

VAULT™

NEW ART & CULTURE

ISSUE 12 NOVEMBER 2015

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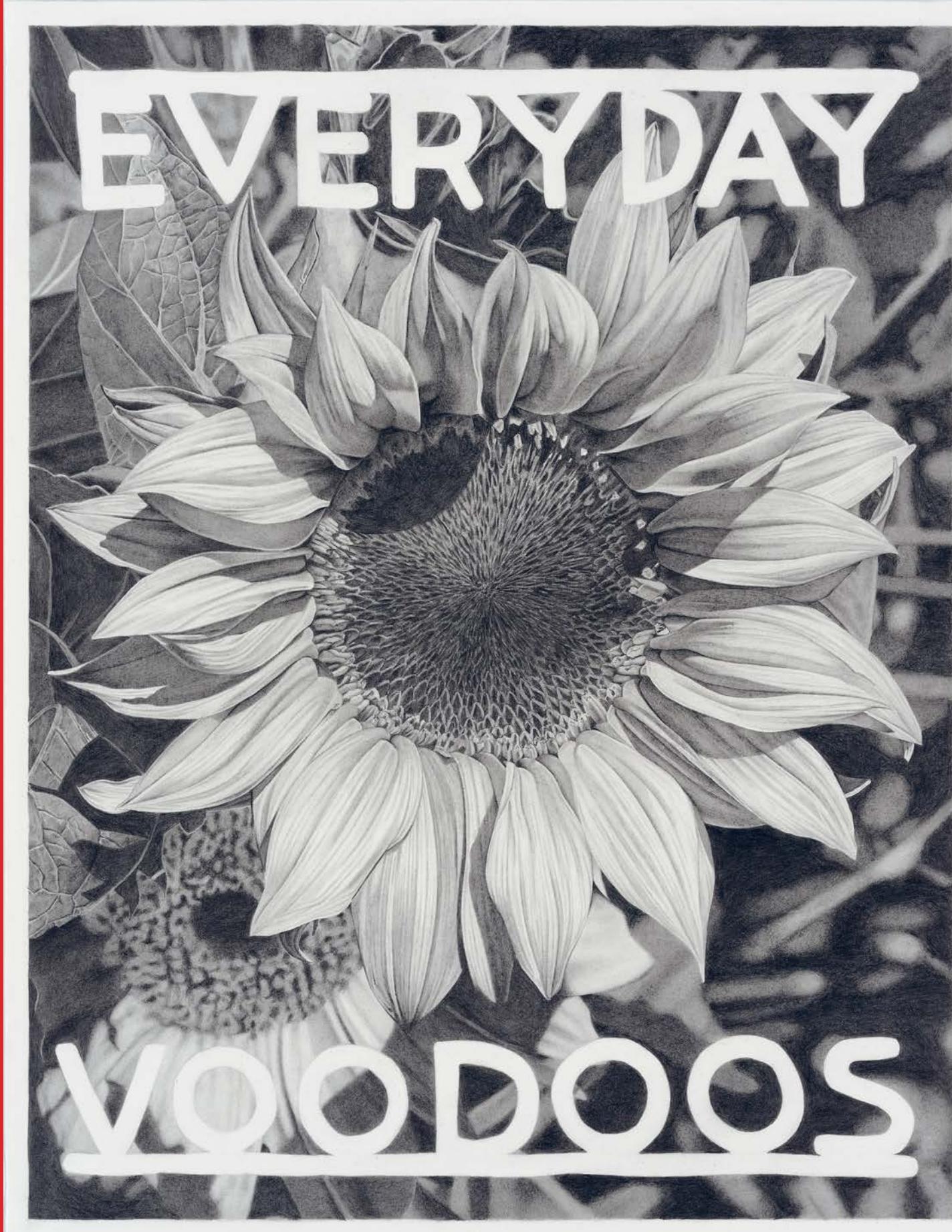
RILEY
PAYNE

AUS \$17.50 NZ \$25.00

ISBN 978-0-9944131-1-6



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Opposite
RILEY PAYNE
a season for everyday, 2014-15
graphite on paper
73 X 57.5 cm
Courtesy the artist
and Tolarno Galleries,
Melbourne

RILEY PAYNE HUMOUR, PROFUNDITY AND HARD LABOUR

VAULT stops by at the studio of New York-based Melbourne artist Riley Payne to mull over all that underpins the self-taught artist's fastidiously drawn forms.

