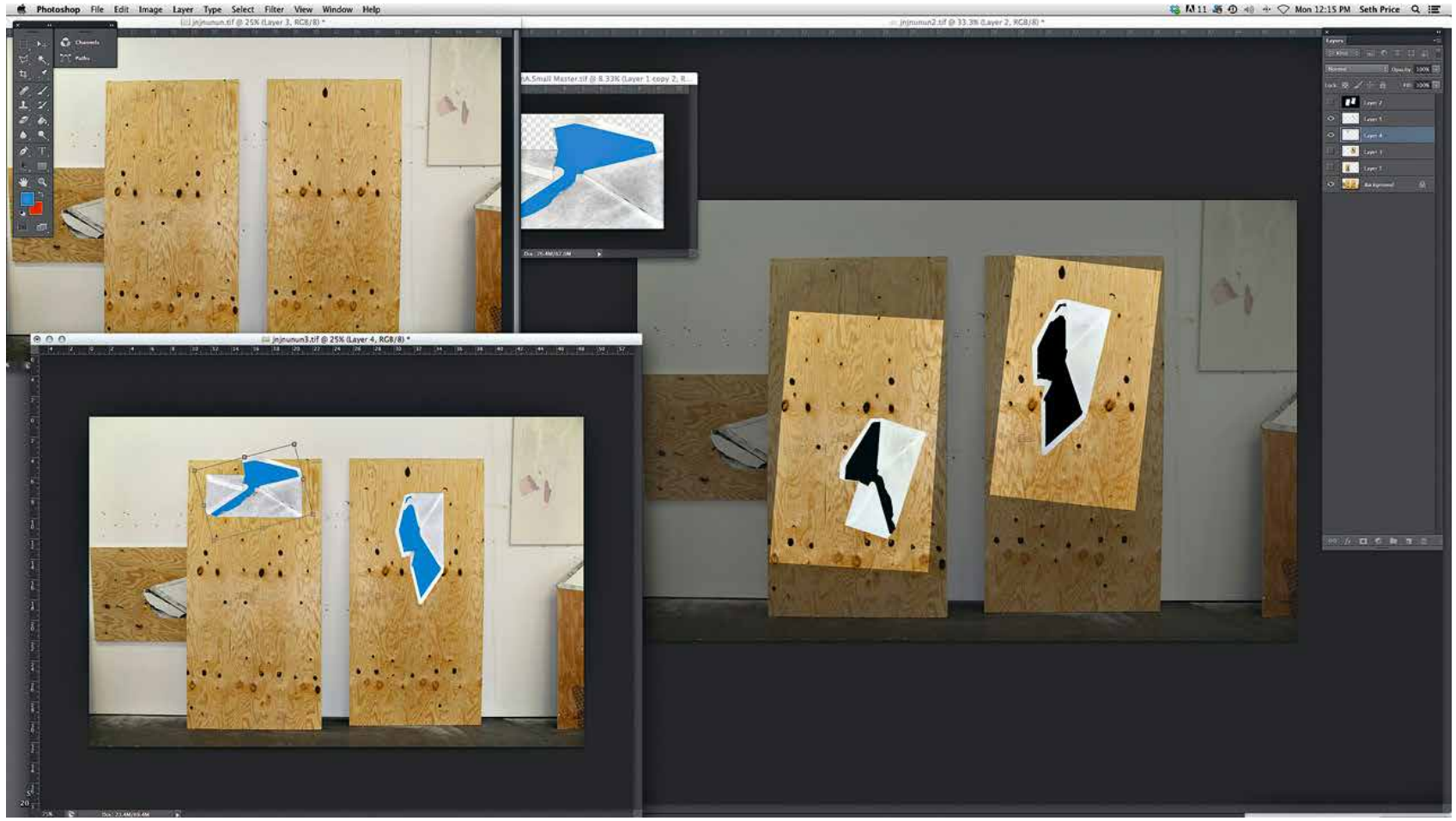
BMC: I think it was all done at the same time. You know, he would design a logo and then tile them digitally. So they were also handmade, in a way. Even though they're in Photoshop and everything, it wasn't something he found, it wasn't a scan or something he downloaded. And he made mistakes tiling them, like every once in a while there are logos that overlap, but that looked cool, too.

