



***THE PARK: PAINTINGS BY ERIK BENSON
ON VIEW IN THE ARSENAL GALLERY***

May 2 – June 20, 2013

The City of New York Parks & Recreation, in partnership with Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, is pleased to announce the exhibition, *The Park*, by Erik Benson. This new series of paintings, created with thousands of shapes hand-cut from dried sheets of acrylic paint, depict colorful but eerily abandoned playgrounds in stark urban landscapes. Drawings from this series, as well as a stop-motion video documenting Benson's unique painting method are also on view. These exquisite compositions of urban landscape will be exhibited in the Arsenal Gallery from May 2 through June 20.

Benson, known for his austere cityscapes, uses his intensive compositional technique to capture the interplay of construction and creative destruction, urban density, abandonment and open space in images that have elements of decay and hope. *The Park* focuses on his interest in playgrounds, which are void of inhabitants but enticingly geometric and colorful. He first began to study these spaces in early graduate work at the Rhode Island School of Design, and was particularly interested in the play structures' boldly unnatural and manmade coloring. The jungle gyms appear to sit on top of the surface rather than integrating with the landscape—a metaphor for his own painting techniques.

“Originally I was interested in creating a painting vocabulary that depicted the plasticity and temporality of unexamined things such as playgrounds and construction sites,” says Benson. “These interests have been growing into ideas and concerns that deal with the urban landscape, such as how cities grow and shrink, and what these issues mean to the inhabitants.” In these new paintings, Benson considers how playgrounds and parks play a role in the community and surrounding neighborhoods that are oftentimes blighted. These oases of saturated color and abstraction provide a much needed escape from the daily grind. These playgrounds are strikingly familiar, and while they are inspired by the play spaces around Benson's neighborhood of Bushwick in Brooklyn, they are not exact representations. In fact their archetypal structure can be found in neighborhoods throughout the country.

Benson's paintings are in equal measure foreboding and optimistic and cause us to question the nature of urban development. Gallery owner Edward Tyler Nahem was impressed by “Erik's clear-eyed view of the intersections of the urban environment and nature - the winners and the losers of this quotidian struggle between “development” and nature, “progress” and tradition.”

Benson has a laborious appliqué technique that is more akin to the construction of the buildings on his canvases than to traditional methods of painting. First, he pours acrylic paint on large panes of glass and lets them dry into extremely thin sheets. Once they have dried, he uses an X-Acto knife to cut shapes from the sheet and then layers them atop each other, like a collage or the memorable children's toy Colorforms. Appropriately, Benson's meticulous method of constructing his paintings literally brick by brick has also been likened to modular and pre-fabrication designs in architecture.

During the reform era of the early 20th century the New York City Parks Department was a pioneer in recreational space, and in 1903 opened the country's first municipal playground at Seward Park on Manhattan's the Lower East Side. Under Commissioner Robert Moses, who served from 1934 to 1960, the Parks Department increased the number of playgrounds in the city from 119 to 777, most were based

on a standard model that was quick and cheap to build and easy to maintain. In the 1960s and 70s Parks experimented with adventure playgrounds, which used natural materials to integrate the play area into the land itself. The playgrounds were muted in tone and blended structural building materials such as cast concrete with natural materials such as ropes and large-size timbers. By the 1980s, with increasing safety standards many playgrounds were retrofitted to eliminate hazardous conditions. Critics also found the aesthetic to be brutal, harsh, and un-park-like. Newer playgrounds relied on more colorful catalog of model equipment, similar to those in Benson's paintings. Ushering in a new era of playground design recent models, such as Imagination Playground in Lower Manhattan rely on children having the ability to manipulate their environment. Today the Parks Department maintains nearly 1,000 playgrounds throughout the city.

Born in Detroit, MI, Benson currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. He received his BFA from Minneapolis College of Art and Design and his MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Benson is represented by Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art and his most recent exhibition in 2010 *Detouring*, opened to critical acclaim after popular showings of his work at the Armory show and Art Basel Miami Beach. Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art also organized the popular pop-up gallery show, *Erik Benson: All City* in Madrid, Spain February 2- March 1, 2012. He has had solo exhibitions at the former Roebling Hall, Brooklyn and included in group exhibitions at Mason Gross Galleries, Rutgers University; Salon 94, New York; Flag Art Foundation, New York; and the Newberger Museum, Purchase, NY. Benson was part of the Bronx Museum of Arts' Artist in the Marketplace, and in 2008 he awarded the New York Foundation for the Arts Painting Fellowship. He recently completed a residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. In addition to the exhibition at the Arsenal Gallery, Eric Benson will be featured in an exhibition at Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art September 26 – October 25, 2013.

The Arsenal Gallery is dedicated to examining themes of nature, urban space, wildlife, New York City parks, and park history. It is located on the third floor of the NYC Parks & Recreation headquarters, in Central Park, on Fifth Avenue at 64th Street. Gallery hours are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. except for holidays. Admission is free. For more information, visit www.nyc.gov/parks/art or call 212-360-8163.

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