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Via degli Specchi, 20
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Jonathan VanDyke: How to Operate in a Dark Room
September 27–November 30, 2019

Dear Viewer:

I am in the studio, preparing this show. Around me are hundreds of pieces of painted and stained textiles, stacked and gathered on tables. You will find small shapes, marked with intricate details, that could fit in the palm of your hand. Their palette is dark, but turn them over and you see brightly dyed linen on the other side. You will find whole t-shirts stained with gradations of color, through a process of accumulation that takes weeks. Laid out on the ground are denim jeans that have absorbed thin pours of paint, and some that have been dyed so that their blues have turned blue-green and blue-violet. Soon I'll rip these t-shirts and jeans apart, but for now they're whole enough that you could assemble an outfit.

The radio is on. I'm listening to the news: the planet is burning, the situation at the border is bleak, the US President is lying. I could tune it out, but I don't want to. Did you think that I was only absorbed in the surfaces of these paintings? I want you to find respite in the particular beauty I'm trying to create. But there is a subtext, a politics to using these materials and processes. For over a decade I've gathered an image archive --evocative photos from the news and from art history--and I've printed some of these on the backs of the paintings. I imagine these images portray the subconscious of the paintings: what they would see in their dreams as they slept.

I compose the paintings on the studio floor, looking down on them from a ladder, and then I sew their many pieces together, frequently pausing to pull them apart, re-arrange, and start again. Piecing is both an action and a metaphor. American quilters of the nineteenth century--women whose labor remains anonymous--made their blankets in pieces because they didn't have much more than small scraps of fabric. A group of pieces arranged within a lap-sized rectangle is called a "block," and you could make a single block after the house work was done and the kids were in bed. Stitch by stitch, block by block, the maker marks time. Many quilters pieced fabrics in geometric patterns that come together as entirely abstract, modern works of art: artworks that you could also sleep underneath, patterns that you could feel in the dark. To make something this way is to embody patience and embrace complexity. I hope to make an artwork that you can't take in all at once, that gives you more if you give it time. I want the work to be warm, not cool.

In 2017, I broke both of my wrists quite badly. I couldn't open a door. I had an operation: two arms, two surgeons. While I could barely use my upper limbs, I had to reorient my body so that my balance came from my legs. Freud referred to homosexuals as "Inverts," as

if we are upside down. To orient oneself differently can be a source of power and of pleasure. Before this accident, I had made my work with dancers, in highly physical processes that encompassed the entire studio. I had to shift and work alone, to slow down, to preference smaller gestures over big actions. It's hard to give words to what changed, but I think my body understands. By the time you read this, the work will be out in the world. I'd rather you come to the work I'm making, or let it come to you, over time, feeling rather than thinking.

--JVD, New York, September 2019