BF: It sounds like a long process of going back and forth between reality and computer.

BMC: Yeah, he would talk about it as "Photoshop IRL." That was something Josh Smith said about the painted vacuum forms, that they were like Photoshop in real life. After any new layer or manipulation to a wooden piece Seth would take a photo and put it in the computer and sketch out different possibilities and print out ten options, and we'd tape them up, talk about it, and make another move. You know, cut it into a new shape, add paint, rotate it.

BF: The piece was turning around?

BMC: Yeah, they kept turning, depending on the things we kept doing to them. I think he hung some for the show one way, and then someone bought it, and he went over and put the cleat on another way right before it shipped. Which I'm sure was, you know, not appreciated.



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a. Screenshot showing plywood sheets, image files, and diagrams combining both, 2013 **b.** Studio view with the finished works, 2013. Also see the installation view on pages 168–169

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a. "Seth Price," Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, 2013, installation view: *Untitled*, 2013, screenprint, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: It's a work of very limited variables, but there are so many possibilities within this limited vocabulary. Seth doesn't really close down options while he's doing anything. So then what happens?

BMC: We'd be putting on all this paste, layers and layers. But the paste would seep in really quickly, so after getting it as smooth as porcelain, if we came back the next day, it would have all sunken down to reveal the grain of the wood. You have to plan your day so that you finish the final layer, have it dry, and still have time to print it, which usually took multiple prints with different screens. And if you fuck up the print, which happens a lot, you have to sand it off and start building it all up again.

BF: Then Seth would do spray painting, hand painting, colored pencil, to finish the details?

BMC: Yeah, exactly. Like, bring certain details out or diminish others. Like a whitewash or charcoal or colored pencil. This is one from the Petzel show. This grain actually has a lot of colored pencil on it.

BF: Now that you mention it, it's really pronounced.

BMC: Yes, it's used in a similar way as you would use makeup, to kind of accentuate certain knotholes or wood grains and make others recede.

BF: Now I suddenly see three heads down here.

BMC: Yeah, they're kind of like weird orifices.

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a. *Northern Waste with Red Virus Pattern* (detail), 2012, screenprint, charcoal, colored pencil, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood **b.** *Black Letter* (detail), 2012, screenprint, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: These look more like a Xerox than a photographic reproduction, these earlier stages of your silk-screen experiments.

BMC: I know, that's a cool thing and we totally went with it, but that was definitely not what we were trying to do. All the imperfections in the earlier pieces look really good now. But at the time they were just purely bewildering.

BF: Did you guys teach yourselves screen-printing?

BMC: Seth knew a bit, I guess. But we had to kind of teach ourselves. 'Cause what we were trying to do was unusual. You're printing on raw wood, this totally rough surface that won't accept the ink, but then you're printing on this sanded paste that's like glass, which is also hard to print on for different reasons, and you have to print from one surface to the other. And the wood is warped in ten different directions, even if you clamp it down.

BF: Tell me about this piece. It seems like the compositions often come back to this idea, with the different forms in a kind of tension: the envelope, the rectangle, the marking.

BMC: So this shows the envelope at an angle. We usually had it at some angle. The wooden rectangle becomes a standard canvas shape, but with this parasite. But also it becomes the blank page behind the letter, or beneath it, or within it.

BF: It's like a still life: someone just opened a letter and walked away. You open the envelope and you take out a message, a sheet of paper.

BMC: And the envelope is made from a sheet of paper that's folded up.

