

■ INTRODUCING



Drip by Drip

Jonathan VanDyke's performances, photomontages, and installations undermine macho AbEx bluster.

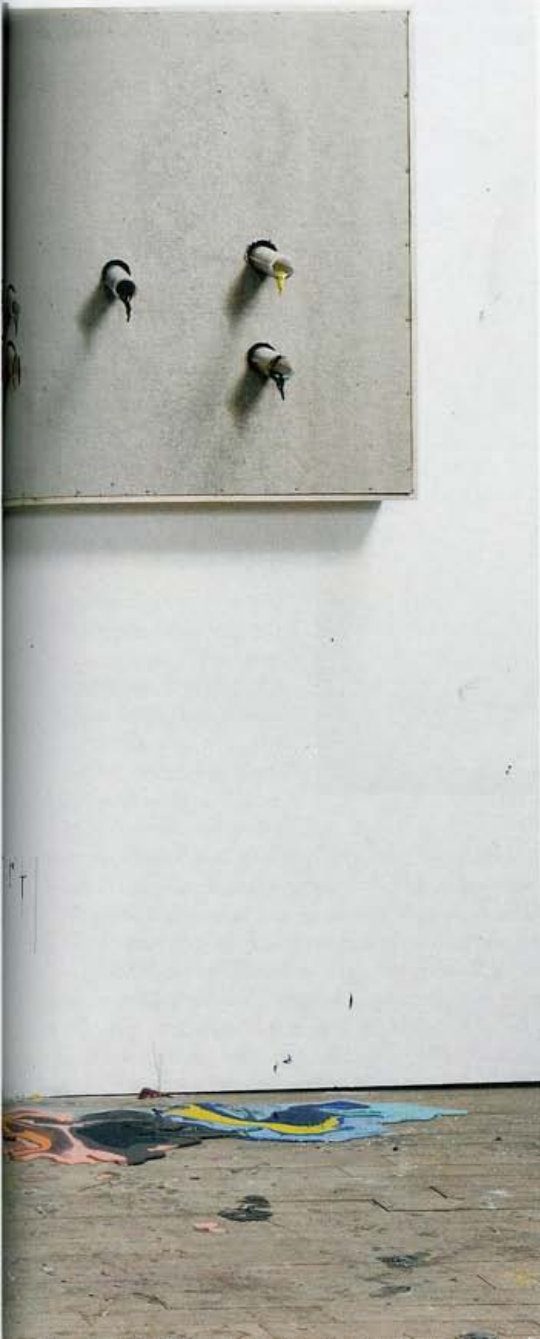
by **Joseph R. Wolin** portrait by **Brad Harris**

A PAIR OF SCULPTURAL RELIEFS hanging in Jonathan VanDyke's Brooklyn studio feature wood-framed Homasote panels the color of raw linen, from which protrude delicately tinted cast-resin pipes. They recall the aggressive canvas-and-metal constructions of Lee Bontecou, as well as the rubber tubes and translucent resin used by Eva Hesse. Like works by those artists, VanDyke's panels seem to exist somewhere between the organic and the industrial. Yet on one panel, color spills out from a pipe to form tiny stalactites, while on the other it runs down the dun surface in thin lines. And a moment's inspection reveals that the color moves, slowly dripping in various hues of acrylic paint from the pipes and onto the studio floor, puddling there in expanding and changing psychedelic slicks reminiscent of Lynda Benglis's poured latex pieces.

Animating his wall-mounted works with dripping paint, the thirty-five-year-old VanDyke underscores their correspondence—like the works of the older artists they evoke—to abject, corporeal forms and functions, from a runny nose to some sort of venereal discharge. But the drips also suggest his works' formal and thematic relationship to an art-historical lineage that goes back to "Jack the Dropper" himself, Jackson Pollock, who jump-started Abstract Expressionism with his poured skeins of paint in the late 1940s. In terms of American art, of course, that is the greatest story ever told, and VanDyke's funny literalization of it positions him as Pollock's descendant and heir, even if ironically. Yet Pollock, his colleagues, and most of his immediate followers also represent mainstream macho bluster and exclusion, and VanDyke revisits that tradition in order to revise it.