By John Thomson

Riley Payne's new studio is in an old waterfront warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The building seems full of those kinds of creative start-ups that boast ping-pong tables and gigantic espresso machines. His space, though, is windowless, almost ascetic, but it's just the right size to hold his upcoming solo show at Melbourne's Tolarno Galleries – his first since being signed to the gallery.

His walls hold a series of figurative, black pencil drawings with superimposed text or shapes. At first, his drawings recall the juxtapositions of James Rosenquist's billboard-like canvases. Payne's overlaying of text on image also brings to mind Ed Ruscha's use of text as a formal device. Both Rosenquist and Ruscha worked in advertising before they made it big and although Payne hasn't done so himself, all three artists mine Pop's symbiotic relationship with commercial art.

Payne is completely self-taught, yet he's no outsider. His work – figurative and handmade, yet looking outward to confront our digital world – pushes a lot buttons right now. His monochrome palette, in the sea of vibrant coloured screens in which we live, seems to translate the efflorescence of the digital into an alternate system that's alive yet uncanny, not unlike the experience of watching classic black-and-white movies on a phone.

He used to be a skater and his work does have a trace of graffiti or street art: not of colourful spray tags, but rather realist murals or street poster art. His work shares their immediacy, but after an initial sense of recognition, you stand back and realise that something else is going on. He sees his art as a conversation between himself and the viewer. It's a disarming way to understand the role of the spectator: his work isn't over-defined like some text-based work can be, nor is it inscrutable either.

Payne gleans many of his images from the internet. They often come from stock photography, so they have a stereotypical quality about them. He labels each image under headings such as 'nature', 'leisure' or 'day-to-day rituals', and as such his drawings become like entries in a visual archive, where there is no particular horizontal connection between each one. Like the illustrations in an encyclopaedia, they relate to one another via their mode of selection and categorisation.

His words are often lifted from popular songs and, like his images, can be familiar yet hold a certain mystery. His symbols impose themselves on their image; they break the narrative spell, like a character in a novel addressing the reader.

TELL ME HOW YOU STARTED DRAWING.

Drawing was always a family pastime, almost to the point of overriding all other classic kid activities. My dad was a freelance illustrator in the pre-digital, actual cut-and-paste era of the business, working on illustrations for various radio stations, drink and snack companies, restaurants and magazine editorial stuff – *Penthouse* and *Playboy* being the two most amusing or infamous ones that come to mind.



Riley Payne at his studio

My mum was a landscape architect who worked on various municipal and residential projects and whose interest was more directly botanical, but her work still involved a huge amount of drafting and a decent stationery supply for me to dip into. Between the two of them, sport was never really encouraged, so my brother and I just drew all the time.

I stopped drawing for a while in my late teens and early twenties when other distractions came along, but around the time I first moved overseas I came back to it with more of an idea of it being connected to something bigger. I started to make the jump from drawn inner monologues in sketchbooks to single pieces that might be pinned up on my bedroom wall.

HOW DO YOU SELECT YOUR REFERENCE IMAGES?

I usually just have an instinctive reaction to some images, which I try not to second-guess too much. Sometimes they'll come to me when I'm not actually looking for them or needing them to make work, in which case I keep them in a steadily growing digital and print reference folder in my studio.

