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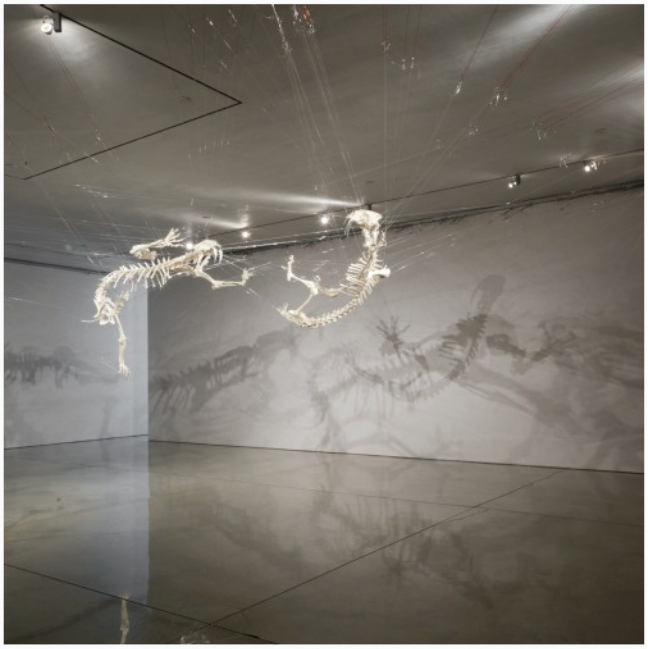

E.V. Day. CatFight (Installation view). Mary Boone Gallery. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

E.V. Day interview: 'I stiffened 200 thongs to look like jet fighters and strung them in the atrium of Philip Morris's. That would not have happened in the 70s.'

Best-known for her 3D installations, artist E.V. Day talks about using Barbie dolls, ripped clothing, skulls, monofilament and light to explore sexuality and feminism, and why she's glad the humour shows in her work

E.V. Day: Semi-Feral
Mary Boone Gallery, New York
5 September – 25 October 2014
and
Salomon Contemporary, New York

18 October – 20 December 2014

by JILL SPALDING

E.V. Day is a New York-based artist who works with fibreglass, monofilament, ripped clothing, and black light to skew social stereotypes of gender and power, explode the thin veneer between primal savagery and popular culture, and inject humour into the feminist agenda. Day's small investigations with beeswax, wrapped resin and manipulated cyanotypes are widely collected, but she is best known for site-specific installations involving disassembled elements – hundreds of thongs, eviscerated haute couture – that radiate out cosmic fields of sexualised energy in gravity-defying suspension. On the occasion of her New York solo show Semi-Feral, the artist talks to Jill Spalding about her evolution and process.

Jill Spalding: You were born in New York, schooled in New England, knew you wanted to be an artist, but chose a college in Massachusetts that offered an alternative liberal arts programme?

E.V. Day: I went to Hampshire College so I could concentrate on art and also have a wide variety of academics to study. The arts programme there at the time was surprisingly conventional. The art classes were based on observation from life and centred around painting and drawing nude models. After my third year, though I developed skill in painting nudes and still lives, I knew I was not going to be paid to do it after graduating.

JS: So you took a year off and went back to New York, found a sublet in the meatpacking district, and a job selling jewellery?

E.V.D: To support myself while I interned at a great photo gallery, Marcuse Pfeifer, in Soho.

JS: What brought you to sculpture?

E.V.D: I had decided to give painting one more shot to figure out what my end goal was. So I enrolled in the New York Studio School on 8th Street, known for a rigorous curriculum of exclusively painting and drawing from life. I confirmed I was decent, but had no content. At the same time, I'd been taking photos of the city, and a friend with a darkroom taught me how to develop black and white prints. I loved the mechanical aspect of my camera, the science laboratory atmosphere of the dark room, and the anticipation of how the images would turn out. I became obsessed with photographing construction sites in the East Village. While I was drawing figures for hour upon hour, I started to fantasise about becoming a construction worker. The idea of placing a brick and cementing it into place seemed wildly satisfying. The brick, the empirical object, its meaning is imbedded in its material which comes with a story and associations, so you are already halfway done with the piece. With a few more twists, a story can take

shape. At that point, painting felt false to me. It was 1989, post-modernism NYC, and painting was only a superficial illusion coupled with the heavy baggage of male elitism. I couldn't make or find meaning in it.

JS: So you went back to Hampshire?