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a. *Black Letter Diagram*, 2012, screenprint, enamel, acrylic, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: Yes, so that it can hold another piece of folded paper. There's a difference here, isn't there, between these two pieces of plywood?

BMC: Right. So when we were having trouble printing on the warpy stuff, Seth had these fabricators make him some plywood. In the middle was quality wood so the pieces would be rigid and straight, and it was layered between pieces that were low-grade, for that shitty surface.

BF: Oh, so it's entirely artificial? It's like the envelopes he handmade. Or the security patterns. They all look real, you'd never know. And the pattern, the structure of the wood in these pieces, always plays with symmetry and these repeating knotholes or motifs. That's because of the way plywood is made?

BMC: Yes, they take slices of the tree and kind of iron them out and run them right next to each other so you get sheets. It's called book matching, because you open up the wood like facing pages of a book, so all the holes and patterns are in a mirror image.

BF: Oh, it's the same with the wood in Seth's silhouette pieces. It's that theme of artificiality again. Constructedness, and being a product, but in something you think of as natural. It's funny to start to think about the composition of plywood, being made of layers, and these artworks are so concerned with layers, and then Photoshop is all layers.

BMC: Right. And paper is made from wood, but plywood is made from wood, too. They're all wood products.

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a. Example of book matching: *Secret*, 2010, laser-cut burled camphor laminated to acrylic

BF: In the Reena show there were some pieces where it was really prominent, the symmetry and repetitions of the plywood structure. The ones with the negative or void. Those black pieces looked so solemn.

BMC: They are solemn. It's a big black void. It's kind of intense. Black itself, on the spectrum, it's receiving everything but not giving back.

BF: In these there's a weird thing going on with inside/outside, too. Even more than with the fabric pieces, where that was also a major element, I think.

BMC: Things are leaking out of the envelope. Those patterns.

BF: Well, you open the envelope, and the envelope is the message. There's never anything else in there except the security patterns, which arguably are part of the envelope. But then they sometimes come out onto the paper, which was inside the envelope. And there's also something about the size. It's obviously bigger than an actual envelope, it comes closer to a figure.

BMC: Yeah, body-size. And with that weight to it on the wall, a big chunk of wood.

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a. "Steh Pirce," Reena Spaulings, New York, 2013, installation view: *Container for Virus Pattern plus Abstract Pattern*, 2013, blackened cork facing, Kevlar mesh shell, printed charmeuse liner, screenprinted Tyvek center panel, double-headed zippers, zipper tape, covered snaps, grommets, buckles, straps; *Nothingness as a Big Head*, 2013, ink, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: So then you could say they're anthropomorphic, because they recall the body, or the body's size. A totem, or—

BMC: Seth actually called them totems. At the beginning he was seeing them as heads.

BF: Or masks. Yes, I can see the totem idea.

BMC: And the void can then be literal: a void within you. Or like a style, you're wearing a void.

BF: Yes, it sort of sucks you in. The piece that we're looking at on the wall, it almost looks like you could fall into it and it would swallow you.

BMC: The abyss. It's like a monster or something. That one kind of reminds me of Seth's folktales that he does.

BF: It reminds me also of the silhouette pieces, where it's also about inside/outside and positive/negative.

BMC: Yeah. But those were a lot more, like, luxury product. And these are all handcrafted, kind of rough.

BF: A little folk-arty.

BMC: Yeah, a little folk-arty. And maybe that's why the fashion things, the cloth pieces, they play that luxury role. That kind of product thing.

BF: As an opposition. There's the studio work, and there's the commercially, industrially produced work.

BMC: Yes, inside/outside, one thing and its negative. These are a response to the cloth pieces, or the fashion thing.

