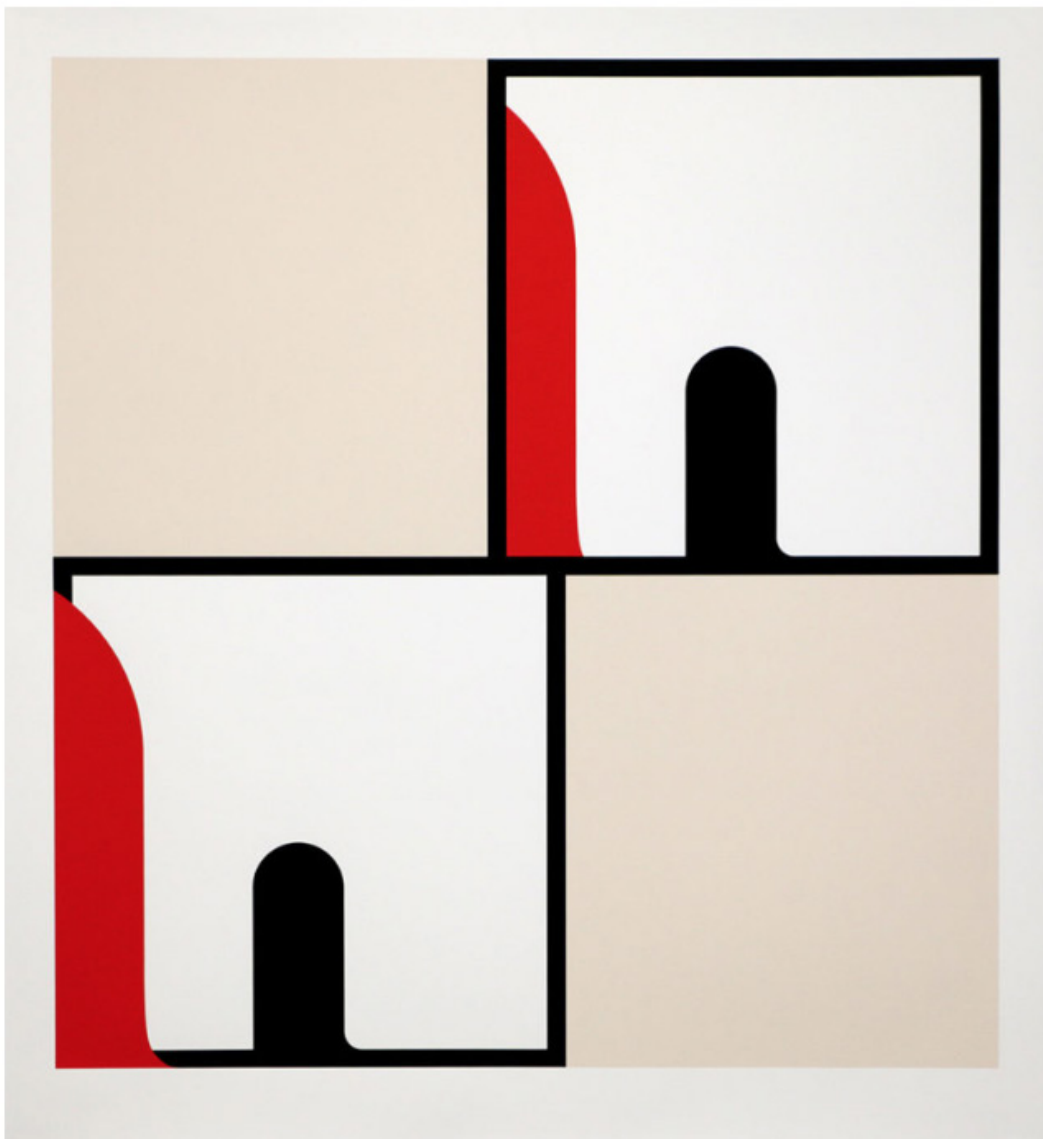


Tanya Leighton

BOMB

Portfolio by Math Bass

A poetics of form.



