

# ACCLAIM

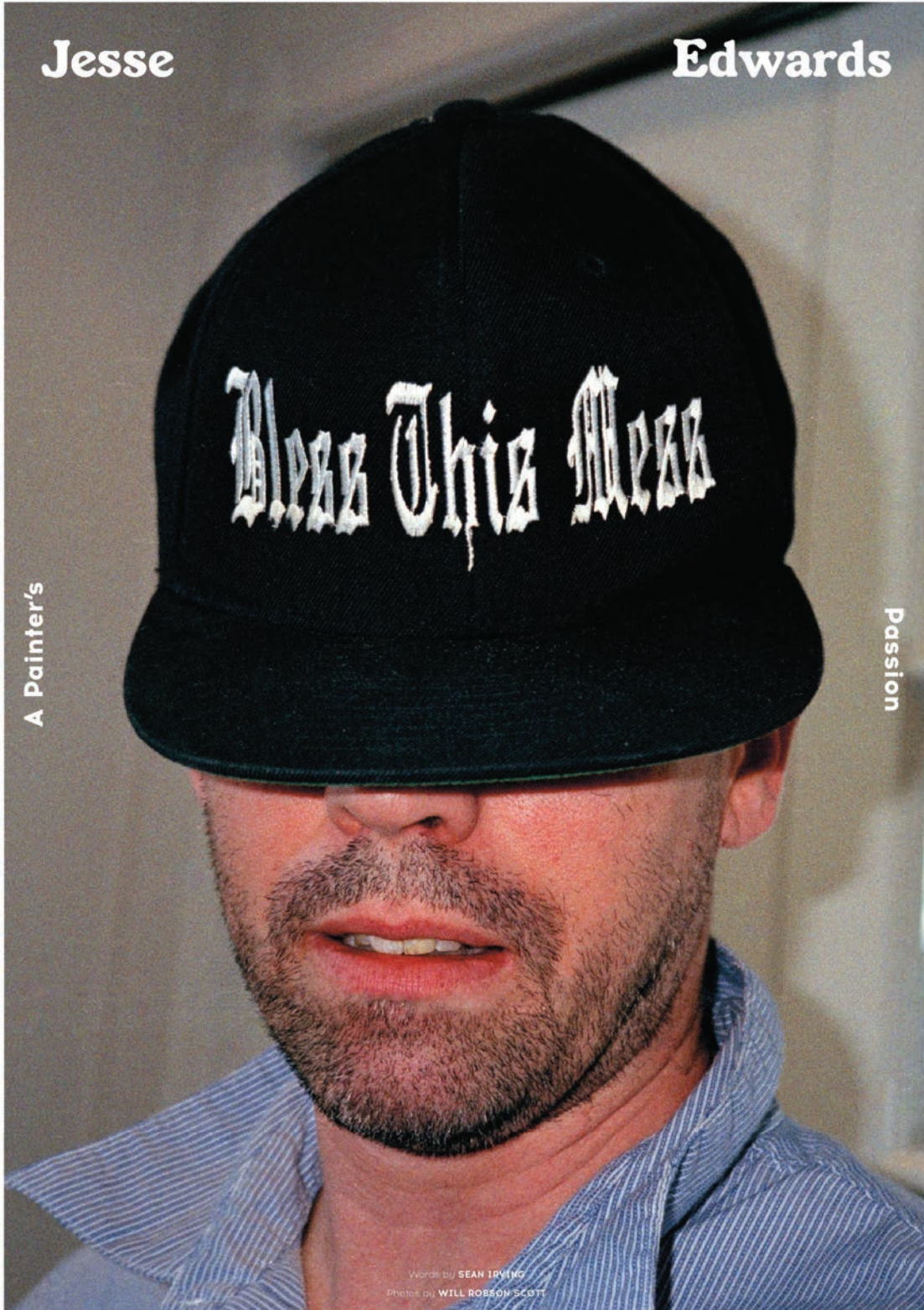
EXPLORER

Jesse

Edwards

A Painter's

Passion



Words by SEAN IRVING  
Photos by WILL ROBSON-SCOTT

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**Mastur-piece**  
2012, Oil on linen, 24 x 22 inches  
Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel, New York

