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ART

Matthew Craven is Disrupting Art History

The collage artist's new book eschews captions to allow viewers to interpret his work for themselves.

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by Ali Webb



Matthew Craven wants to stay outside the hierarchy of art. His work isn't the kind that will enter the most traditional galleries and receive praise for its craft, nor is it part of any avant-garde movements with a specific social agenda. Instead, he wants to make a simple yet complex statement with collage, refusing to provide viewers context for his work so the truth of the images can shine.

Craven is a lifelong doodler, but he didn't take his first art class until age 22 after a fellow student in his college dorm inspired him. He tried a range of mediums, such as painting and sculpture, but ultimately felt it would be organic to return to his roots on paper.

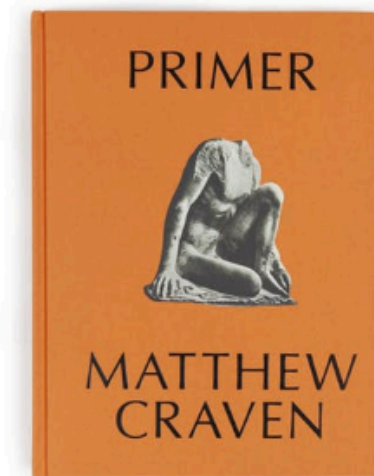
"I gave up on painting and sculpting and other things like that because it didn't speak to me the way casual nature of work on paper did," the artist said of his journey. "After taking classes and trying everything out, I wanted to return to a very simple art practice of working 2D, which eventually turned into finding images and books."

Craven takes a lot of inspiration from history, both in the statues and artifacts depicted and the materials themselves. Flipping through his book, *Primer*, which comes out October 2, viewers will see statues, pottery, and masks from a range of cultures. These coexist on the same pages, often laid overtop old photographs or posters. No definitive separation, chronological or thematic, is apparent, and while the audience is likely to recognize images they have encountered in their own experience, anything unfamiliar is up to the viewer to figure out. The lack of historical context or explanation can seem daunting at first, but it frees the object from biased interpretations, as well as viewers from unnatural influence on their thought process.

"I hope that people take their own path," Craven says of his intentions in offering no context. "I want the viewers in a contemporary context to explore the same way I feel when I'm in an old bookstore looking for things. If I can create something that makes them ask themselves questions, then I feel like that makes sense for viewing art in 2018."

"If I can get a little bit of that energy from our past and do my work, then I feel like I made something worthwhile."

While Craven doesn't place a specific agenda on his work, he acknowledges its place in breaking from historical bias in education. He has a deep awareness that the obsolete textbooks which provide much of his material were written by actual people, many with a European or American background, and the textual content is likely to come from their subjective worldview. Without captions, the images show, in many ancient cases, all we know about the artist's intent, and the viewer can experience their presence without a specific discipline telling them what to think.



By acknowledging and removing this potential bias, as well as the hands-on nature of his collages, Craven aims to show the human touch which goes into artwork, both his own and projects he depicts. He feels the separation of history, yet finds a connection in the process and a shared human experience, elements which inspire him in reviving historical works from tired narratives.

"Even though [my art is] radically different from an Etruscan bust from 4000 years ago, it still was made--there was a story behind it, a personal story," the artist said. "If I can get a little bit of that energy from our past and do my work, then I feel like I made something worthwhile."

Primer by Matthew Craven,
published by Anthology Editions,
will be available for purchase on
October 2.