



david ellis
conversation



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Rice Gallery
HOUSTON, TEXAS



foreword

One night when David Ellis and the Rice Gallery staff were in the gallery, David's father and mother walked in, having just driven from North Carolina to Houston. David's father introduced himself, looked around the gallery and said, "You know, David has been trying to paint music all his life." It was one of those moments of recognition, when the air seems to vibrate because everyone knows that what has been spoken is deeply true. With *Conversation*, his installation at Rice Gallery, David had done it.

I want to thank David for one of the most spectacular-looking and joyful-feeling installations we have ever had at Rice Gallery. *Conversation* had a magical effect on all kinds of people. Drawn in by its spectacle of color and

movement, as well as by the irresistible talking grouse, each visitor instinctively identified with the large or the small one and became part of the conversation. Once the beats began, everyone – from children to university administrators in suits – moved with the music. They could not remove the smiles from their faces.

In *Conversation*, slow rhythms and a constant pulse flowed together as a continuum. The beats – David's beats – are the rhythm and flow of life, which he hears, orchestrates, and makes visible to us.

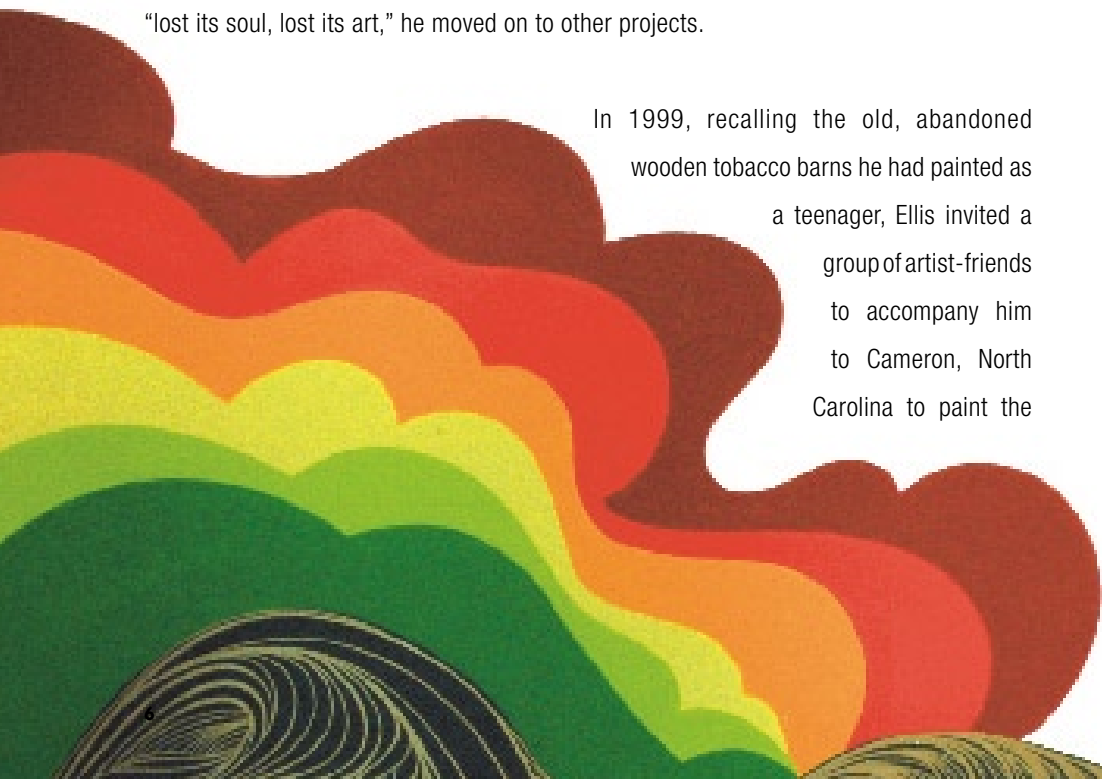
Kimberly Davenport
Director





I am an artist from a family of musicians. My uncle plays and restores pianos, and my brother travels the world playing tenor saxophone. As a kid I had no patience with piano lessons and learning to read music, but absorbed everything I heard on the “Super Mix,” a Saturday night radio program that was broadcast from the Fort Bragg military base near where I grew up. It was just far enough away that reception required one hand on the pause button and the other on an elaborate assembly of coat hangers, duct tape, and tin foil jammed into the hole that was once an antenna on my boom box. I recorded the show every week with the volume low so not to disturb my mother’s ultrasonic night hearing, which would result in radio confiscation. Each week a new style of early New York hip-hop found its way into the mind of a 12-year old boy living in the attic of a log cabin in rural North Carolina. By the time Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five dropped “The Message,” I was writing my own rhymes and banging out beats on the desks at school. Those beats have been in the back of my mind all my life.