E.V.D: They had added a sculpture course, so I decided to do my thesis in 3D. The only thing I knew how to build was canvas-stretchers, so I started picking up wood scraps and literally building off my drawings. I felt free to finger through all the architecture books where I found Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l)au and Frank Gehry – I wrote a term paper psychologically analysing Gehry's famous Santa Monica cottage home. I tapped into my passion by immersing myself in studying deconstructivist architecture, constructivist sculpture and relief, and various aesthetics of speed of the Italian futurists.

JS: You then headed out to Los Angeles for a couple of years.

E.V.D: LA still feels like home, a home that I dream of. I was working for the artist Peter Shelton, who had a beautiful home/studio just north of Malibu. I loved my daily two-hour round-trip drive through the canyons and along Pacific Coast Highway from Silver Lake. He had this large studio and a crew of great guys, and he was working with fibreglass – glassing, as they say in the surfboard shop. I learned so much, mostly doing fibreglass.

JS: Which you have worked with ever since?

E.V.D: Until very recently. I stopped because of the toxicity. It's a wonder material and has the immediacy other two-part resins don't have. The downside is that when you take your respirator off, it smells like Eva Hesse's brain tumour. But I still miss it.

JS: You went on to get your Master of Fine Arts in sculpture at Yale University School of Art.

E.V.D: A rough ride!

JS: You've said that when you graduated you didn't feel ready for more than group shows, but at the Whitney Biennial 2000 you skyrocketed to fame with Bombshell, a suspended installation that reproduced the white halter-dress Marilyn Monroe famously wore in [the 1955 film] The Seven Year Itch, but torn completely to pieces – crepe, tulle, lining, all of it – and every element strung out across the atrium on hundreds of feet of heavy-duty fishing line and turnbuckles. Nobody who saw it will ever forget it. Was that work the game changer for you?

E.V.D: It was a game changer altogether. It pierced the walls, penetrated the Breuer building where the

Whitney Museum of American Art was then based]. It was a memorial to how things have changed: freedoms for women, including drag queens. There was no escaping it.

JS: That was not the first dress you ripped apart. A year before you made Black Bombshell, and then, also in 2000, Transporter, deconstructing a silver sequin dress designed by your friend, the fashion designer Stephen Sprouse. Were these all part of the same investigation?

E.V.D: They were similar in process but different in approach. Marilyn's dress I had rebuilt in 200% scale, larger than life, and it held the place of the most well-known dress in American pop culture. The Sprouse dress just arrived as a gift from Stephen in a zip-lock sandwich bag – as I was pulling it out, the silver sequins shimmered like TV static or the Transporter in Star Trek, when the travellers break up into bits of sparkling light. So I suspended it between two polished mirror steel discs to create an infinity tube that suggested a travel portal. Stephen and I talked a lot about science fiction together and visualising future environments and instantaneous travel, and I wanted to capture that that science fiction luminescence.

JS: You never stopped using light. In 2001, you worked it into Stealth, a glow-piece for the Whitney that replicated a stealth bomber, exactly to scale. It seemed to be about cloaking and instilling fear, and how women have to operate stealthily in a masculine world.

E.V.D: It's a word and a way – stealth. One day a critic came to visit my studio while I was preparing my next exhibition and he said: "Well, what are you going to do?" I said I wanted to put my Stealth Bomber in one of the two rooms of the gallery and he snickered and said something like: "Well, good luck!" We were literally sitting inside the suspended sculpture, but the daylight made the monofilaments translucent and hard to read the outline of the bomber. A gallerist took it all the way over to Art Basel in Switzerland, and well, yes, no one could see it in that context either! I used black light to illuminate the stealth piece in the Intergalactic Installations exhibition I did with Jeffrey Deitch in Miami. The green line glowed and took on the look of an old school computer rendering, while the clear suspension vertical lines remained pretty clear, less visible. It looks like the Stealth Bomber is just hovering in its garage.

JS: It was featured in several iterations of your Galaxy shows. As I remember, there was quite a reaction to it.

E.V.D: When boys hear that a female made this thing/sculpture, they are shocked. It's fun! But mostly, Stealth is a verb, adjective and noun that women have to incorporate into their social politics and behaviour when taking on a job traditionally held by men. It is not stealthy of me to reveal this survival tactic, but I don't think men are aware of it anyhow.

JS: I saw that show in Miami – the 3D drawings in black light were very cool. So was the

construction titled Black Hole. Were you addressing the same concerns with that work?

