



Issue 03 | Fall 2010

## Mark Mann

New Work, 2010

How much can you say with a postcard? Maybe just a simple greeting, or maybe a message textured with nuance and tension, and sometimes both. Piecing together select elements of several different vintage postcards, artist Mark Mann creates family vacation scenes rich with subtext and *trompe l'oeil* ("tricks of the eye"). In what follows, Mann, born in Oklahoma, based in Brooklyn, explains to EYEMAZING how his latest series focuses on connection and the sincere pull of the family bond, as flawed and sometimes comical as it may be.

**Clayton Maxwell:** In this series, *New Work 2010*, your depictions of families on vacation seem much more about the human need to find support and less about the absent parent or loneliness within the family, as may have been the undercurrent in earlier series like *Wish You Were Here* and *Are We There Yet?*

**Mark Mann:** Yes, I think there's been a shift towards security and support. I've been doing this work with appropriated vacation scenes, constructing them myself from many very different cards to create scenes with a family dynamic. I try to capture the state of things that were happening. And in these earlier works my pieces found tension, or odd things going on. But since then, my work has gravitated towards groups of people and families who seem to have this interdependence on each other for support or security or protection. I noticed that I was creating these really insular places for the people who inhabited the space, so you see some boundaries, or borders around these secure spaces. I don't know if that trend in my work relates to larger things that are going on in the world or adversity that has been happening, but I do see this shift more towards people sticking together and taking care of each other.

**CM:** This series seems to express more empathy towards the family and how their often flawed and maybe goofy attempts at togetherness come from a sincere desire to be connected.

**MM:** Yes, and I don't know if I consciously think about it when I am putting things together. But that kind of support and hopefulness about the direction of life in general, and the people in my life is stronger now, and maybe that comes through in some of these. There

was a piece just preceding this series titled *Long Highway* in which groups of people are migrating together. Now, perhaps because I am living in the city, there is some sense in my work of this larger community and how people are just trying to live through tough times. And perhaps that has seeped into my consciousness. And maybe this series is a way to keep a connection to my own family who is far away.

I've always used the postcard reference as a part of that feeling of wanting to stay connected. Even though now it's transforming into texts and emails and that kind of communication – it's still that instantaneous message of like, "Oh, here's how I am feeling in this moment, and I want you to share it with me even though you are far away." That connects people together even though it's the smallest thing. That's how it's kind of changed and evolved.

**CM:** It's interesting that this work is so much about support and connection, because you could say that there is so much disconnect between the vacationing families in your earlier work.

**MM:** I can see where that would be read into it – the proximity of people and the isolation it can create. But contrary to that, vacation was the only time that my family ever got together and spent a lot of time together. Perhaps it's partially the influence of living the early part of my life in the suburbs in a very laid-back atmosphere and then moving to a large urban area. And the disconnect is more a commentary on the challenges of adult life and things that are stressful, and that impacted my thoughts about earlier experiences. So, there was this merging I think that happened.

**CM:** So would you say there are a lot of autobiographical elements in your work?

**MM:** Yes, perhaps in the background. But I want to make it universal, and I use postcards to remove myself at least one degree from autobiography. I want my work to be open to anyone; I don't want it to be a personal story. It's about how life changes your perceptions and ideas of the family. My parents were divorced so I had kind of a broken family in that sense; it was not a normal family structure and we had all these people – aunts, uncles, sisters,

etcetera, and all your life you are trying to maintain this sense of family. It's important to me, but its not conventional.

**CM:** Yes, I really get that feeling – in these images people are really trying. The image of the mother and her children on the edge of the pool really resonates for me.

**MM:** Yes, *600 Feet from Highway Noise*. The brother-sister-mother thing, the connection between mother and child. The environment struck me as this strange, oddly protected, secluded but special place for these people to inhabit – this is particular to my later work. You've got this grass, the outer ring, and the fence; even though it's this very weird boundary or wall that's created, there is this sense of bond and special place. There is some empathy here.

**CM:** And in *Vista Mar*, is that a life saving ring the family is passing down?

**MM:** Yes, it relates to that whole safety, preservation element that I like – the support, something in that manner. To me that was the whole message. The title of the piece, *Sea View*, and the plants taking on this watery action... to me, the mother was trying to save the others, in a metaphorical sense. But it could just be an inner tube with the mom saying to her kids, "Come on, we gotta go,;" it could just be this everyday thing as well. It can ride that line. The metaphorical reading is more poignant versus something that's like, "Hey, send that thing down here – we gotta get going to the pool!"

**CM:** Yes, but in that mundane, day-to-day, "Hand me the inner tube so we can go to the pool" you can still find that other reading of "We have to take care of each and I am going to hand you the life raft and we can find ways to support and connect with each other." Maybe they are interwoven – even in the day-to-day mundane there is that undercurrent of care and support and trying to be together that exists within all that, even if it looks like just trying to get to the pool in time.

**MM:** Yes, even small interactions tell a lot about a relationship. Those small actions of caring matter. I



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use appropriated work. I use these fragments of multiple cards and I was really intrigued by the postures that emerge from the small details within this larger scene. You are given this larger scene, either a pool scene or hotel scene and there are these little dramas that are going on. They are underlying, not overt, but you don't notice some of these things until you magnify them – because I was doing a lot of work scanning and magnifying and bringing these details out and I can only bring out so much before they deteriorated. It was enough to bring them out to give you that little nuance or suggestion of a posture that indicated what they were feeling or what might have been their state of being. And in that particular picture, *Vista Mar*, I was kind of amazed that I could find totally different scenes of people doing different things and bring them together to create that story –

all from disparate, non-related cards. You know that kid, I think, was just leaning down to pick up a towel. It's interesting to have all these different sources to create one unified scene.

**CM:** How many different cards do you think you used for *Vista Mar*?

**MM:** Each figure came from a different one, so that's three. Then the life saving ring came from a different pool scene and the background came from a different one. The only thing that happened to the environment was removing the details that might distract someone. I think I changed certain relationships, maybe enlarging the foliage, but that's all that happened in that one.

**CM:** Why do you use the mid-century photographs?

**MM:** They are mostly from the 60s and 70s, and I think it relates to my growing up, my generation. I like that visual sensibility, there is an emotional attachment to it for myself, and it goes beyond that, using the photograph has that connotation. I don't think people think about it, I think people are just kind of connected to it.

Text by CLAYTON MOORELL

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