I first came across Jesse Edwards via his chaotic Youtube show *Painting Passion*. Ostensibly a how-to painting series, a frenetic Edwards bounced around my screen deftly explaining complicated painting techniques in-between ruminations on the reality of street life - all while working on a still-life of crack-smoking accouterments. Intrigued by the fine artist with the swagger and diction of a veteran graffiti writer, I did some digging. Sure enough, alongside his identity as a trained artist Edwards was also a founding member of the notorious BTM crew. Since those early days, Edwards has made waves in the gallery scene with his classic treatments of contemporary urban scenes. Violence, drug addiction and pornography are all rendered lushly in oil paints in Edwards' work. With recent representation by the covetable Vito Schnabel, and co-signs by the likes of Erik Brunetti and Chuck Close, it appears this painter's passion has paid off.



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**Hey Jesse, first up congratulations on the Vito Schnabel representation. How'd that come about?**

I met Vito through a mutual friend while I was working in the basement of the Hole gallery. Vito produced a show with David Rimanelli called *DSM-V* and exhibited two of my works. Since then things have progressed naturally.

**What was it like growing up in Seattle?**

I began spending a lot of time in the city when I started getting involved in graffiti, and during that time it was pretty much the 'Golden Age' for Seattle. There was a huge tech boom so there was a lot of money being spent in the fine art community, and the grunge movement was going on so there was a lot of national interest in Seattle. We used to hang out at the Westlake Skatepark, which is in the heart of the city, and there were numerous other places where we could legally paint graffiti. So we had a place to hang out and skate, places to paint, and we could see bands like Nirvana and Mudhoney. It was awesome, it was really cool.

**You've had a pretty interesting development as an artist, how has your career progressed so far?**

Well, the progression of my career has been a hard won success. Nothing has been easy and I have earned every bit of success through hard work.

**Did you get introduced to art via graffiti writing or the other way around?**

I've been interested in art ever since I was a child. My mother would make paintings and some of my earliest childhood memories come back to me whenever I open a tube of paint. I was introduced to graffiti art by looking out the city transit window and seeing a number of artists painting in a garage in Seattle. I must have been 14 years old at the time.

**How have those experiences as a writer informed the work that you produce now?**

Those experiences as a graffiti writer have definitely helped shape my practice. Out on the streets it's the law of the jungle, to have your work shown it needs to be stronger than the next man's to dominate the space. I really work hard on my oil paintings so that my work can be shown in the galleries for its quality.

**You were an early member of BTM, a graffiti crew notorious for the scale of damage that they produce. How do you balance that identity with your role as a fine artist?**

I just make art. My art isn't confined to a canvas, or a ceramic, or a wall.

**You're engaging with a lot of art history, and a very traditional means of painting. How do you re-contextualise that for a modern audience?**

I'm just using the skills that traditionally defined an artist. I like the idea of using traditional skills and mediums to express myself; we all have something unique to say and



it's easier to relay a message when people recognise your means of expression. Everybody can understand what I'm saying and I'm not speaking with words as much as I am with images. Oil painting is a universal language. If I can draw a picture and show it to somebody, it doesn't matter what nationality or race they are, they will understand what I'm saying. That's the beauty and power of what I do. I use objects I see and place them into my compositions. I paint things that are of some significance to me. It's natural for me to do things this way because it makes sense.

**A lot of your work seems to engage with inner city urban life, what draws you to that imagery?**

Well I have lived in the city since I was 18 years old. I'm currently 36, so that's half of my life. I spent the majority of that time living in low-income housing, where you really see the low points of humanity. I also like rap music and I wanted to make paintings about what they rap about – which is drugs, sex and violence.

**Were you exposed to a lot of the cultures that you're painting now, as far as drugs and crime go? Are the images biographical?**

Some of them are very autobiographical – they represent something that was in my life, but they're not necessarily a self-portrait. My images tend to be very relevant to the experiences that I've had, or my friends have had, and the things that I've seen.

**Can you tell us about your landscape paintings? What is it about those scenes that you are drawn to?**

I love to do landscape painting. A lot of it has to do with just getting out in the sun and trying to make something that's beautiful. A lot of the images I am drawn to are of



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**Mickey Mouse in Fantasia (Dream)**  
2014, Under and over glazes on stoneware, 11 x 10 x 2 inches  
Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel, New York.