E.V.D: In a way. Black Holes are female signage, and in astrophysics are the Vagina dentata of outerspace. The consequences of each are the dangers of being sucked into the vortex or the maw, devoured, swallowed and then shredded into tiny bits. It's poetic.

JS: Another of your explorations into assumed feminine stereotypes has involved Barbie dolls. You are not the first artist to question their image of "ideal woman", but you have addressed it very differently, wrapping them in resin, like latter-day mummies, with only their eyes showing – hardly a reference to Islam, given when you first created them.

E.V.D: True, but by the early 2000's Burka Barbie was a regular topic of discussion in the studio. Barbie is an action figure and her superpowers are whatever you need to impose upon her to feel powerful at any given time, be it a rock star, a nurse, or an art collector, and always with a super-model physique. By mummifying her, I'm concealing her, creating a curiosity. Is she *really* in there? It raises questions about why she's so powerful and problematic.

Cultures have always rendered their ideal likenesses in extremes. Take the Venus of Willendorf. She could be considered the action figure of fertility. She fits in the palm of your hand and she's built with features more abundant than needed to survive in her day. Barbie seems to be an analogue in our contemporary culture, but there's a difference because now we actually have the tools (plastic surgery) to reshape our real bodies into the idealised Barbie action figure. And the result – unlike the ancient fertility figures – is completely dissociated from notions of survival, fecundity, eternal life. It's one thing to embrace the ideal, and another thing entirely to recreate oneself in its image. The conflict I have with Barbie is that her proportions are not extreme *enough*. Barbie is attainable, whereas if her features were as extreme as the Venus of Willendorf, it's doubtful anyone would alter herself to look like her.

JS: In 2002, you upped the volume with the three seven-feet-tall Sanguine Sisters, made for the Barbican; costumed in red sequins, their flying limbs and bursting aortas were swirled into blazing red energy zones. Were they another skewed aspect of the feminine ideal?

E.V.D: The red was blood, of course, and fire, and at the same time the ultimate party dress. Who would wear such dresses? And where? Only Drag Queens! To the Oscars!

JS: How much of yourself do you put into these – Marilyn, the Brides, the girlie drag queens – are they all in some sense self-portraits?

E.V.D: Of course.

JS: I find it interesting that you don't seem antagonistic to benign exploitation. You have said you have nothing against those fulsome Playboy centrefolds, for example. Do you see the overt depiction of female sexuality as the power equivalent to a female superhero? Interestingly, you seem to have focused in more on the male stereotyped superhero, Spider-Man, for one, than on, say, Wonder Woman.

E.V.D: I like that Spider-Man can shoot silk threads to propel him through the city, and his webs look like fishnet stockings. I like thinking about a fishnet stocking as female superpower. So when he shoots his silk fishnet stocking, it's only natural for him to wear stilettos. I'm showing Spidey's feminine side in Spidey/Striptease (2008) and I think he seems more powerful.

JS: Deitch has said of your work that it brings back the feminist dialogue from the 70s. Is that how you see it? Or is yours a new dialogue, taken from elsewhere and going somewhere different?

E.V.D: I am indebted to women from the previous political era and grateful I didn't have to burn my bra to have certain freedoms now. I like to acknowledge feminist works, because I see power, fight and emotion inside. I stretched and stiffened 200 thongs to look like jet fighters and strung them into flight patterns in the atrium of Philip Morris's HQ on Park Avenue. That would not have happened in the 70s.

JS: You kept coming back to the idea of suspension and exploding, stringing out a flotsam of clothing on yards, sometimes miles, of fishing line. Bride Fight (2006) took you to a fiercer place with emptied out avatars of two women reduced to insane fury by their antagonism – two eviscerated bridal dresses that went at each other for months in the lobby gallery of Lever House. The installation was terrifying but at the same time hilarious – every detail has stayed with me – one glove clutched a great chunk of blond hair, another was ripping apart a pearl necklace. I remember putting my hand to the pearls I was wearing that day, in anxious reaction, and understanding for the first time the thin line between terror and laughter. Do you strive for that duality of emotion?

E.V.D: Not deliberately, but I'm glad the humour shows through the abstraction. Humour needs its opposite to be activated – the irony of the sad clown. I have an awkward habit of laughing at inappropriate times.

JS: Continuing the Exploding Couture series, you eviscerated an Hervé Leger "bandage dress" and a Chanel suit. Did each involve a different investigation? Or was it more about the variations in form and abstraction that the different garments provided?