It is telling that VanDyke's panels remind one of three of the great feminist (or protofeminist) artists of the 1960s and '70s, each of whom also grappled with the legacy of the Abstract Expressionists, for he intends to cast a queer eye over the whole equivocal, intertwined history of straight-guy prerogative and artistic domination. Citing the ideas of the art historian Lane Relyea, VanDyke notes that action painting always ran the risk of being seen as decorative. "Pollock became marketed as a total macho sex symbol on the one hand, while his work became the ultimate accessory on the

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other," he explains. "I just find that whole world [of Abstract Expressionism], the painting, and the space and culture and interpretation around the painting to have a lot of juice left in it."

Such thoughts find even greater explicitness in a series of Photoshop montages VanDyke created prior to making the dripping panels. For these, he scanned art book pages illustrating classic works of midcentury male modernism and overlaid them with small images found on the Internet of naked men in various unlikely scenarios. These latter lie ambiguously between fraternity pranks and soft-core gay porn; when coupled with the artworks, a witty visual rhyming results, pointing to the overplayed, faintly ridiculous masculinity and the suppressed homoeroticism that always underlay the "heroic gesture." A man on an athletic field pouring beer down his full-frontal self sits in the center of a double-page spread of Pollock's great *Lavender Mist* in one work; the photo of a nude soccer team, their bodies painted with red and

found photo of a bare-assed skydiver in sneakers, high above some fleecy clouds, on top of a book's blank end pages, which bear a yellowed, symmetrical, Rorschach-like water stain; the image invokes Stieglitz, but also Andy Warhol and his own tongue-in-cheek response to Pollock's dribbling, the "piss paintings."

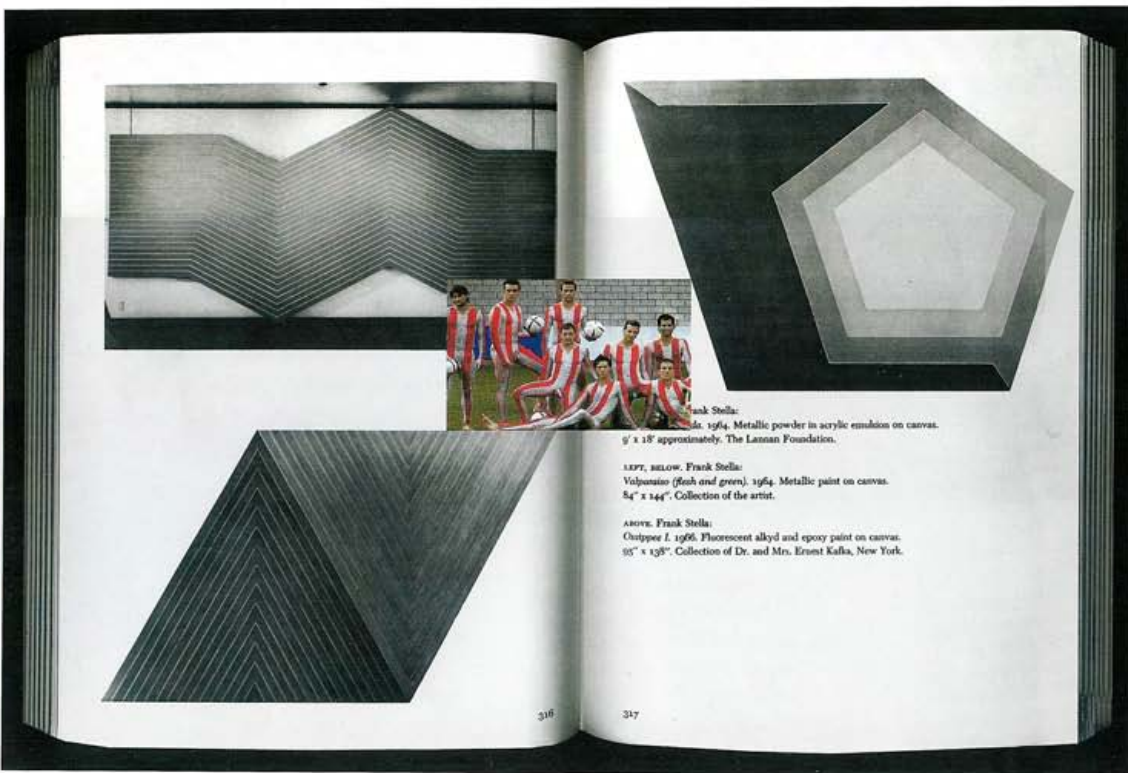
The path that led to VanDyke's recent works, however, runs not only through the library but also through the studio, and, as much as a riposte to his own historical research project, his dripping panels are a distillation of an artistic practice that began in the MFA program at Bard College, which he completed in 2004. During his second summer there, he relates, "I poured cheap leftover paint over a sculpture I couldn't solve. It was such a relief to let the piece fall apart under the flow of liquid and see what happened." That initial gesture evolved into an ongoing series of installations, often with accompanying performances, that found their most complete formulation to date in *Involuntary House* at Socrates Sculpture