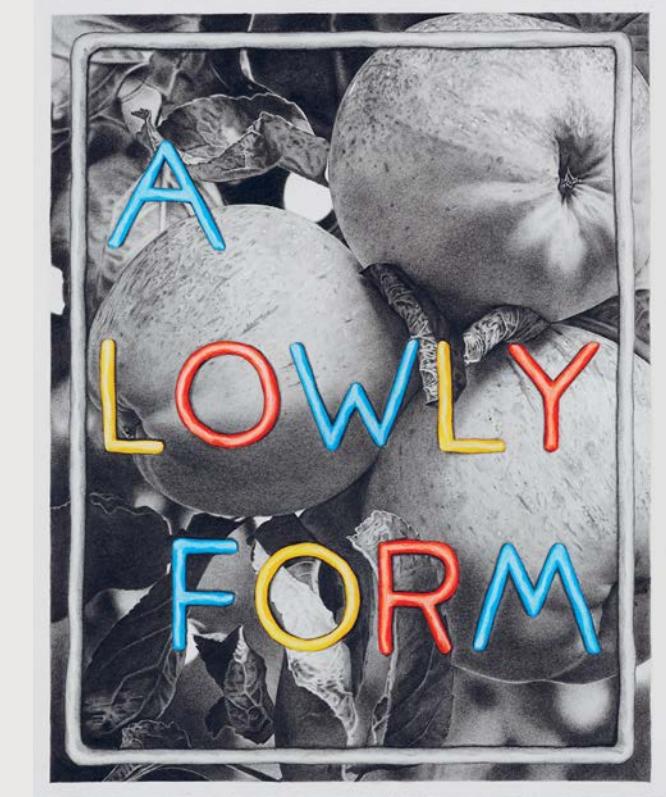
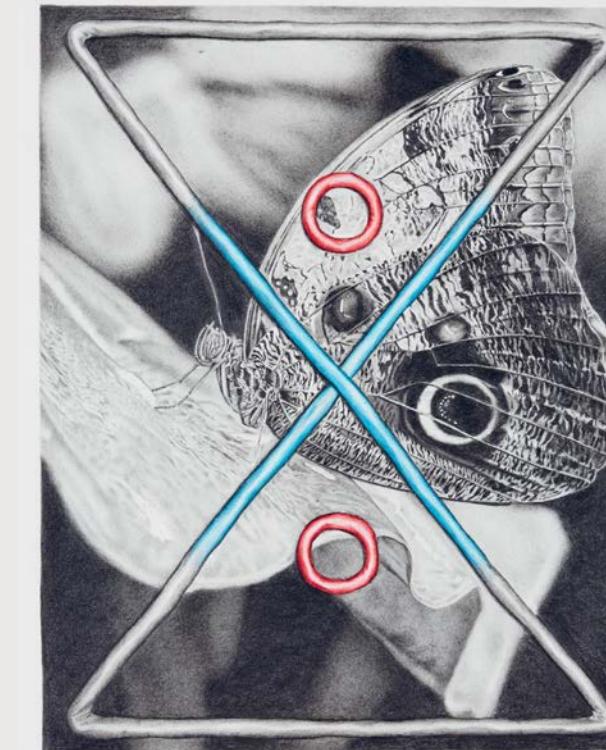
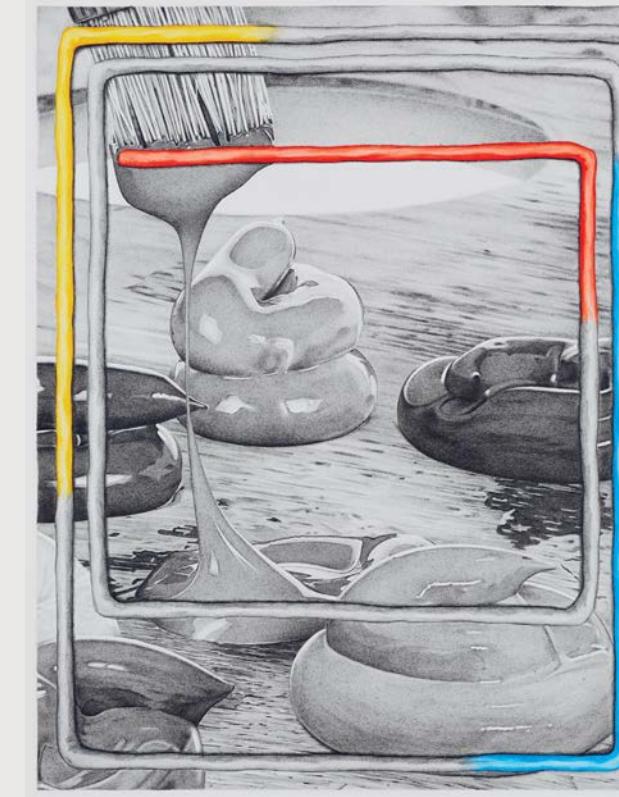
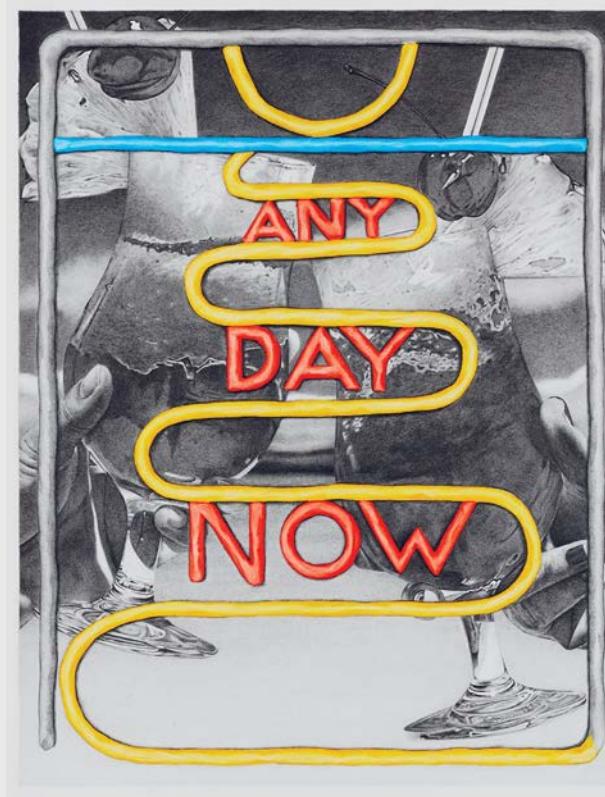
When I know vaguely what I'm looking for, I'll wade through my various go-to online sources and certain books or magazines until I generate the feeling I want. I guess I have a mental checklist when I'm looking around for images – things like mild absurdity, overt romanticism, false sincerity, ubiquity – and when they've ticked off one or more of those, I'm good to go.

