



David Ellis
Conversation

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Born in 1971, David Ellis grew up in a tobacco-growing region of North Carolina and by age twelve knew he wanted to be an artist. The 1983 PBS documentary, *Style Wars*, a seminal film about New York hip-hop music and graffiti style subway art, ignited Ellis's imagination and soon, he was putting his own graffiti (with permission) on his family's barns and outbuildings. During the day, Ellis developed his improvisational artistic language – fast-paced painting with a bold graphic style and playfulness of form – while late at night he listened to the sounds of early New York hip-hop music broadcast from the nearby Fort Bragg radio station. Ellis claims, "I tuned into that like nothing I've ever tuned into in my life." He worked in the tobacco fields and painted murals in nearby music clubs to earn money to buy the turntable and hip-hop records he craved.

Ellis attended North Carolina School of the Arts where the visual arts students honed their skills by creating sets for the theater division. Moving to New York, he continued his studies at The Cooper Union, a university renowned for its intensive studio art program. Ellis earned extra money designing and building sets for hip-hop music videos, and in the process learned to create an immersive environment, a skill he uses in creating installations today. By the mid-1990s he had become disillusioned with hip-hop's single-minded focus on money or "bling" and violence. Feeling that hip-hop had, "lost its soul, lost its art," he disassociated himself from the scene.

The Barnstormers

In 1999, Ellis headed home to Cameron, North Carolina. Recalling the old and abandoned wooden tobacco barns he painted as a teenager, Ellis asked a group of artists, designers, and friends to go with him to paint the barns again. The local farmers considered Ellis's murals on their barns to be a commemoration of the area's once proud, but now decaying, architecture and gave his group a warm welcome. Ellis remembers, "The local people met us at my grade school with trucks full of ladders and paint, rollers and all this stuff that they had pulled out of their basements. It was *on*." The artists worked night and day throughout the driving rains of Hurricane Floyd. "The sun came out on the last day or two; we finished

everything up, and it was amazing. It changed my life," Ellis recalls. One farmer, whose barn had been painted, barbecued a pig and it was the centerpiece of a covered dish supper to honor the artists and attended by hundreds from the Cameron community. The small town became an unlikely Mecca for the urban artists. Headed by Ellis, an ever-shifting roster of over thirty international artists, now known as the Barnstormers, has returned each summer to paint dozens of barns, tractor-trailers, shacks, and farm equipment.

The trip home was a revelation. Ellis was able to reconcile the two disparate parts of his life: his rural upbringing and his urban early adulthood. With one breath of tobacco-saturated air, Ellis's childhood had rushed back. "Looking back on the first trip, it was overwhelming," he remembers. "I don't know what I thought would happen, but what did was an awakening. The two communities in my life, which in my head had nothing to do with one another, sat down at the table together, held hands, and became one."

Returning to New York, Ellis and the Barnstormers continued to collaborate in jam sessions of painting, each improvisation a jumping-off-point for the next. A studio floor, rather than a



David Ellis and Kami
Barn, 1999 (Cameron, North Carolina)
Photo: Marlene Marino

barn, was now their canvas. The artists worked in tag-team fashion, layering painting upon painting, each successive image covering the last. A camera mounted on the ceiling took time-lapse photographs, which when played back at high speed, produced an ever-morphing animation of images, each one seeming to emerge from the previous one. Ellis has continued to produce what is called “motion painting,” both with the group and on his own. *Bound*, 2005, a video projection of a delivery truck he repainted every day for a week, and an example of a motion painting, is visible through peepholes in the left side-wall of the gallery.

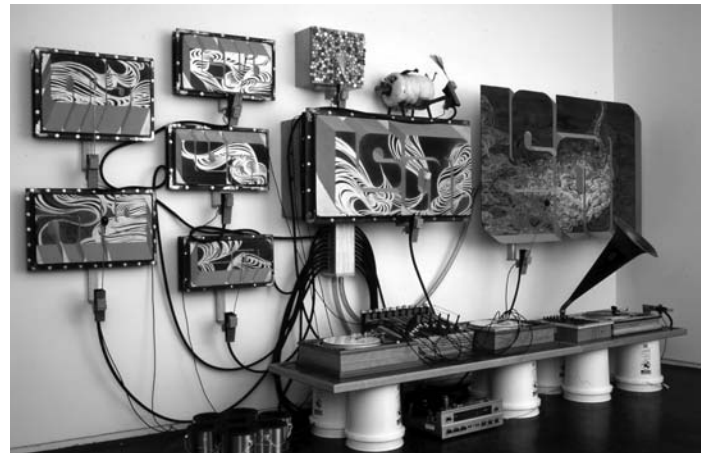


David Ellis
Bound, 2005 (video still)
Photo courtesy the artist

Drum Painting

Beat and rhythm have always been unspoken components of Ellis’s painting. His early exploration was inspired by the hip-hop he heard. When painting together, the Barnstormers “jammed” painting instead of “jamming” music. Ellis says his goal has always been, “to paint jazz,” to make the rhythm that he hears visible to the viewer. The next step for Ellis then was to incorporate beat directly into his work. “What interests me now,” he says, “is the surface of a skin vibrating, and the natural acoustics of that thing.”

