

## No Shangri La: Ned Evans on Painting, Surfing, and Venice

*He is 56 years old, with decades committed to painting—canvases rich with sensual quilting of liquid color and lush, rectangular swatches interweaving foreground and background. But if you talk to Ned Evans about his art, he doesn't want to get into it. Ask him to comment on collector Aldis Browne's observation that Evans imposes structure on color while most artists impose color on structure and he swats the question away with "that's art theory." Even as he prepares for a show at his gallery—Berman Turner Projects—he would rather talk about almost anything else. For instance: the nuances of crossing a specific portion of Lincoln Boulevard where there is a pedestrian walkway but no traffic light. You have to time it with a light further down the street, otherwise you'll get killed, he says. He knows these things because he has lived in Venice for over thirty years, since he came to here to follow, to work for artist Billy Al Bengston who taught him in art school.*

*Evans' studio is a true, old-style Venice live-work space—the kitchen barely existing. An afterthought. A non-essential occupying a tiny corner in the hall. His workspace crowds out almost any other function in his home, but ask him about the paintings made in the studio and he'd rather talk about that dodgy situation on Lincoln Boulevard, or the art-driven benefit for the Surfrider Foundation in New York that he was recently asked to contribute work to. Ask him about that, how he got involved in Surfrider, and his words and ideas flow thick and fluid as the paint on his canvases.*

**Evans:** I grew up surfing Malibu, I've been going there since I was ten. If you frequent a beach for forty, forty-five years, you see it deteriorate. I sit in the water all the time, it just became obvious to me to do something. Ganzer [the founder of the Jimmy Z clothing line] and I were on the board of the Malibu Chapter for two or three years, trying to help. It's a gargantuan thing—water pollution. It's interesting to learn about it—just how bad that problem is, it's so monumental. What it comes down to is: Surfrider—it's about awareness, they are not going to solve anything. You raise \$20,000, \$25,000 dollars and it's just a drop in the bucket. It's a multimillion dollar problem. If you're not a volunteer/committee-type, corporate-sort-of-person you do what you can do and move on. But I still support it.

**VenicePaper: Does surfing as an experience, impact your process as a painter?**

**Evans:** I think it does. The physicality of surfing and the emersion in the medium translates into what happens in here [in the studio], and it's not conscious, it just happens for me. I like to immerse myself in the process of the painting and the liquidity of the painting. Everything's done wet-on-wet and it carries right over into the same sensations when you're surfing.

**VP: Are you a painter first and a surfer second, or vice versa, or are they the same?**

**Evans:** I'm probably a painter first.... a painter who surfs. Some of my friends, they

made businesses, they're moguls in the surf world, which is great but it was never enough for me. [Surfing] was always a way to feed everything else. It was like my shrink.

**VP: People would see your life as idealized: you surf, you're an artist.**

**Evans:** Well, that's pretty funny. (Laughs)

**VP: So what's the non-iconic or luxurious part of your life?**

**Evans:** Everybody I know that's worth their salt... they go through life doing a million different things to support [their art]. I've done a million things to support it, from being a carpenter, to a plumber, to a designer, to a sort-of self-made-little-architect, and builder, and contractor. I mean, I gardened... you name it. But at a certain age you just give up and you just go—"this is what I'm going to do." And other people don't make it. They fall away because it's not idealized. The best thing about it is that you get to decide what the rules are, and that's the appealing part of it: whether you're rich, poor, famous, or whatever—you walk through the studio [door] and it's your decision.

**VP: Did you know how hard it would be to make your living like this when you were 18?**

**Evans:** Sure, but, when you're young you think you can do anything. You just go for it. It's like taking off on a wave—you gotta go for it and not think. If you hesitate then you're screwed.

**VP: Has living in Venice helped you in terms of a support system with other artists or is it just more competitive?**

**Evans:** I think it did [help] in the beginning, when it was smaller. Everybody was more supportive. There was the Venice scene, there was a little scene in Pasadena, little midtown scene and that was sort of it. Now it just is so dispersed it doesn't really matter anymore. I mean, L.A., New York, this, that, the Internet—and, in a way, that's healthier. If you're good, it can happen anywhere. I mean, I don't think the art world exists. People call it the art world but, it's just a-million-things-out-there; you can find different ways to survive. I'm living proof. Some people live through the museum system, other people live solely through galleries. There's just a million ways to do it. That's the great part about it—if you can pull it off.

**VP: If you have shows that don't sell well and then other shows that sell well how do you keep yourself from repeating that show?**

**Evans:** Well, I've been lucky enough to where I've never sold a show out. I've had many shows where nothing happens and sometimes you reflect on the work. (Pause) I think the best answer for this is that at any given time whenever you do a show, that group of work, whether you like it or not, reflects what's going on in your life outside whether it's: you're happy, or the work's coming easy or difficult or you got personal problems or money problems or family problems. All that stuff sorta gets reflected and sometimes—back to faith—sometimes it's pretty depressing: you worked two years and nothing happens. That's happened [to me]! But, you go back in your little hole and weep a little bit and come back out

again. (Laughs.) Or you quit. That's when people want to quit. Everybody's wanted to quit.

**VP: You've lived in Venice for 30 years.**

**Evans:** Since '72, '73.

**VP: Does living in Venice that long bring a responsibility with it? Ironically, the first time I saw you was not at an art opening but at a meeting during which you spoke out against the proposed Lincoln Center development.**

**Evans:** I live right behind Lincoln Center. It really needs a face lift but these guys come in from outta nowhere, drop from outer space, and they're hired with high profile and no connection to the community, and they want to all-of-a-sudden put an 80 foot building where the height is 30. I think the allowed height is 45...

So the neighborhood, Laura Silagi and Dennis Hathaway and all these people who are my neighbors and people who have lived here as long as I have—and not as long, it doesn't matter—said: wait a minute.

I place the blame on the city—the way they structure it all. They give [the developer] all the tax benefits... and they don't take care about the traffic. They just keep building condos in industrial areas. Down here in the Marina, it all used to be mixed-use and industrial. Now it's all condos next door to guys that make surfboards. It's fine but I, you, know why they're doing it. It's just avarice and greed.

You can't fault anybody for wanting to develop that [Lincoln Center] property. It needs to be redone, but hopefully we'll be able to force them to do it in a mindful sort of community sensitive way. That's the idea. You know, nobody's trying to stop it because it's inevitable.

**VP: Why stay in Venice? You said earlier that, today, as an artist, you can make it anywhere. Why didn't you move to a better surf spot?**

**Evans:** I don't want to go to Indonesia and sit in a little cabin and have my Shangri La because, you know, I've done that. I've done Costa Rica a million times and I love it but I've done the vacation thing and it's not what I want to do. It's not, there's not enough sustenance, it's too removed. I'm not searching for Shangri La.

**VP: That's it, thank you.**

**Evans:** I just got started.

*Venice Paper*  
Tibby Rothman  
Venice, CA  
2005