

# Art in America

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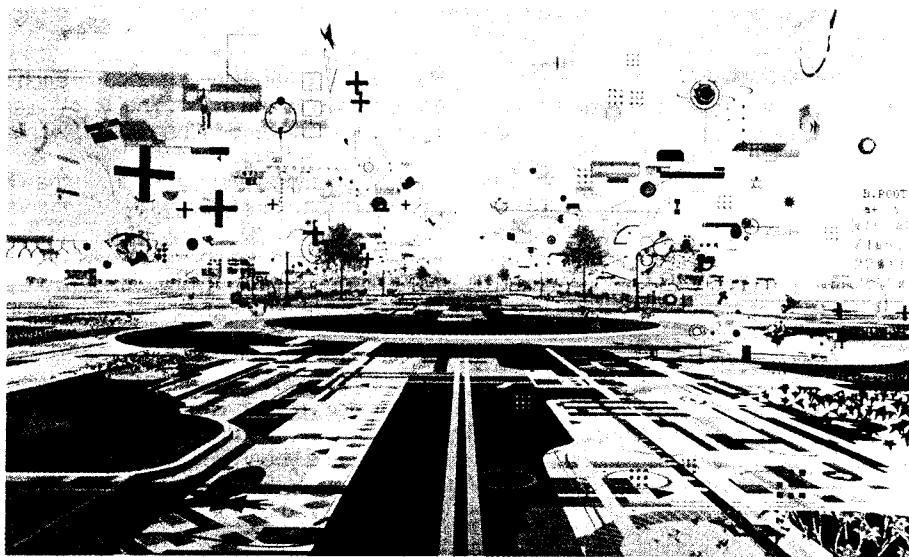
## Benjamin Edwards at Greenberg Van Doren

Like a spectacular TV commercial, Benjamin Edwards's paintings represent not only the sleek image of contemporary life but also the very spirit of postmodern capitalism. His disjointed images of chain stores, fast-food joints and visionary cityscapes evoke the standardized yet chaotic jumble of consumer utopias such as Starbucks and the Mall of America. If Futurists like Boccioni captured the ferocity of 20th-century mass man, Edwards conjures the secretive, deceptively benign power of 21st-century globalization.

*Convergence* (2000-01), a masterful earlier work by the Silicon Valley-raised artist, is a densely structured accumulation of architectural details from 250 retail sites around Washington, D.C., where he lives and works. Nearly duplicating that achievement in his recent show of large-scale acrylics is *Immersion* (2004), a sweeping view of an imaginary urban esplanade, its Renaissance-style perspective cluttered with cryptic symbols, as if the invisible language of bit-streams and computer logic had suddenly materialized in midair.

Edwards more than reflects the technology undergirding the modern economy: he uses it. His complex technique includes drawing a cartoon based on digital graphics, satellite maps, blueprints and other sources, then meticulously filling in areas with bright squares, rectangles and ovals of paint, sometimes adding touches of green landscaping foam to represent vegetation. As in *The Charms of Dynamism* (2003), there's rarely a crooked line or asymmetrical shape, or a color that doesn't seem culled from the palette of some commercial development firm.

In weaker paintings, however, the artist loses the critical tension between high-tech tools and the bland artificiality of modern life. *House* (2004), for example, seems little more than a condominium designed by M.C. Escher on computer software. *Entity* (2004) is a pale blue amalgam of



Benjamin Edwards: *Immersion*, 2004, acrylic, texture media and landscaping foam on canvas, 75 by 125 inches; at Greenberg Van Doren.

Stalinist-style architecture, whose sense of contrivance leaves the viewer cold.

But these were bumps on the road to *Automatic City* (2004), another Edwards triumph. Here, the artist drew on sources as disparate as paintings by American artist Thomas Cole and Halliburton's corporate headquarters to portray a vast city, rising Las Vegas-like out of a seeming desert, with a spectacular and ghostly metropolis hovering overhead. The 11½-foot-long painting lent itself to multiple readings: utopian dreams, castles in the air and the eschatological vision inspiring American religiosity, from the Puritans' "shining city on a hill" to the Mormons' New Jerusalem.

The artist rounded out his show with a smart bit of esthetic activism. His 60 *Anti-Icons* (2004), computer-altered corporate logos digitally printed on 8-by-8-inch canvases, manage to skewer corporate culture without lapsing into tendentiousness or ideology. His similarly sized *Multigraphs* (2004)—40 variations of icons and logos found on Internet consumer sites—satirize point-and-click shopping. The charm of these works, combined with the near mystical qualities of *Immersion* and *Automatic City*, strengthen Edwards's claim to mastery over the nexus where megabytes, mega-stores and mega-faith intersect.

—Steven Vincent