E.V.D: Each has its own, different premise. The bandage dress has great visual associations of mummification, bondage, or the bandaging after full body liposuction. I used those ideas and forms in the

2008 Bandage/Bondage piece for the Whitney Art Party. Chanel/Shazam is a suspended sculpture and also a photo diptych that was inspired by my interest in freezing the moment when a plain-clothed civilian transforms into a superhero. Both pieces are my version of the revolving door or phone booth as a vehicle for, essentially, a wardrobe change. In the Chanel/Shazam diptych, Kembra Pfahler is depicted as a lady-who-lunches wearing a Chanel power suit. Then she transforms into a superhero, the rock'n'roll performance artist Karen Black, of the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black.

JS: You're not the only artist to have used fishing line to fly work into space – I'm thinking of Cai Guo-Qiang and the UK artist Cornelia Parker – but you were certainly among the first. When did you first string a work out on monofilament, and how have you made it your own?

E.V.D: In graduate school in the mid-90s, I started deconstructing surfers' wetsuits, suspending them in frames. For me, monofilament fishing line with its translucency can become a trail of light that marks a trajectory in space. I want it to convey the speed of light. They are the contrails of the vehicle that just passed, they are the residual evidence of motion.

JS: You also kept on wrapping objects – there was a skull ribboned with resin at Salomon Contemporary. How does wrapping serve your investigation?

E.V.D: The tension on the twine is essential, and the pressure or pain of bondage is suggested. Wrapping Barbie is a bit of a double entendre – fetishising a fetish. And mummifying is a gesture of preservation for the afterlife, but the sabre-tooth skull and the Barbie are already well-preserved. The compression of tightly wrapping lines is also about freezing a moment in time – similar to my suspended stop-action sculptures, but from an opposing spatial/energetic approach.

JS: You are thought of as a sculptor, but you would prefer to be called a 3D artist. You say that images actually came to you in 3D, and describe your sculpture as "futurist abstract paintings in three dimensions".

E.V.D: "Sculptor" is a catch-all description for any artist who works in 3D, and equally as vague is the title of "installation artist". I actually can sculpt and I love to do it, but other than the current show at Salomon Contemporary, I don't get to do it so often. Generally, I'm looking to explore or resolve ideas in spatial terms, not singular monumental-style solid objects. My work is more about movement through space and what it looks like when you stop it for a split second. And ghosts, and turbulence and weather – the g-force of history that you can't reason with.

JS: Sounds like Alice Aycock.

E.V.D: Actually, we had a two-person show a couple of years ago at Salomon Contemporary [Alice Aycock: Twist of Fate and E.V. Day: Butterfly, 2011]. It was a funny coincidence, because the reason I'd gone to Yale was that she was teaching there – tragically, when I got there, she had just left.

JS: You sometimes work with sound; for one work, in a boiler room, the purring of a cat – your cat, I believe? – intensified until it sounded like a gang of motorcycles. You did the same for a more recent work called SNAP! which knotted webs of red climbing rope around the black and red elements of Philip Johnson's "Da Monsta" building, part of his Glass House. What does sound add?

E.V.D: To me, the sound and vibration of cat purring is a version of sublime comfort. When the same purring sound is cranked up loud, it sounds like Nascar [National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing] or a gang of motorcycles. I wanted to anthropomorphise Johnson's Da Monsta building a little further … to transform it into a sleeping creature that might wake up at any moment. The sound made the floor vibrate, too.

JS: Do you wait for a commission in order to undertake a large work? I'm thinking of installations such as Divas Ascending, which you started in 2009, where you strung out 14 costumes exploded from ones New York City Opera had retired. It was a flying extravaganza, so well received that it travelled to several cities, and may keep on travelling!

E.V.D: That work came out of City Opera's invitation to work with its materials and staff and its space. I couldn't have imagined working with opera, but as the project developed, it made sense. I do like to work site specifically in general – the meaning of the materials and the space inform the subject. That was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I learned so much about the history of opera, sets and stagecraft, how garments are constructed, and the names of so many women in operas who die dramatic deaths.

JS: I'm always interested in process. When you get an idea for a new work, do you begin with a drawing?

E.V.D: Not as a rule. Often experimenting with a new material leads me to the next step, but it's not the same with every piece. I make sketches and gestures and I do a lot of research. Sometimes I'll start assembling materials for a new piece and it starts to feel so familiar that I become convinced it has been done already. So I scour the internet, searching for, say, "exploded opera costumes", and I still can't believe I can't find an image of someone else's. But as the piece develops and new things start to happen, then it becomes most exciting.