YOUR TEXTS DO NOT LITERALLY RELATE TO YOUR IMAGES. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THERE IS A GOOD FIT?

Again it's mostly instinctive, though with a bit more thought and worry than just choosing the images alone. There's always a relation between the text and image – there has to be for me to commit that much time to rendering them – though I also realised as soon as I started showing these works that when you're dealing with such recognisable references, it's entirely subjective; each work seemed to generate multiple responses depending on what the viewer's connection to the various elements was. People laughed, got sad, confused. Initially, I was a bit bruised that nobody was taking in these supposedly profound messages that I was putting out, but then I realised you can't really try to control people's reactions like that, and that the ambiguity generated by those random elements was a really interesting space to explore.

HAS COMMERCIAL ART INFLUENCED YOUR WORK AND IDEAS?

I'd say so, though at the same time it's such a broad term that I'd probably have to narrow it down to certain elements of commercial art and exclude quite a few others. I've recently started looking a lot closer at some of the stuff I grew up surrounded by and took for granted, such as old Japanese illustration and airbrush annuals that my dad had, as well as some of the cheaply produced but incredible band flyers and stickers that I was obsessed with in my teens. I think that stuff has been a huge influence in terms of graphic impact and layout, even though I wasn't aware of it at the time.



"IT'S ALMOST BY FETISHISING THE IMAGES, BY DEVOTING SO MUCH TIME TO RENDERING THEM, THAT I CAN TRY TO WRESTLE SOME OF THE POWER BACK FROM SOMETHING THAT IS, IN ESSENCE, DESIGNED FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF MANIPULATION."

Left to right
RILEY PAYNE
grayscale vacation,
2013-14
graphite and coloured
pencil on paper
53 x 42 cm

RILEY PAYNE
*a handle on my
business*, 2013-14
graphite and coloured
pencil on paper
53 x 42 cm

RILEY PAYNE
two martini trutin', 2013
graphite and coloured
pencil on paper
37 x 30 cm

RILEY PAYNE
fruit driven fun, 2013-14
graphite and coloured
pencil on paper
53 x 42 cm

Courtesy the artist and
Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

I pick and choose certain things from that world as I need them, either as reference images, design ideas or as a conceptual ground to query. That's probably where it ends though - even though I grew up in close proximity to it, the commerce-client side of that world is still pretty foreign to me and not something I think I'd be able to move in fluidly.

WHY DRAW WITH PENCIL IN THIS AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION?

The simple and not so interesting answer would be because I just still really enjoy the process. I have come to realise that the place I have access to, mentally and physically, while spending so much time on the drawings, is both super-calming and also a really fertile area of productivity. I rarely have good ideas when I'm trying to have good ideas. I find the best ones come when I'm already working on something completely separate.

In the broader picture, however, I think that by choosing a really time-consuming and arguably pretty futile way of re-presenting existing images - regardless of whether there's a textual or other element included - I get to slow things down a little and spend a bit more time thinking

about why I find particular images so arresting. It's almost by fetishising the images, by devoting so much time to rendering them, that I can try to wrestle some of the power back from something that is, in essence, designed for the sole purpose of manipulation. It doesn't last, obviously, but while it's happening there's a really interesting moment of detachment that keeps me going. **V**

Riley Payne shows at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, from November 21 to December 19, 2015.

Riley Payne is represented by Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.
tolarnogalleries.com