Ellis began exploring this idea in a series of what he calls “drum paintings,” rhythmic installations that combine painting, sculpture, and sound. The main elements of drum painting installations are ordinary objects he transformed into working drums. In his first drum painting, Ellis made the drums by covering wooden frames with stretched animal hides and attaching a beater to each. A player piano roll-like apparatus controlled the rhythm that the beaters pounded out. Because the rhythm lasted for only one rotation of the roll, the beats of these first drum paintings were relatively simple. The next drum painting Ellis made used electronic beater controls, which



David Ellis
Granny (Drum Painting Project, Version 4.0), 2005
Photo courtesy Jessica Murray Projects, New York

allowed for the creation of a more complex rhythm. Ellis also integrated his signature cloud form into the drum paintings. He was inspired to paint the cloud after a visit to an active volcano where he saw how the flowing lava touched the ocean, cooled, and froze into undulating layers of movement. At first, Ellis decorated only the drumheads with this cloud form, but later he covered every surface in the installation, using the painting as a unifying element and a visual expression of the rhythm.

Conversation

Conversation, Ellis’s site-specific installation for Rice Gallery, is his most ambitious drum painting to date. It builds and expands on the previous drum paintings’ cloud imagery and rhythms, while it also incorporates rural motifs from Ellis’s memory. At the center of the gallery, two figures are engaged in dialogue with one another. Bright-eyed and covered with long grey fur, the figures’ wide, frog-like mouths open and close. The large figure speaks in a reverberating baritone, while the smaller one answers in a higher, almost child-like tone. These figures are *grouse*, animal hybrids of Ellis’s imagination, conceived when he painted the floor of his studio using a stain he made by boiling tobacco leaves, a gift from a Cameron farmer. As if viewing a Rorschach inkblot, Ellis saw in the abstract patterns he created – frogs, ducks, snakes, and possums – creatures familiar to him from his rural childhood. The *grouse* is based on these animals. Although Ellis has frequently painted the *grouse*, it appears in *Conversation* for the first time as a sculpture.

The *grouse*, Ellis says, is a Trickster. Most prominent in North American and African mythology, the Trickster can change its form from god to human to animal. Although the Trickster causes trouble and confusion, his pranks often pave the way for a new world order. A Trickster embodies an important paradox: although the cosmos is ruled by order, it is in a state

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I am an artist from a family of musicians. My uncle plays and restores pianos, and my brother travels the world playing tenor saxophone. As a kid I had no patience with piano lessons and learning to read music, but absorbed everything I heard on the “Super Mix,” a Saturday night radio program that was broadcast from the Fort Bragg military base near where I grew up. It was just far enough away that reception required one hand on the pause button and the other on an elaborate assembly of coat hangers, duct tape, and tin foil jammed into the hole that was once an antenna on my boom box. I recorded the show every week with the volume low so not to disturb my mother’s ultra sonic night hearing, which would result in radio confiscation. Each week a new style of early New York hip-hop found its way into the mind of a 12-year old boy living in the attic of a log cabin in rural North Carolina. By the time Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 5 dropped “The Message,” I was writing my own rhymes and banging out beats on the desks at school. Those beats have been in the back of my mind all my life.

— David Ellis

of constant change. Because the *grouse* is a Trickster, Ellis warns, it is not what it seems. In *Conversation*, they appear to be fantastical and otherworldly creatures, but their shiny green running shoes give them away. The shoes establish them as contemporary figures, grounded in the here and now, and make the anthropomorphic *grouse* stand-ins for “us.”

The giant *grouse* wears a suit of armor made from pennies, transit tokens, and international coins, a symbol of this *grouse*'s potent monetary power. In contrast, the smaller, life-sized *grouse* is dressed humbly in paint-splattered clothes. Lacking armor, the smaller figure might appear to be overwhelmed by the larger one, but the giant *grouse* seems to be looking beneficently on the smaller *grouse*, and the two figures are engaged in conversation.

Conversation continues Ellis's exploration of rhythm in drum paintings, but instead of a single beat, the installation's sound is an ambitiously complex polyrhythmic composition played out on three walls. Along the back wall, fifty-five gallon oil drums, chosen by Ellis to evoke Houston's oil culture, form a flat-topped pyramid. The metal lids on some of the drums have been replaced by stretched goatskin painted green. Computer-controlled beaters attached to these drums hammer out “a beat on which the rest of the piece rides,” says Ellis. An explosion of paint cans mounted on the right-side wall picks up the beat of

the oil drums. On the opposite wall, beaters inside larger, plastic buckets shake clusters of dried seedpods.

The *grouse* also contribute rhythmic elements. To create their dialogue, Ellis recorded himself and friends talking, then remixed the speech sounds by running them backwards and changing the speed. The speech of the *grouse* is controlled by computers nested within the figures, and is played through their speaker eyes. Their conversation is punctuated with tambourine sounds made by beaters that appear to shake the coins in the small figure's back pants pocket and the giant's suit of armor. The beats produced by the oil drums, paint cans, plastic buckets, and *grouse* resound in a booming, rocking composition.