JS: You must give a great deal of time to gathering materials. Do they come from the street, thrift stores, dollar stores? I'm told you have stacks of clear storage boxes marked thongs, garter belts,

gloves, or whatever.

E.V.D: I keep a lot of inspiration materials in storage bins and in folders on my computer. Not so much from off the street, though I have seen more than one abandoned thong on the street! I pick up a lot of things on my travels. The dresses for Bride Fight came from a Junior League thrift store in North Carolina.

JS: You have to work with a team for the big installations. Is it large one? Do you hire on a need basis, or do you maintain a core crew?

E.V.D: Currently, I have a studio manager and we hire others for skills needed on a project by project basis.

JS: That's it? I imagined you working with all sorts of people around you.

E.V.D: Oh no, I'm an introvert. I need uninterrupted solo studio time to start new work, and once the project is hatched and more people come in, then I become more of a conductor, using the other side of my brain.

JS: How much do you do on the computer?

E.V.D: I used a 3D printer for my Pollinator sculptures, where the actual print, or object that comes out of the machine is then nickel-plated. The computer drawings for the 3D printer are in wire frame and look like fishnet stockings. I have taken those drawings and made etchings with them from different views of flowers. It is like drawing with fishnet stockings as the tool.

JS: You've often worked with photography. An important part of the 2012 installation you prepared while artist in residence in Monet's garden at Giverny, of all magical places, involved digitally manipulated photographs of the Pfahler placed at strategic parts of the replicated garden. Why photographs – as distinct from video, say, or stringing deconstructed renditions of pink punked-up dolls across the bridge and the foliage?

E.V.D: Standing on the green bridge, looking out over Monet's water lily pond, you can imagine, it is like being in a living Hallmark card. The view is so familiar that it looks fake and, like an empty stage, incomplete. The surface of the pond water was so black and glassy, it reminded me of Pfahler's shiny patent leather boots. I was thinking that if she were standing out in the water, painted the same pink as the water lily blossoms, she would appear as a natural element of the landscape. Her reflection would be upside down and perfectly clear. The glamour and horror. This idea, for me, needed to be a still photograph, an iconic portrait where she is embedded in Monet's impressionistic muse. She looks in the

pictures as if she is of it and lives it. It's a bit of a miracle that we pulled this off.

JS: Then you developed the show at The Hole gallery on the Bowery, New York, which was another event all together!

E.V.D: We created a replica of the Giverny garden landscape with living plants – I mean rhododendron and azalea bushes, loaded with spring blooms such as daffodils, with the smell of the hyacinth, grass, turf. There were gravel paths that made the same crunching sound as the paths at Giverny, and we had the pond, the bridge. The images were blown up really big and hung around the walls so you could imagine Pfahler in situ. The opening at The Hole was in early spring and so it was full-on spring inside. People loved it, the gallery hosted readings, artists did easel paintings as they would *en plein air*, in a real landscape. Pfahler and I did another photoshoot for Playboy magazine in the space. [The fashion designer] Rick Owens shot his season's look-book in it. The recreated garden actually made me feel nostalgic.

JS: Which brings us to Semi-Feral, represented in two galleries in the same month; one part at the Mary Boone gallery uptown, which closed on 25 October, and the other showing until 20 December at Salomon Contemporary, downtown. At Mary Boone you exhibited three works; the smaller room held two pristine examples of past work: Bridal Supernova (2006), one of the Exploding Couture series, which looks at first glance like a lotus blossom transforming into a cumulus cloud, and Portable CatFight(2007), which encloses two cats, strung out from actual skeletons, that circle each other in mid-air with claws and fangs bared. Commanding the large room, literally wall to wall, CatFight (2011-14) ups the voltage with two female sabretooth tiger skeletons, reproduced from actual bones, going at each other tooth and nail. Just installing it must have been daunting!

E.V.D: Mary Boone's installation staff were fantastic. We had about 15 people and installed it in two days.

JS: Like the clothing, the skeletons have been deconstructed and drawn out on monofilament, but did they present a different challenge?

E.V.D: CatFight is my first gravity-based installation – the weight of the sculpture creates the tension of the overall spatial drawing. For my previous suspension pieces, I tethered lines from ceiling to floor to create the tension piece, but for CatFight I added floor-tethers, which make it extra exciting because you can walk under and through it. I had wanted to do the piece for a while, but it needed a specific kind of space and venue so when the invitation and commission came from Artpace, in San Antonio, during my residency there, I put those skeleton replicas on speed dial! Reconfiguring it for the exhibition at Mary Boone energised it in a really unexpected way. It took on a more forceful lateral tension, which was entirely new, and opened a new dimension for me to consider in future site installations.