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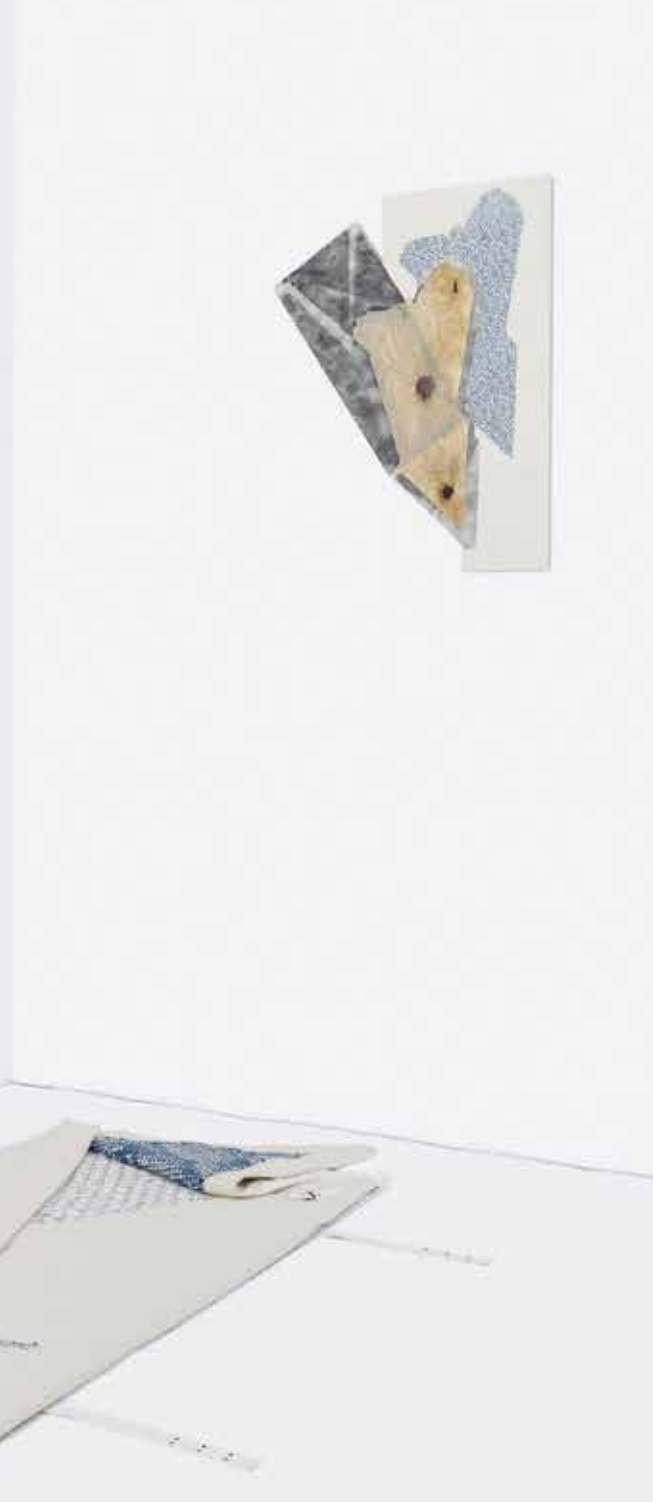
a. *Totem in Perspectival View*, 2012, screenprint, acrylic, acrylic polymer, and gesso on plywood. **b.** *Xerox Lore*, 2013, screenprint, enamel, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: I think that's an interesting area to talk about a little bit more, this dialogue between the fabric pieces and the studio, or plywood, pieces. You were working on them at the same time, right?

BMC: Yes. One would kind of influence the other. In the early garment pieces, we were going after this rugged military look. And at the time, these plywood pieces were also rougher, more in that folk direction. And then after that, the plywood pieces became more petite and a little bit better done. And the cloth pieces, the sleeping bags, also became a little bit nicer, and adorned, too, with those charms he did. They kind of went through different seasons together. But the plywood pieces were still pretty folky at that point, as opposed to the ones shown at Reena Spaulings, which were austere. Those earlier ones still had some color in them, some painting, pencil, and gesture, they had to do with painting. Whereas the ones at Reena Spaulings were more product-y, they were more like something you'd see in a boutique. They were still folky, in a way, but they were really well done and really stripped down, just *boom*. I kind of related it to this luxury-brand thing he was trying for with the handbag-style pieces. The black pieces seemed better to accompany that, because they were cold and stark, like how a product should be, or how it wants to be.