A smoke-shaped cloud, colored in hues of fire-reds and cool greens, forms a *grouse* face on the oil drums, then snakes around the gallery walls, finally pooling in the middle of the front glass wall. Ellis has filled in the darkest green with metallic gold wall enamel, which in its tight, repeated lines is the “muscle” of the painting. Ellis explains, “It's at once a reference to beginning and end, beautiful rolling clouds at sunrise and sunset, lava fields, and the animated smells of something burning in the kitchen of a Tom and Jerry cartoon.” Ellis's *tour de force* painting picks up the beat and visually completes the installation. In *Conversation*, Ellis has continued the evolution of his drum paintings, making beat not only audible, but also visible.



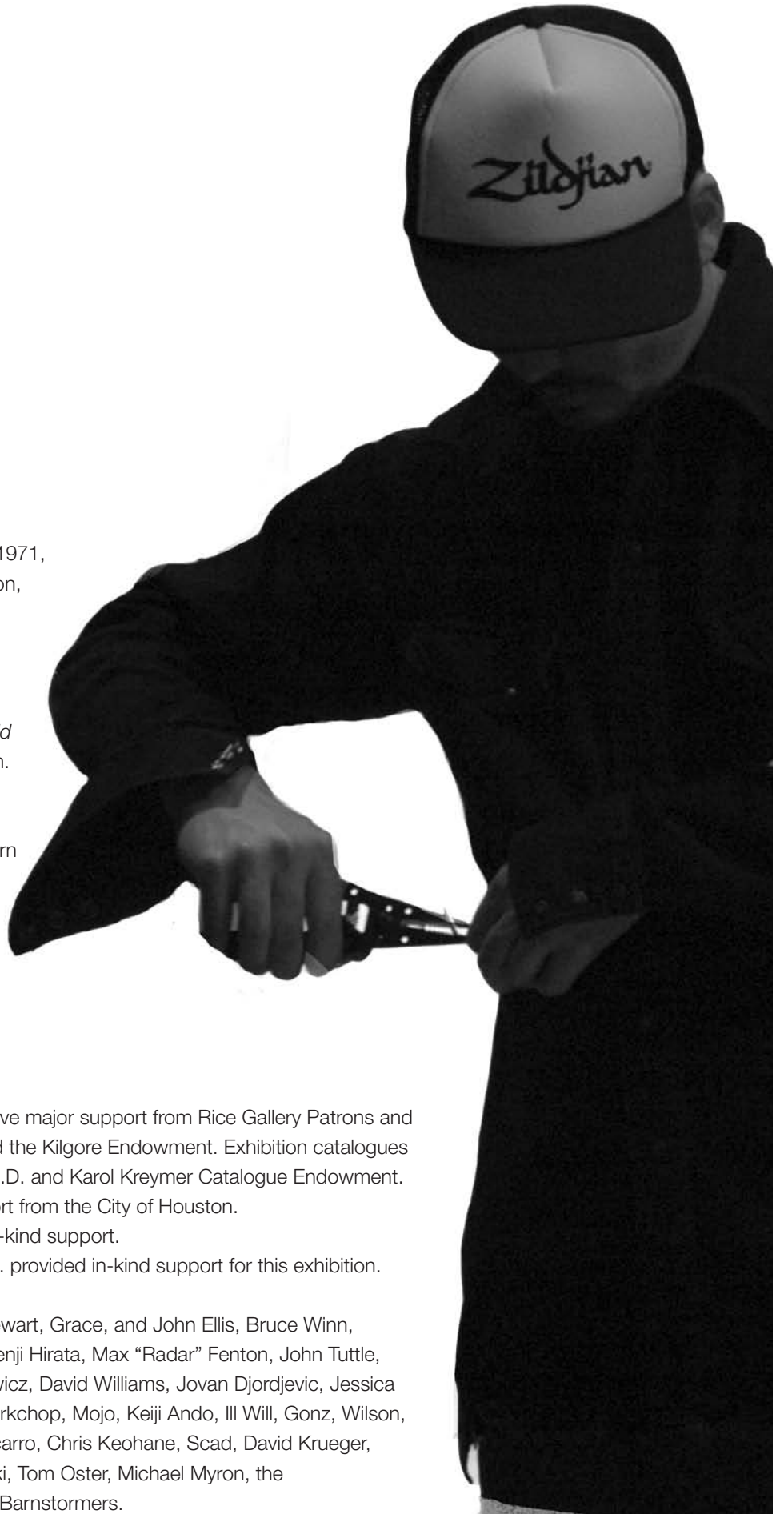
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ellis was born in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1971, and received his BFA from The Cooper Union, New York, in 1993. Recent solo exhibitions include *Orchestrion* (2005), Jessica Murray Projects, New York; *Beat Box, a Painting is a Drum* (2004), 222 Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and *Paint on Trucks in a World in Need of Love* (2002), Tidal, Osaka, Japan. His work was included in *Greater New York 2005*, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, and *Barnstormers* (2004), Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In 2004, Ellis was selected for the artists studio program at Smack Mellon Studios. David Ellis lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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