

matador



Ross Simonini

Eddie flicks a red nugget of oil paint at his canvas and watches it cling to fresh gesso like a vulnerable fly in a web. He fiddles around with it for a moment but decides to let it stay put. He steps away, does a loop around the studio, aimlessly swats at a partly done canvas, wipes something gray off another, leans in to inspect the corner of a small painting on the wall. When he returns to the nugget, he spritzes it with a bottle of mineral spirits. The paint cries down in translucent streaks that crack when they dry. It mucks up the background, which is dirty white and patched like drywall. It's the most white Eddie's ever put into a painting, and he thinks of it as blank paper, which makes sense, since for him, the ultimate goal is to achieve what he calls a "painted drawing"—a fully developed wet work with the energy of a sketch.

He begins to build an image in the center of the canvas. He uses a knife to add some blue, and then scrapes it off. He doesn't look at the canvas he's working on, but at another one, across the room, which he's sort of mimicking. It's the third in a series of paintings, and he plans to make more. He paces around the room, moving into the adjacent space, which a few months before had been a separate studio he kept as a clean viewing room. But now the wall has been razed and the whole studio is one big open space, all of it speckled with a constellation of color droppings.

Eddie takes off his cap, rubs his head, puts the cap back on, walks over to his desk. Fran, his French bulldog, scuttles onto the couch. Eddie sits to draw, to take his eye off the larger task at hand. The sketch he starts is an abstract collection of chunky, stately forms he's been toying around with for a few weeks, a new composition, still in the development stages, not quite ready to be realized on a big canvas. He's assembling a "loosely fixed" cast of characters: the proud red tongue, the serpentine yellow column, the constrained scribble of the black spade, and the floating cube of deep blue. In his older work, these forms congealed into flowers and figures and bedecked tabletops, but his recent energy is less nameable. These new shapes point toward something familiar without ever pointing at anything in particular, especially not words.

Behind him, the wall is covered in similar drawings, pinned up in a casual grid, each one a study of this new idea, with subtle variations of hue and shape. Most of them are on paper with crayons and markers. Some are from the iPad, which he's been sketching on recently. He'll take a picture of an in-progress painting, drop it into the digital tablet, and try some marks over it. The drawings are finished quickly, regularly, and somewhat compulsively—his attempt at "exhausting a composition."

He makes marks with a sharpie, filling in the lines until he's woven a dense tangle of slashes, packed with energy. He sets the paper on the ground to look at it with a little more distance, jams the heel of his boot into the drawing, and drags it across the dirty floor, which is thick with years of oily sediment, so the paper accretes a partial footprint and a hazy atmosphere of visual noise. He reaches for a tub of white paint and slathers it on the drawing with a flat house-painting brush, outlining some forms, painting over others. He leaves the drawing, walks away, changes the music to a Grateful Dead track—"Tennessee Jed" from a live bootleg—and then goes back to the original canvas, the

one with the nugget, which is still mostly white. He shakes up a can of spray paint and blasts the canvas with a few big body-length strokes—curves that have the same unleashed quality as the pen marks he made a few minutes before.

All of this process isn't just the work behind the paint. It's right there on the canvas, a whole garden of techniques and layers and gestures and moments. Any spot you look at on one of these canvases is jammed with incident. He drops a painting on the floor, walks on the edges of the canvas, dances when he gets to a corner. He scrapes at the canvas—gives a liberal pour of turpentine and lets it pool in the center of the image for a few hours. "I've probably peed on them several million times," he says.

The group of five paintings Eddie's been working on for about six months is called the "Matador" series. He describes himself as "somewhere between the bull, the audience, and the matador." Around him, the canvases lean against the walls, wide like bulls, towering at the top of his arm's reach. "When I'm painting these," he says, "it feels like it's either me or the canvas who's coming out the victor." As with his earlier work, the pieces all visually register, at least initially, as the most fundamental of painting subjects—landscape, portrait, still life, or something between the three. There's a thingness in Eddie's work, but these things aren't stable. You can point to one of these objects, call it a thing, and understand its basic properties—oblong, saggy—but it's a thing in motion, a thing that contains time, built up like topography. If Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* painted time horizontally, Eddie shows it dimensionally, building canvases up with a history of complex marks. Usually, it's hard to say where these things come from, but sometimes they have an autobiographical origin. For instance, Eddie once took a trip to Jamaica, drew on the beach, and returned home with a new, recurrent icon, a golden sun that found its way into hundreds of his images.