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a. *Youth Culture Bag*, 2012 (on floor), canvas, printed cotton liners, charm, buckles, zippers, snaps, etc., with *Youth Culture Pattern*, 2012 (on wall), enamel, screenprint, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: And sovereign. You're mastering your materials now, so you can afford to do much less to it. In this photograph of the Petzel installation, when the envelope flap of these works folds into a different direction with each work, it makes it sort of look like they're about to shoot off somewhere.

BMC: Yeah, like fireworks. This tall one here was strange. I remember him asking if he should put it in.

BF: Yeah, I remember that, too.

BMC: And I was like, "No," and I think you said, "No."

BF: So then he said, "Yes," of course. [*laughter*] Oh, yeah, he looked at this one as a horizontal for a long time. But in the show, he hung it vertically.

BMC: Yeah.

BF: Actually, it's another one where the pattern explodes, like the exploding Corbis in documenta.

BMC: Yes, exactly.

BF: So he *did* do it again, with the envelope taken apart like that. Hmm. It just really breaks harmony. Because it's already a very complicated motif to look at and try to understand, since it's not abstraction. I mean, he always talks about them as diagrams, diagrams for the fabric envelopes, maybe, or just some kind of schematic drawing or explanation. But for me, it was difficult to see that connection. I think it's more of a Cubist notion.

BMC: Totally. In a way, they're all exploded already.

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a. "Folklore U.S.," Petzel Gallery, New York, 2012, installation view

BF: And I think the moment you undermine the full shape of the envelope outline, you're just really—

BMC: Pushing it. Yeah. You know, looking at this picture of the Petzel show, in the context of all the envelopes around, I think it's kind of cool, though. A runway with the sleeping-bag envelopes on it, that's cool. Like sleeping models, invisible models.

BF: When you talk about the work, it sounds a little bit like—because you figured out processes and techniques together—you really identify with it.

BMC: Yeah. It's like working in an Italian car shop, like working on a Lamborghini or something, modifying products and taking pride in this manual labor that works through problems.

BF: A couple of times now you've made references to luxury products.

BMC: I mean, they are luxury goods. There's a high level of quality control, and they have to walk whatever line they're going for in a very deliberate way. But then they're also really weird, because—I mean, they're kind of interesting like that—I guess art itself is kind of—I mean, that's kind of why this is interesting, because it brings in the question of what is art now, in our situation? I mean, what is it in relation to products?

BF: But also these works are made with such care and precision and investment of time, whereas you could think of a lot of art that's also perceived or valued like a luxury good, but is made more gesturally, more quickly. A lot of contemporary painting, in fact.

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a. *Cyan Decay*, 2014, screenprint, ink, pigments, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood **b.** *Cyan Decay* (detail), 2014, screenprint, ink, pigments, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BMC: Well, yeah, that's something I like about these. They have all these elements that go into making art, inspiration and creativity and care to craft. But then they're also almost daring you not to see that or something, they're not bragging, not being ostentatious about it. In a way that's kind of cool, because they're, like, you know, commodified, but then kind of resisting that in a chill way.

BF: They're really made in dialogue with the fabric pieces, then.

BMC: Yes, totally. Sam [Pulitzer] had a good quote about Seth's work. You might not want to put this in there. But as opposed to Cheyney Thompson. Cheyney makes paintings that function as products, and Seth makes products that really function as paintings. Which I think is kind of, you know—

BF: I don't know, I'd have to think about that a bit longer. I know that Cheyney has a slightly different use of the term *product*, maybe, than Seth.

BMC: Right. Totally. Like, a painting to buy to put on your wall, to invest in, that sort of stuff.