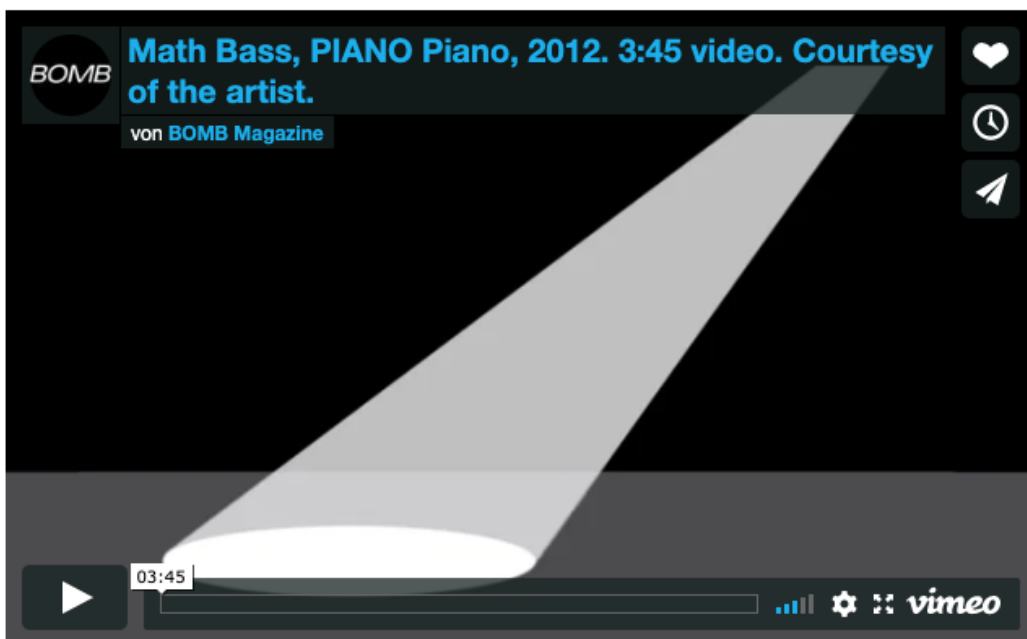
Math Bass, *Newz!*, 2017. Archival pigment print. 30 x 32 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Cirrus Gallery & Editions Ltd.

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Anne Carson writes: "Desires as round as peaches bloom in me all night, I no longer gather what falls." We might never harvest Math Bass's forms, and maybe we shouldn't; maybe conversely we let the orchard become overrun, Gothic, a place where the fruit just serves worms and curious children. Another quote exterior to me: the Log Lady says, "My log does not judge." One could say perhaps that the log does not interpret; the log does not tell histories, only stories. What is the difference, anyway? The log can't or won't tell you, for instance, if something is sufficiently ambiguous or undecidable to be considered queer.



[Math Bass, PIANO Piano, 2012. 3:45 video. Courtesy of the artist.](#) from [BOMB Magazine on Vimeo.](#)

I talk to Bass about music, and I wish I had something more elevated to say in pursuit of lyricism, but instead I start thinking about "Piano Man," which is really just a sentimental limerick (what is Bass's genre?), and why it's important to us that Billy Joel's characters are based on real people. All these pieces fit together too neatly. After all, one of my favorite performances by Bass is called *PIANO Piano* (2011). Joel grew up on Long Island, too; and no one who's from there will let you forget it. It's a song about music, and there's vision as well (the spectacle of getting wasted and screaming the words and begging your boyfriend to let you see his actual house and touch his mom's hand instead of just circling the

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Amityville Horror house, and you have to be content with seeing those creepy flies and not his mom); and it's melodramatic and composed of familiar parts but always sounds new (I usually forget one of the verses and which one I forget always changes). Joel's last new song is called "Christmas in Fallujah," and it was inspired by letters he received from the troops in Iraq. And then I think about the letters that Bass sends and receives, and whether their syntax ever coheres enough to tell you a story about failed actors and whatever a real-estate novelist is. Maybe it does. Bass's work says as much about narrative as it does about place; but what is its place, neither in Long Island nor Fallujah? Neither and both places, neither and both the intellect and the body, having a cigarette while wearing a NicoDerm patch.



Math Bass, *Newz!*, 2018. Gouache on canvas. 82 x 90 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mary Boone Gallery.

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Math Bass, *Newz!*, 2018. Gouache on canvas. 42 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mary Boone Gallery.

Susan Stewart: "Downy cheek against a beard: oh scratches // On the record, oh baby, oh measure / Oh strange balance that grips us / On this side of the world." I imagine Bass is thinking about this side of the world. I imagine there's nothing liminal about it. Why make Bass's work in-between and legible and graphic and inscrutable and stylized and illegible and ambiguous and familiar and non-narrative and flat and round as peaches? Nothing and nobody can sustain that much weight. Bass's notations are, to quote Siegfried Kracauer, "buried as if under a layer of snow," even as they present themselves to us without obfuscation, without withholding.

—William J. Simmons