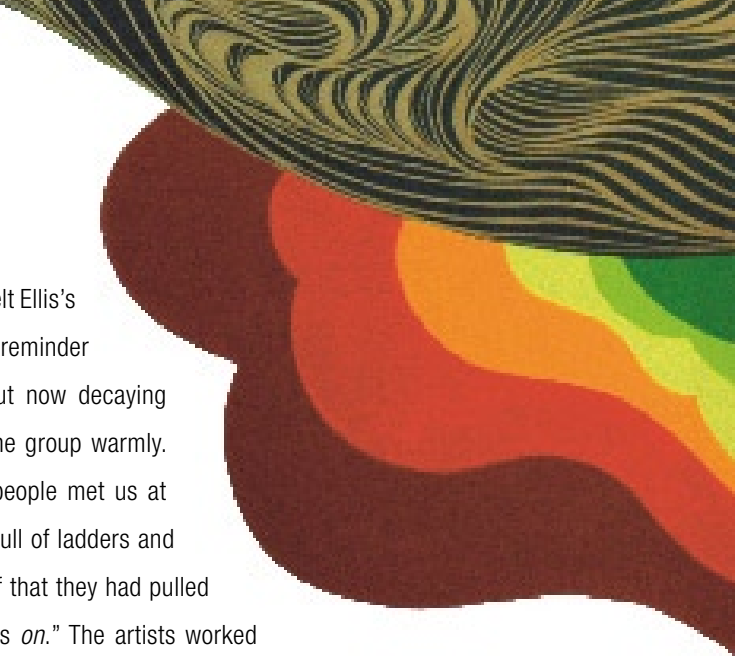
— David Ellis



North Carolina native David Ellis knew from a young age that he wanted to be an artist or a musician. Inspired by *Style Wars*, a 1983 PBS documentary about New York hip-hop music and graffiti style subway art, he put his own graffiti (with permission) on his family's barns and out buildings. Saturday nights he listened to "Super Mix," a radio program broadcast from nearby Fort Bragg that featured early New York hip-hop music. Ellis claims, "I had no patience with piano lessons and learning to read music, but I absorbed everything I heard on the radio. I tuned into that like nothing I've ever tuned into in my life." He worked in local tobacco fields and painted murals in music clubs to earn money to buy the turntable and hip-hop records he craved.

Ellis attended North Carolina School of the Arts before he moved to New York to continue his studies at The Cooper Union, a college known for its intensive studio art program. To earn money he built sets for hip-hop videos, but by the mid-1990s, Ellis had become disillusioned with hip-hop's increasing focus on money and violence, and feeling that it had "lost its soul, lost its art," he moved on to other projects.