BF: Well, he's also really invested in a very theoretical sort of abstract investigation—

BMC: Well, I know. But—

BF: But you think they don't embody it in the same way that this embodies it.

BMC: Yeah. That's what I think. I think these are more generous, if you let them be. But then the folk-art thing is weird, because they're not really folk art. I mean, they're rough, they're awkward and kind of outsider. Some of my friends didn't like them at Petzel, they were just like: "Oh no! Why did he do *that*…" But at the same time you're supposed to be into stuff that's weird, so everyone was like, okay.

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a. *Letter from a Shop Window*, 2014, resin, screenprint, ink, pigments, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BF: There's also a relationship not just to folk art or fashion or luxury goods but to the history of painting. Like looking at, I don't know, Ryman, for example, or who else comes to mind? Certainly in dialogue with his own group of friends, in some inarticulable way.

BMC: Right. In some ways, these are super-economical, and there aren't a lot of options: there's white, and there's off-white, and there's the color of the wood. But maybe instead of gestural painting it's more about compositional ideas, and ties into Photoshop and design and layout. We did a piece called *Design as a Spray of Surfer's Cum on the Waves*.

BF: Well, the limited variables is something I'm interested in, because it applies to a lot of Seth's work. So why—you always refer to these works as paintings. In my head I always refer to them as prints.

BMC: I know. Well, they're tricky, obviously, but I see them as paintings because—you know, this is painted. It involves a print, but it also involves painting.

BF: You mean the application of the molding paste and gesso to create flat surfaces—

BMC: Is painting. And I like giving things the benefit of the doubt: if it *could* be a painting…

BF: I always think of these as the wooden pieces. But it's true that there's something about the size and the stability, and the depth of the wood is reminiscent of the stretcher. And the actual process involves a lot of preparation for painting, like gessoing a canvas and giving it a wooden support. But on the other hand there's no gesture. Or sometimes there is, I guess.

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a. "Seth Price," Eden Eden, Berlin, 2014, installation view: *Letter from Inside/Out*, 2014, screenprint, ink, pigments, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood **b.** *Letter from Inside/Out*, 2014, screenprint, ink, pigments, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood

BMC: But you could think of them as sculptures, too, because the material is built up into different levels, and the wood is sawed and shaped. But then the reason he wanted to do all the edges with that white porcelain finish was to make the wood, the surface, just float. It loses depth as an object or a material. I think that's why that collector didn't recognize it as plywood, because it's kind of presented as an image. It's supposed to be wood as an effect.

BF: Then they're very close to the vacuum pieces, which share all these sort of ambiguities of sculpture and painting, and painted-on versus pressed or printed. Well, vacuum forming is printing, in a way. And looking now at this black negative shape inside the envelope, it recalls the silhouette pieces. Because those also look like continents or country boundaries.

BMC: Yeah. And they're relatively flat, but they're also actually raised off the wall a little bit.

BF: It's weird, they do have this quality of being incredibly graphic in reproduction, they resolve back into looking like Photoshop sketches. Even from ten feet away you think it's a sticker, that it's flat. But up close they're all textured, you have the different layers and thicknesses of the white parts and the black parts popping out, it is like a sculpture. That play with flatness and depth, all his work, pretty much, has that. It's interesting for me to talk and think about these pieces more, because if you take a look at them, you don't immediately see the relationship to other bodies of work. Maybe you can feel some sort of relationship, but you don't immediately have words for it. You might even wonder, what is the connection: In being alienated? In being excited? Or both at once? ❤

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a. *Autumn*, 2012, acrylic, enamel, resin, and UV-cured ink jet on PETG vacuum-formed over knotted rope, mounted over printed foam **b.** *Talking or Taking*, 2008, burled Carpathian elm and acrylic **c.** *Nothingness as a Big Head* (detail), 2013, ink, gesso, and acrylic polymer on plywood