

ARTFORUM

Franklin Evans
Miles McEnery Gallery

Colby Chamberlain
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Franklin Evans, joysdivision, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 30 3/4 x 32 5/8 inches, 78.1 x 82.9 cm

The titles for the paintings in Franklin Evans’s exhibition “fugitivemisreadings” were made up of lowercase letters jammed together into solid blocks, like the stream-of-consciousness “thunderwords” in James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939), or the file names of PDFs scattered over a Mac desktop. In one canvas, Evans paid tribute to Henri Matisse’s famous pastoral of 1905—1906, *The Joy of Life*, by hand copying the composition’s Fauvist figures and rearranging them as if he were using the cut-and-paste function in Photoshop. The work is called . . . wait for it . . . joysdivision (all works cited, 2021). Yes, the name of this Matisse remix is a callback to everyone’s favorite short-lived New Wave postpunk act from Salford, England. Why so? Was the pun just irresistible?



Franklin Evans, titianatilt, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 79 1/2 x 68 3/4 inches, 201.9 x 174.6 cm

Or is there something tellingly ambivalent about associating Matisse with one of the bands mentioned over the course of LCD Soundsystem's eight-minute epochal rhapsody of hipster affectation, "Losing My Edge" (2002)?

A recurring element in Evans's paintings are crisp acrylic lines that resemble taut strips of masking tape. In previous exhibitions, Evans employed actual colored tape to extend his picture plane into three dimensions, covering the walls and floors surrounding his canvases with pictures, press releases, spreadsheets, and other printed matter. The artist's use of tape led to his interest in Piet Mondrian's braided-line compositions of the 1940s, but a more apposite point of comparison might be the tape-encrusted installations of Thomas Hirschhorn. The Swiss artist's ersatz memorials to Georges Bataille or Antonio Gramsci reflect what Hirschhorn himself has described as a "fan" mentality that celebrates philosophers with a frenzied devotion usually reserved for sports teams or pop stars. The profusion of references to Matisse throughout "fugitivemisreadings" radiated a similar degree of unchecked enthusiasm. Why does Evans keep copying *The Joy of Life*? He's a fan!

But what does it mean to be a fan of modernism? Like Joy Division, modernist painting circa 1900 teeters perpetually at the edge of relevance. Even the era's most eminently cancelable "master," the predatory Paul Gauguin, continues to exert a generative influence on contemporary painters (e.g., Chris Ofili and Sanya Kantarovsky). Yet Post-Impressionism and Fauvism are now also thoroughly commodified fodder for coffee mugs and mouse pads, the pictorial equivalent of dad rock. Evans's direct citations of famous paintings play on this double aspect.



Franklin Evans, *decenteringfacespace*, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 80 5/8 x 68 5/8 inches, 204.8 x 174.3 cm

At times, these snippets offered little more than the middle-brow pleasure of winning a name-that-tune contest. At other times, “high” modernism became a measuring stick for gauging the historical specificity of feeling human. For instance, Evans’s representation of his own work space, *titianatilt*, calls out for comparison with Matisse’s *Red Studio*, 1911. Both scenes are populated with nods to other Matisse paintings, but whereas the nested images in *The Red Studio* afford the eye moments of rest before it resumes its ambit over the canvas’s rusted-red expanse, *titianatilt* shows a pile of printed-out JPGs on a candy-striped floor so densely packed with visual stimulations that gaining one’s bearings is nearly impossible. The interior becomes a vivid portrait of an information-addled twenty-first-century mind.

For three large-scale canvases in “*fugitivemisreadings*,” Evans dispensed with his masking-tape lattices in favor of dollop-laden biomorphic patterns that serve as backdrops to swirling medleys of modernism’s greatest hits. In one, *decenteringfacespace*, apples lifted from Paul Cézanne’s works float beside the decapitated heads of the skull-faced boys in the Matisse paintings *Music*, 1910, and *The Piano Lesson*, 1916. This same painting also contains small-scale portraits of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. How should one understand these respective nods to the abolitionist and civil rights movements in the welter of Evan’s art-historical references? Perhaps they mark the limits of fandom in grappling with the barely latent racism of modernist aesthetics. Or perhaps they are expressions of a sentiment that vinyl aficionados and museum curators alike have lately been muttering under their breath: Damn, my collection is just . . . so . . . white.