

# WASHINGTON CITY PAPER

## Emerging at (e)merge: Conor Backman

By Kriston Capps on Oct. 6, 2012



Conor Backman, "I's and Other I," 2012

The (e)merge Art Fair is open and drawing some first responses. The *Washington Post's* Michael O'Sullivan calls the (e)merge Art Fair a "hot dog-eating contest": "After a while, you stop savoring each individual hot dog. You're just trying to get as many in your mouth as you can without losing your lunch."

You can, in fact, order a hot dog at (e)merge, at a grill setup by the pool, where most of the performance-art is happening today. But to run with O'Sullivan's metaphor, among the art at (e)merge there is the occasional Nathan's frank, the proverbial Hebrew National. And the top dog I've seen is Conor Backman.

New York-based gallery Mixed Greens brought a solo show's worth of Backman's material to the Capitol Skyline (and no other work by any other artist from the gallery's stable). Backman has a diverse practice with a focus on *trompe l'oeil*: He paints Aspen-esque mountain landscapes by

copying the scenes from beer cans—your Natty Lite range or Coors peaks—and omitting any text.

For one installation in Mixed Greens's hotel room, Backman scattered a few grape Crush sodas on the ground, and inserted in the mix copycat safes that are disguised as grape Crush soda cans. In a different Backman junkscape installation, the artist sets out a steel waste bin and fills it with crumpled paper—but all the pages are in fact painted steel.



Conor Backman, "Bad Sunday," 2012.

Those works are straight forward and a little joke-y, but Backman can go deeper: An extremely dark oil still-life oil will have the viewer wanting to adjust the brightness on the painting. A *trompe l'oeil* painting depicting a taped-up board alongside a *trompe l'oeil* drawing of a ripped-up envelope containing a drawing of the Pink Panther don't just trick the eye—they bore the brain. There is a thrill in going to great lengths for returns that are marginal at best.

I recently wrote a similar line about a D.C.-based artist, Patrick McDonough (whose work is being presented solo at (e)merge by G Fine Art). Falling somewhere between McDonough's conceptual art and Molly Springfield's painstaking cerebral drawings, Backman's work suits D.C. like a Ben's half-smoke.