

TIBOR DE NAGY

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HYPERALLERGIC

A Travelogue of Imaginary Lands in Stamps Donald Evans concentrated all of his attention on the postage stamp, unlocking its potential to evoke distant, unseen lands.
by John Yau, June 1, 2022

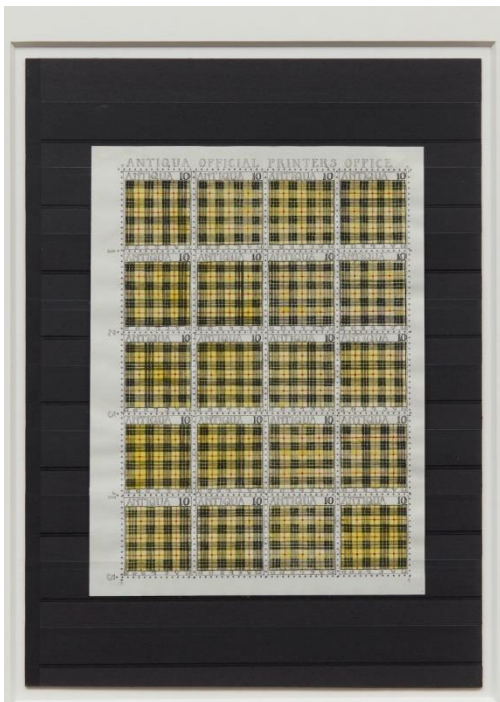


Donald Evans, "Nadorp, 1953. Windmills" (1977), watercolor and rubberstamp on paper

More than a decade has passed since Donald Evans (1945-1977) has had a solo exhibition in New York. The timing seems right for his current show, not because his work fits in with the latest phase of our obsession with materialist excess and escapist fantasies, but because it offers such a compelling counterpoint. This has always been true of Evans's artworks, which are essentially watercolors on a piece of paper

mimicking a postage stamp, and about the height and width of a thumbprint. During the six years that he made art, from 1971 to '77, he concentrated all of his attention on the postage stamp — an inexpensive, disposable object — unlocking its potential to evoke distant, unseen lands. Although he only made art for a brief time, his oeuvre consists of more than 4000 faux stamps issued by the 42 countries he dreamed up.

Evans began painting stamps of imaginary countries when he was a child. He stopped when he was a teenager and did not begin again until two years after he got a BA in architecture from Cornell University in 1969. In 1977, at the age of 31, he died when the building where he was living in Amsterdam caught fire.



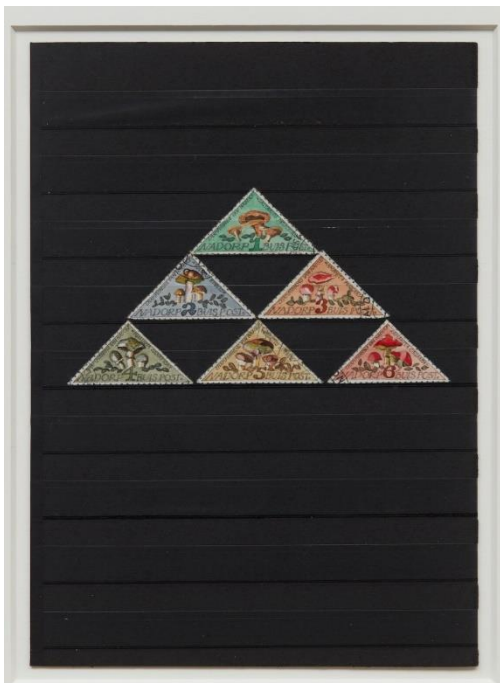
Donald Evans, "Antiqua, 1954. Tartans (MacLeod)" (1974), watercolor on paper

According to his Wikipedia entry, "Evans usually traced each stamp design in pencil, then completed it with a No. 2 Grumbacher paintbrush, watercolor, and pen and ink. To simulate stamp perforations, Evans pounded out a series of periods on an old typewriter." To further suggest the real thing, as well as add a note of authenticity to the work, he carved rubber erasers so that he could "postmark" or "cancel" them. Each country had its own set of cancellation marks.

Evans's admirers have included Italo Calvino, Bruce Chatwin, and Takashi Hiraide, all of whom explored real and imagined places. I remember wondering what Raymond Roussel, who wrote "La Source," a long poem about walking into a landscape he sees on the label of a bottle of mineral water, would have made of Evans's stamps. Like Joseph Cornell, Evans created entire worlds, but with even barer means. He could carry all the art supplies he needed, or even an entire exhibition of his work, under one arm.