JS: The sabre-tooths seem at the same time to float above and alongside the viewers. They would have held their own easily in the vast Boone gallery in West Chelsea. What determined the choice of the smaller uptown space?

E.V.D: For one thing, only the uptown gallery was available for autumn 2014. But I think the more conventional environment of the Fifth Avenue space set off perfectly the intensity of the installation. The sense of compression was powerful. The idea of semi-feral – an animal that does not live naturally in a domestic environment – was even more pronounced, and more evident in that space. We were able to get really crisp and layered shadows on the walls, and the super high-gloss floor was like a mirror. It looked as if the cats were in the clouds, and the effect was all-enveloping.

JS: What are you after with these fight-to-the death works? And how do the giant sabre-tooths move the dialogue along from Portable CatFight? Is it a question of dimension, or have you added a new element to the ballet of aggression and attraction?

E.V.D: The PortableCatFight is the muse, and let's say the "domestic" version of CatFight. Sabre-tooth cats are the most iconic and most ferocious, with their huge front paws and fangs.

JS: Which brings us to the second half of the exhibition, now on at Salomon Contemporary, which is part overview and part continuation of key aspects of your work. There is a series of skulls in profile, mostly coated with beeswax, one with the metallic paint used on traffic signs, another built from silver leaf, a third wrapped like a mummy, and others vividly coloured – ruby, blue – their glamour and mystery belied by the ferocity of their tusks.

E.V.D: Sabre-toothed cat skulls are various portraits of Semi-Feral. One is carved along the seam lines of the cranium on one side or hemisphere and coated with highly reflective paint. The carved half of the skull looks wild and complicated, half skull, half feral. This seems analogous to what many artists may feel themselves when their art is on display in the white box of a commercial gallery.

JS: There is a fiery sculpture of tongues, red and rubbery – angry or naughty?

E.V.D: Naughty. They are chained to each other, and salivating.

JS: There's a lithe one of fibreglass lingerie stretched out by a thong,titled The Bride Strip Dragster?

E.V.D: The dragster here is autonomous, yet in bridal costume, aerospace vernacular for supersonic capabilities. The tulle of the bridal thong becomes the shock wave contrail [vapour trail] representing

speed and agility. The GPS pearl in the crotch steers the thong on its autonomous mission as a bride with a guide of its own. This is a single edition in a "fleet" of five, representing the pack mentality of the bridal party.

JS: What about the two spitting kittens – one silver, one gold – placed on brackets for pedestals.

E.V.D: The mummified kittens are reproduction cat skeletons, similar to my mummified Barbies. They are a cross between a mummified cat and the Egyptian statuary of the cat that Egyptians would be buried with for good luck and safe travels to the afterlife. My kitties here – their mouths are open, maybe meowing or hissing, wrapped in beeswax and glitter.

JS: James Salomon thinks the work presents collectively as an autobiography of sorts; "E.V. herself is semi-feral, impenetrable and untamed." [She laughs] The shows-stoppers here are four large cyanotypes – light-reflecting digital photographs on aluminium – of Portable CatFight. Cyanotype-printing is a technique you have used before and will be showing again in November at the Armory Print Fair. Have you taken to it because of the light factor that takes two dimensions into three?

E.V.D: I love the format of the blueprint. It represents the master plan, the instructions from which to build. Cyanotyping is the original process used to make copies. A liquid formula (which may have included cyanide) is brushed on to paper and when UV light passes through a transparency with an image over it, the chemistry on the paper turns blue. The shades of blue on my aluminium ones approximate variations of cyanotype colours and then also refer to cyan, the blue digital printer ink. The reflection of light from the aluminium alludes to the sunlight used to make cyanotypes and also the metal of the CatFight cage. I wanted the shadow on the wall of the piece to be the subject of the prints, like a ghost, a residual energy, an after-image of a kind of traumatic tangle, but like when the pain starts to leave and the medicine takes effect. My process can be rigid with many rules, but all in the service of getting that quality of zero-gravity, floating in the moment of release.

JS: After you have come off such an active year, do I dare ask what's next?

E.V.D: It's not firmed up yet, but I can say that it's a very large installation in a big public space …

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