

# David Ellis at the Break of Day

Carlo McCormick

If each artist is at essence differentiated from other artists less by style than by how they fundamentally see things in their own way, artistic expression then is purely a manifestation of the character of their perceptions. It takes a particular kind of optimism to regard the American empire in its gloaming as the refrain of 'our dawn's early light,' but David Ellis looks at things not so much as they are but for what they could become. His creative process, at once determined and circumstantial, is about negotiating a path of transformation from one set of meanings and functions to a new ulterior purpose. I often think of what hard work it is- surely young man there must be an easier way. But changing things, making radical alterations in form and content, is never a simple task. Adaptive, subversive, naturally inclined to accumulate meanings and work with multiplicities and contradictions rather than absolutes, David Ellis traces the vague outline of what is or might be with a refractive gaze. His disciplined exteriority functions with interior cause to physically and psychologically rewire the kind of emotive presence this stuff of our material and linguistic world occupies.

Having followed David Ellis' art for a few years now, first with an eye towards his collaborative work with the urban collective, Barnstormers (so named for their inspired enterprise of traveling en masse as a migratory visual minstrelsy from their graffiti street art practices in New York to the remote and rural old tobacco country of Ellis's youth where disused barns became primary canvas), then subsequently with increasingly enthusiastic interest in his own studio work, I foolishly thought that writing this would be a simple matter. Ellis' short history already has an aesthetic and conceptual depth where all that seemingly should be needed would be to outline the arc of his greatest hits and formidable methodologies, then plug in his most recent experiments neatly into this cohesive frame. Ha! We best leave such token pursuits to artists less demanding. David Ellis is just far too ambitious in his reach, too compelling in his intensities and difficult in his subtleties to merely produce another body of work for passive consumption. We'd love to iterate some of the amazing things he has accomplished and explain his intentions to date, but the three dynamically diverse departure points offered up in this exhibition insist upon their own careful examination.

When art gets close to alchemy, when it is less about making things than transforming matter, the power and potential of mutability can, as in the case of David Ellis' art, rotate on the hinge of context. Born post-modern, that is, understanding already that the challenge is no longer to be "new" but instead to be able to see what is already there in a new way, Ellis does not appropriate for the sake of clever quotation marks. Everything he uses in his arsenal has specific meaning, and his ever-evolving set of cultural strategies work precisely towards ways in which he can either redefine this content or shift it about so that we confront some critical disjuncture between appearance and meaning. Enter Ellis' new Star Spangled Banner project. Even the patriotic glory of the Star Spangled Banner Ellis reminds us comes from the shadows of a darker history. Written by John Stafford Smith in 1814, it is a phoenix-like recasting of a very American sense of hope after the Battle of 1812. Getting into the text itself, something that most of us casually inherited by rote so that we'd never ponder its meanings, Ellis explains, "It was a very bloody time, when the White House got burnt to the ground." As our great social experiment is being undermined from within, and the mighty American empire itself is seemingly blindly racing to its inevitable fall, Ellis' sense of wonder (indeed it is hard now to ever imagine a time

when an invading force could burn down this iconic architecture of power) is coded and couched in a contemporary global politics as a metaphoric *memento mori*.

The dawn's early light cast by Ellis' elegiac visual text is undeniably infused with the same regenerative faith in the possibility of cultural resurrection as the original, but not a rebirth of purity it is rather the trail of meaning left by the hybridizations of necessity. Inspired more by the distortions of Jimi Hendrix's anthemic rendition at Woodstock than the pomp and circumstance of its continued public execution, David Ellis layers in a flag-like filigree upon which the lyrics float as morphed typographies alternately suggestive of Hiragana, Arabic and Hebrew advertising fonts. "The tune itself is actually based on an old English drinking song," Ellis muses, "and if you listen carefully to the lyrics almost every line is a question." David's love of language is predicated on this kind of ambivalence, the way our lexicon resists the absolute and resides in multiplicity. Working as a graffiti artist under the name Skwerm, Ellis was less interested in tagging and getting up in the name of street fame than he's been intrigued by the interface of symbols and icons opened up by this medium. If the invention of a surrogate name in street art is driven by primal issues of identity, David Ellis returned to the word to explore these boundaries of self for the ways in which they extend into the social realm. His basic deconstruction is more schoolyard communication than high philosophical inquiry, which is obviously why it works better than the post-modernisms of the academy. At the center of Skwerm is 'we' (as close as we can get to the subject of his artistic practice), and from there is 'em,' a vernacular for them, and of course 'me,' and 'ew' (or you), a mad riff play worthy of Thelonus Monk. "I look at war today, and we are them. It's not just that we trained the Taliban for instance but that all conflicts arise from the failure of people to trust." Politics for Ellis, or more specifically fighting as a regional conflict among neighbors, it would seem is the loss of poetics, the determination of ideas and identities outside the common principals of understanding.