In 1975 he told the *Paris Review*:

It was vicarious travelling for me to a made-up world that I liked better than the one I was in. I'm doing that now too. No catastrophes occur. There are no generals or battles or warplanes on my stamps. The countries are innocent, peaceful, composed. Sometimes I get so concentrated in these worlds I get confused ... it's hard to get out.



Donald Evans, "Nadorp, 1965. Mushrooms" (1972), watercolor and rubber stamp on paper

Donald Evans: Philatelic Counter at Tibor de Nagy (April 30–June 4, 2022) will be a revelation for those who don't know his work and wish to immerse themselves in a magical, anti-heroic world that offers pleasure while rejecting bourgeois enthusiasm for operatic displays. For those who do know his work, seeing it again will be like visiting an old friend you did not know you missed as much as you did.

The 28 works in the exhibition are carefully arranged in standard black sleeves that stamp collectors use. Possessed with a protean imagination, Evans's stamps are a journal of his preoccupations, passions, interests, research, and friendships. Some are affixed to a souvenir postcard or a plain white envelope that he has addressed. Some are sheets of 36 stamps, all meticulously painted and carefully perforated. His stamps have either been used or are waiting to carry a message. Working in a trompe l'oeil vein, everything he did is devoted to achieving an air of authenticity. The mauves and blues he employed in many of his works evoke the ink used on late 19th-century stamps.

In "Domino, 1938, Dominoes" (1975), Evans's meticulous devotion to making what appears to be a sheet of 36 stamps picturing a domino is astonishing for its accuracy, tenderness, and vulnerability. Even the white border around the stamps is carefully attended to, with the title and date of issue "printed" on the bottom right edge. It is the kind of perfection we have come to expect from an artist such as Vija Celmins. The difference between Celmins and Evans is in the scale. However, it is wrong to say that Evans is a miniaturist because he is working in a 1:1 relationship.



Donald Evans, "Sabot, 1966. Edible mushrooms" (1973), watercolor and rubber stamp on paper

Evans did not just paint stamps. Each of the countries or settlements that issued them had its own flag, flora and fauna, and set of customs, all of which he documented. Judging by what this exhibition includes, he had a particular fondness for windmills, fruits, mushrooms, tartans, carpets, wildflowers, island and tropical landscapes, the writings of Gertrude Stein, a Chinese supernatural tale in which ghosts fear human saliva.

In “Sabot, 1966. Edible Mushrooms” (1973), Evans painted eight postmarked stamps, each depicting a different edible mushroom and assigned a different price. He included the Latin name. The inspiration for these stamps was likely 19th-century hand-colored lithographs of mushrooms, possibly based on the drawings of the Scottish botanical artist Walter Hood Fitch (1817-1892). What’s astonishing and undeniable about Evans’s mushrooms is the fidelity to the source image he achieves while working on such a small scale. Look at the level of detail in his portraits and landscapes, the wit of copying the image of a veiled woman on a vintage postcard onto the stamp he has placed in the upper left-hand corner of “Adujani, 1962, Veiled Adjudani woman” (1972) or the ingenuity of making a map of imaginary tropical islands on a stamp issued by a country he made up. Done before the rise of Neo-Expressionism and the “return of painting” in the 1980s, his work offered a self-sustaining alternative to the hoopla accompanying many artists’ three-gallery exhibitions that were all the rage during the Reagan presidency. He never claimed to be a genius. He didn’t have to.

In “Stein, 1972. Fiftieth anniversary of ‘A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson’ by Gertrude Stein” (1972), Evans “postmarked” a sheet of four differently priced stamps, each of which cites a line from the text Stein dedicated to Anderson in 1922. It is telling that Evans chose to cite the entirety of “Let’s Describe,” the last section of the “Valentine,” which contains this line: “It was a very windy night and some of the larger vehicles found it more prudent not to venture.” Evans did not need a large vehicle to make his work. The modesty of his materials and the absolutely necessary scale of his work quietly refutes the New York art world’s excitement over materialism and fabrication, and the bigger-is-better aesthetic. No wonder none of its major museums have any of his work in their collections or, as far as I can tell, have ever included it in an exhibition.



Donald Evans, "Stein, 1972. Fiftieth anniversary of 'A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson' by Gertrude Stein" (1972), watercolor and rubber stamp on paper

Donald Evans: Philatelic Counter continues at Tibor de Nagy gallery (11 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through June 4. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.