Park in Queens in 2005. The roof of its freestanding, towerlike wooden structure collected rainwater, which flowed intermittently into pigment-filled buckets, rigged to slowly drip from a second storey onto trash and construction debris on the ground floor. Viewers could peer in through side windows to watch the amorphous pile of refuse grow ever more soddenly beautiful under streams and rivulets of color.

Once set in motion, the drip in these entropic, Rube Goldbergian constructions (which distantly parody formalist, Clem Greenbergian notions) becomes unpredictable, ungovernable, and, ultimately, as liquid paint eventually covers and erodes everything in its wake, destructive. "This dripping in my work," VanDyke says, "lines up with something I try to

recognize about myself, namely a desire for complete order mixed with the coexisting desire to completely make a shambles of that order. . . . In every work, I try to set up an overarching system that is ruptured." And it's a short leap to see the dripping rainbows of color cascading through his works as metaphors for gloriously transformative disruptions in social structures. "As a queer person, I think you feel at times the pressure of the overarching culture that says that there's something in you, something inseparable from the way you experience the world, that isn't quite right. Yet as you discover the incredible pleasure of your desire, you also realize that, although your queer body has been evaluated as a rupture to culture, this rupture isn't such a bad thing. I mean, bring on the rupture!" ♦

Jonathan VanDyke's work will be on view at HQ Gallery in Brooklyn this May.



PREVIOUS TWO PAGES: Jonathan VanDyke in his Brooklyn studio. Painting at left: *the More I See You, the More I*, 2009. Various materials, with paint dripping from two points, 43 x 33 x 5 in. Painting at right: *and Then We Overlapped, and Then*, 2009. Various materials, with paint dripping from five points, 43 x 33 x 5 in.

ABOVE: *flesh and green (Equivalent)*, 2008. Pigment print, 33 x 22 1/2 in.

white bands, graces illustrations of Frank Stella's metallic and fluorescent stripe paintings from the mid-1960s in another. "I was in a fraternity in college," the artist notes, "so this type of photograph of the 'guys gone wild' genre was familiar to me from firsthand experience. While I was in college I was also in the library late on many a night, poring over art books and looking for a reflection of my own unrealized fantasies. Both places, the book and the frat, became rich spaces of secret desire." Titled "Equivalents," after Alfred Stieglitz's suggestively moody pictures of clouds (a quasi-abstract precedent, perhaps, for Abstract Expressionist art's supposed engendering of emotional states), the series makes those desires humorously commensurate and public. In the most unspecifically allusive work in the series, VanDyke placed a