Recently, Eddie's been using literal, physical things on his surfaces—handi-wipes, oil-stick wrappers, paper towels, computer printouts, holiday wrapping paper, parts of another canvas he cut out with a razor. He affixes them to his canvases, paints over them, leaves them unfinished. He'll pin something on the paint for a while and stare at it.

He sinks into his oil-caked wheelie chair and pushes himself around, debating out loud whether to list his materials, whether he should call attention to the presence of a rogue handi-wipe or whether it should be "mixed media"—the mysterious texture of the unknown. He decides on the latter.

While he works, Eddie is a part of this texture. The paint residue on his overalls and beige jumpsuit looks like a gory, exposed wound. His work area is an explosion of brushes and half-used tubes and a big glass palette table—all of it thick with years of paint. The floor looks like it'll never be clean again. If he wants to eat a cough drop on the table next to him, he uses a pair of scissors to lift the drop to his mouth, so as not to touch it with his painty, toxic fingers. When he's finished for the day he heads into the closet, sheds his painty self, and emerges in clean clothes. He puts Fran on her leash and goes outside to let her relieve herself on a tree.

For a while Eddie doesn't go into the studio with the same tenacity and regularity. He works

on a few small sculptures, but seems more surprised by this work, less controlling of it. He explores more, realizes less. He plays tennis. He stops by the studio, puts on some Hawaiian music, orders up a Mexican salad and a seltzer from a restaurant a block away, watches *The Wire* on his computer while he eats. He looks at images by the painter Grace Hartigan on Google. He takes a photo with his phone of one of his in-progress paintings and posts it on Instagram. He buys a scooter and leans it in the corner and sometimes gets the urge to drive it around the studio in circles.

When the warm season arrives, he works either in Massachusetts at his in-laws' house or in the home he rents on Long Island. He paints outside, propping canvases against a small barn studio, stacking them in structures. As the summer continues, the surfaces accumulate insects and whatever botanical elements drift in the wind when the paint is viscous. He doesn't smash the bugs into the paint, but he doesn't pick them out, either.

When the season ends, he drives the paintings back to the city in a U-Haul. They are mailed out for shows, in Kansas City and Berlin and Los Angeles. A batch of them end up at a group show in Chelsea. Some of the small drawings go to a show on the Lower East Side. Some go to friends.

At this point, Eddie's exhausted with the big boys, as he calls them, the seven-by-ten-foot monsters, and he draws at home, maybe for a night, maybe for weeks at a time. His place is a few blocks from his studio, in Brooklyn. Paintings by artist friends hang around the house. The television plays the Tennis Channel and Eddie sits on the couch, leaning over the table, scribbling in a way that is both relaxed and furious. He's toying with another new composition, reworking it over half a dozen drawings, taking photos of it with his phone. He tries a few shades of blue on a wing-tipped shape that wobbles on the middle of the page. The television's muted, and the white noise of markers on paper is the sound track. Every few minutes, Eddie sings a single line from a hip-hop track, something from the radio, and swaps the name of his dog for an unsuspecting lyric. He sings the same line repeatedly. Songs, it seems, get in his head like images do.

He grabs a nearby book of Carroll Dunham's work and pages through it. There are so many stacks of art books on the table that you can't see the table—a Helen Frankenthaler monograph, an old Milton Avery book, a book of late Miró paintings. When Eddie looks at them, he can barely turn the pages fast enough, taking in as much as he can in glances. When he gets to the end, he starts going backward, and then flipping back and forth between pages, revisiting any images that remain compelling on multiple looks. He puts down the book, looks at the finished drawings, spread out on the table and floor, and rubs his beard. "I never feel like drawing's enough," he says—"I need paint."