**"Out on the streets it's the law of the jungle, to have your work shown it needs to be stronger than the next man's"**

**Two Women Exploring Each Other's Bodies (Avenues)**  
2014, Under and over glazes on stoneware, 18 x 19 x 2 inches  
Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel, New York.





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Fireworks & Flowers

2012, Oil on linen, 72 x 60 inches

Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnobel, New York

water and scenes with a lot of depth. It is very satisfying to make a painting and create an effect that transcends the medium.

**How does that approach differ when you're working on your still-life paintings?**

I'm not sure that it differs. A lot of times I'll apply techniques from landscape painting in my still-lives and vice versa. I will frequently use an aerial perspective in my still-life paintings, which is basically the diffusion of lines in objects that are not in the focus, to create an sense of depth. In landscapes, I often find an object I like and will focus on that and treat it almost as a still-life. They're all done basically with the same skill-set but I can make a more poignant statement with still-lives. But everything has its own unique qualities. I invented my own easel that I use for landscape paintings because it is such an endeavor to paint landscapes from life.

**You also work with ceramics and sculptural objects, what led you to branch out into three-dimensional representations?**

I do work in ceramics. My last show at Vito Schnobel's was all new ceramic paintings. I was first introduced to a ceramic artist named Charles Kraft by a critic for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Regina Hackett. I was fascinated by what he was doing. So through the inter-webs, I found him and I went over to his studio and he very kindly taught me his craft.

**Can you talk us through the cellphones and televisions that you've been making?**

I first started making some things like ceramic box trucks that I would paint glazed graffiti on the side of. I did some plates too, which I painted nudes onto. I made some spraycans. I love the spraycans, I still make those. But I started to get more interested in the painting aspect than the sculptural aspect so I started to think about what we look at regularly as a form of entertainment. That is where I came up with the idea for the televisions and the cellphones. I like the televisions because they hang on the wall like paintings. Painting is taken more seriously as a form of fine art than ceramics, so I like the idea of putting ceramic on the same level as painting. I paint the televisions and the cell phones in the same manner that I would an oil painting, with under-

painting and over-glazing techniques. It's exciting to fire the works but it's also nerve-racking because every time you fire it you're risking a potential breakage.

**You studied oil painting at the Gage Academy of art, how did you find learning in an art institution?**

I started at Cornish College of the Arts. I was enrolled there for one semester upon which I was removed because of my outspoken contempt of an instructor in sculpture class. I paid for my own schooling and the instructors were not up to the level of artistic accomplishment that I would expect from what I believed to be a prestigious institution. After leaving Cornish, I applied for a scholarship to what was then called the Seattle Academy of Realist Art [now called the Gage Academy of Art]. I was accepted and I enrolled in the Atelier program. I pursued the craft of painting in the traditional manner with figure models and still-lives on and off for about three years. I really learned a lot in the Atelier program because it was a hands-on learning experience where the instructor would come in once a week and introduce us to artists and share critiques. This was the opposite of Cornish's contemporary curriculum - the instructors were not able to teach me the traditional values that I had learned to respect and appreciate. I was only interested in learning how to oil paint and the rest of the curriculum was just information that I was not interested in. Toward the end of my time at the Seattle Academy, I began to sell my oil paintings out of the studio through a local gallery.

**Do you feel a part of the fine art community?**

Somewhat. I feel more like I am a cowboy out here with my style.

**Who's your audience?**

I heard it said once that a conductor must turn his back on an audience to conduct an orchestra.

**What are you working on at the moment? What's coming up for you?**

Currently I am working on a still-life of an eight ball pipe, a cube of marijuana, a lighter, and a small bottle of Visine. This is placed on a tree stump that I stole from a bodega. I definitely have a large body of work that's ready to be exhibited, and I am finalising the dates of my next show. I'm very proud of the number of the works that I have been creating lately.



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**"Oil painting  
is a universal  
language"**



**Still Life with Red Skate Board**  
2012, Oil on linen, 32 x 34 inches  
Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel, New York