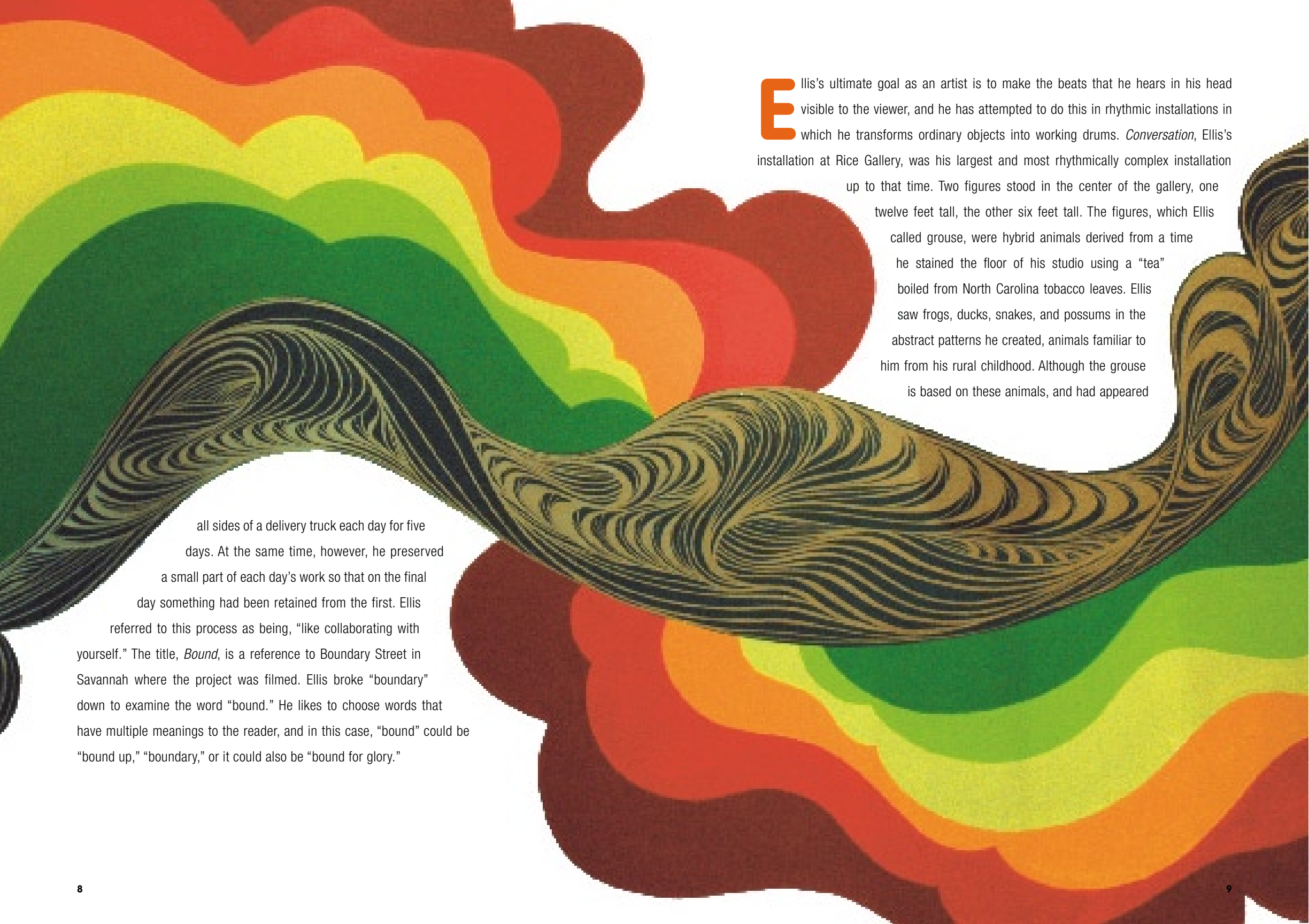
In 1999, recalling the old, abandoned wooden tobacco barns he had painted as a teenager, Ellis invited a group of artist-friends to accompany him to Cameron, North Carolina to paint the



barns again. Local residents felt Ellis's earlier barn murals were a reminder of the area's once proud, but now decaying architecture and welcomed the group warmly. Ellis remembers, "The local people met us at my grade school with trucks full of ladders and paint, rollers, and all this stuff that they had pulled out of their basements. It was *on*." The artists worked day and night throughout the driving rains of Hurricane Floyd, but during the final few days the sun came out and they were able to finish. This experience reconciled the two disparate parts of the artist's life: his rural upbringing and his urban present, and according to Ellis, changed his life.

Back in New York, Ellis and the Barnstormers – the name given to the artist team – continued to collaborate in jam sessions of painting, each improvisation a jumping-off-point for the next. A floor rather than the side of a barn was their canvas. Working in tag-teams, they layered painting upon painting with each successive image covering the last. The artists developed a way of filming the marathon painting sessions by taking time-lapse photographs with a camera mounted on the ceiling. Played back at high speed, an ever-morphing animation of images was produced, each seeming to emerge from the previous one. Ellis calls this type of work "motion painting," and he continues to produce them with the Barnstormers and on his own. Founded on the idea that "no condition is permanent," Ellis has said of the paintings that some of the best work he has made, inevitably he has painted over.