Something utterly lovely happens in David Ellis' art that is hard to explain, but it has a lot to do with how he can wield a great deal of complexity in such simple and direct ways. It's in the way he uses chance as a vehicle for control, or how the inexplicable explains a whole lot, the way in which abstraction takes on its own representational force, the quality by which the character of process invokes a determined intentionality bordering on fate, and even how refuse is never refusal but a manifestation of something intrinsically precious. These traits bleed through Dawn's Early Light in subtle ways, like the vestigial miasma of his tobacco stain paintings (where surfaces soaked in tobacco juice- a native material to his southern roots- become Rorschach tests rife and redolent with immensely imaginative association), and take on substantial formal properties in the more modest projects included in this exhibition. If Ellis' public art proffers a kind of all-subsuming maximalism, his studio practice tweaks that aesthetic by condensing the maximal into minimalist form. His series Record Collection asserts just such a kind of reductive capacity for the otherwise unmanageable mass of materiality choking contemporary existence. More like "recollections" he jokes, David Ellis simply takes a shelf of records as a physical space of collective memory, a singular object as surrogate for the psychological nexus of our consumer materialism. The shelf is not there in fact, it is not furniture but sculpture, the albums supporting each other by their co-dependency as assembled discrete elements in a whole that is created by binding them all together with a layer of resin. And within, the visual language and mimetic codes of records that have meant so much to their audience in their now nearly obsolete life spans. Titled after famous songs, they hang there like stanzas. Too bad Donald Judd's art was never half so smart or sexy.

Much like his Record Collections, Ellis's modified Drum Sculptures and Paintings ossify our cultural sediment into their own lost continents. Made in situ, scavenged directly out of the

detritus of Savannah, Ellis accumulates that which has lost function to give it new utility. He understands that everything has a resonance, especially that which is used and discarded, and *Trash Talk* (2006) is quite literally a symphony by which he can make these things sing for us. Midi controlled and programmed, *Trash Talk* is rather more visceral and is hardly something the listener would associate with digital sound. "I collect the old shit that people throw out," Ellis explains, "there's so much of that today, I'm just trying to make sense of it. With the primal quality of just physically banging on something in a room, it's got the urban primitive touch but also a kind of invention by necessity that is roots Americana. Be it some big old wooden spool or an empty bag of dog food, Ellis grabs onto the potential of non-traditional acoustic instruments with the same back-home lyricism of a washtub bass or a coinola player piano. Perhaps you'll hear the cacophony of the big city, but if you ask David he'll admit it has a lot more to do with where you're standing. "My grandmother's from Charleston," Ellis offers by way of explanation, "with the drums, or when I'm painting over and over the same space making discoveries at each and every moment that are just as quickly covered up again, I feel like I'm trying to get the cadence of all the old people who told me stories when I was growing up." That's the David Ellis School of story telling, the social interaction that comes in a place where people have more time to talk with one another. "It may be slower, but it's always really smart, heavy on metaphor, not as direct but with a resonance, a large band width." I'd guess he's only just begun to tell his tale.

---

David Ellis: *Dawn's Early Light*

curated by Matthew Mascotte

Red Gallery: Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia,

Oct. 6-Nov. 12, 2006