Bound, 2005, a video included in the Rice Gallery exhibition, shows Ellis undertaking a motion painting marathon commissioned by the Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia. Working from sunrise to sunset, Ellis painted a new body of work on



Ellis's ultimate goal as an artist is to make the beats that he hears in his head visible to the viewer, and he has attempted to do this in rhythmic installations in which he transforms ordinary objects into working drums. *Conversation*, Ellis's installation at Rice Gallery, was his largest and most rhythmically complex installation up to that time. Two figures stood in the center of the gallery, one twelve feet tall, the other six feet tall. The figures, which Ellis called grouse, were hybrid animals derived from a time he stained the floor of his studio using a "tea" boiled from North Carolina tobacco leaves. Ellis saw frogs, ducks, snakes, and possums in the abstract patterns he created, animals familiar to him from his rural childhood. Although the grouse is based on these animals, and had appeared

all sides of a delivery truck each day for five days. At the same time, however, he preserved a small part of each day's work so that on the final day something had been retained from the first. Ellis referred to this process as being, "like collaborating with yourself." The title, *Bound*, is a reference to Boundary Street in Savannah where the project was filmed. Ellis broke "boundary" down to examine the word "bound." He likes to choose words that have multiple meanings to the reader, and in this case, "bound" could be "bound up," "boundary," or it could also be "bound for glory."

in many of Ellis's paintings, it was created as a sculpture for the first time in *Conversation*. The large grouse had a beard of turkey feathers saved from the Ellis family Thanksgiving the year before, and it wore a suit of armor made from thousands of pennies, transit tokens, and international coins. By contrast, the smaller, life-sized grouse was humbly dressed in Ellis's paint-splattered clothes with only a few coins in its back pants pocket. A chevron of the turkey feathers painted gold was spread on the floor behind. Covered in long gray fur and wearing bright green sneakers, they engaged each other in an unintelligible dialogue; the larger one spoke in a reverberating baritone while the smaller one answered in a higher, almost child-like tone. To create their gibberish, Ellis had recorded himself talking then remixed his speech by running it backwards and changing the speed, a technique used in hip-hop music. Computers nested inside the grouse controlled their speech, which was played through their speaker eyes. Ellis declined to say what the grouse were talking about because he wanted people to bring their own meanings to the conversation.

Bright green, fifty-five gallon oil drums, chosen by Ellis to evoke Houston's oil culture, were stacked along the back wall to form a flat-topped pyramid. Using his signature smoke-shaped cloud style, the artist painted a grouse face on the oil drums in hues of fire-reds and cool greens. The cloud snaked around both sides of the gallery before it pooled in the middle of the front glass wall. This style of painting was Ellis's latest version of what he calls flow, his visual parallel of the spontaneous, chance-based improvisation that musicians do, DJs, MCs, horn and drum players, in particular. The flow style came primarily from a trip to Hawaii where he saw lava flowing into the ocean at night:

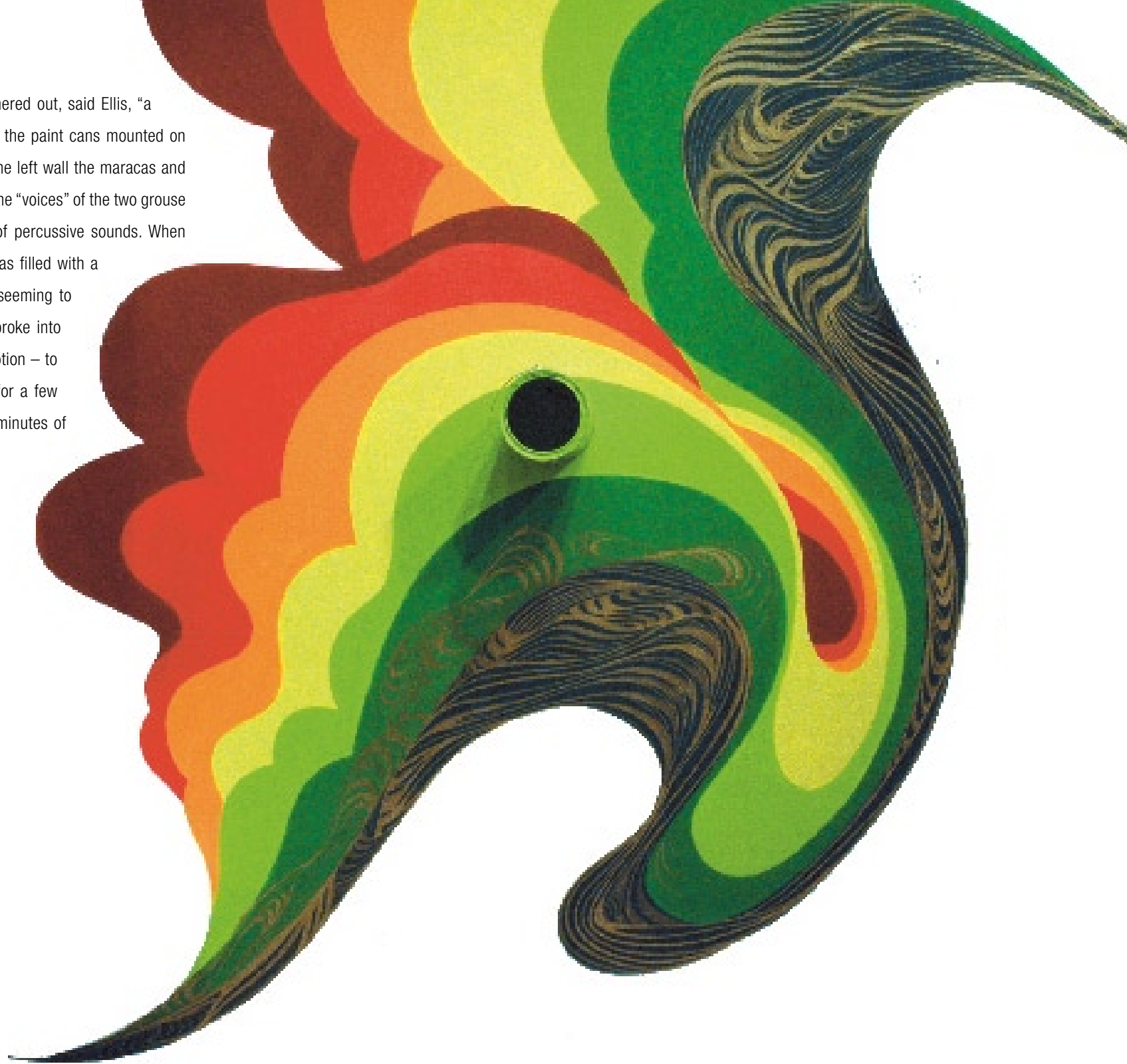


It was amazing. I looked at it and thought, this is the beginning and end all at once. It allowed me to see it. It affected me and I can't stop thinking about it. It gives me a chance to flow, like when you're an MC and you've got skills and you practice and you want to write rhymes. You flow; you freestyle, and you make up things in the moment. This is the language where I can do that. It [the painting] took three or four days. I can see when I was in a good mood, when I was stressing. I can see when I had too many Dr Peppers . . . it's a recording, you know, it's a recording.

On the right gallery wall, empty one-gallon paint cans, some with various types of beaters attached, were grouped under the flow painting, while five-gallon plastic buckets, several with clusters of dried seed pods or maracas inside, were mounted on the left wall.

Conversation featured an ambitiously complex polyrhythmic composition played out on the two figures and on the three gallery walls. Every 15 minutes a mallet would strike the back pocket of the smaller grouse causing the coins inside to jingle. On the rear wall where the metal lids on three of the oil drums had been replaced by stretched goatskin,

computer-controlled beaters attached to these drums hammered out, said Ellis, “a beat on which the rest of the piece rides.” Next, beaters on the paint cans mounted on the right wall picked up the beat of the oil drums, while on the left wall the maracas and clusters of seedpods rattled inside the large plastic buckets. The “voices” of the two grouse added to, but were briefly drowned out by, the rising tide of percussive sounds. When all the “instruments” played at the same time, the gallery was filled with a booming, rocking sound that reverberated within its walls, seeming to course through the river of color and flow to visitors, who broke into smiles and were caught up in an irresistible urge to be in motion – to dance, sway, and move to the beat. This crescendo lasted for a few joyful moments, then the drumming ended and after a few minutes of silence, the conversation began again.



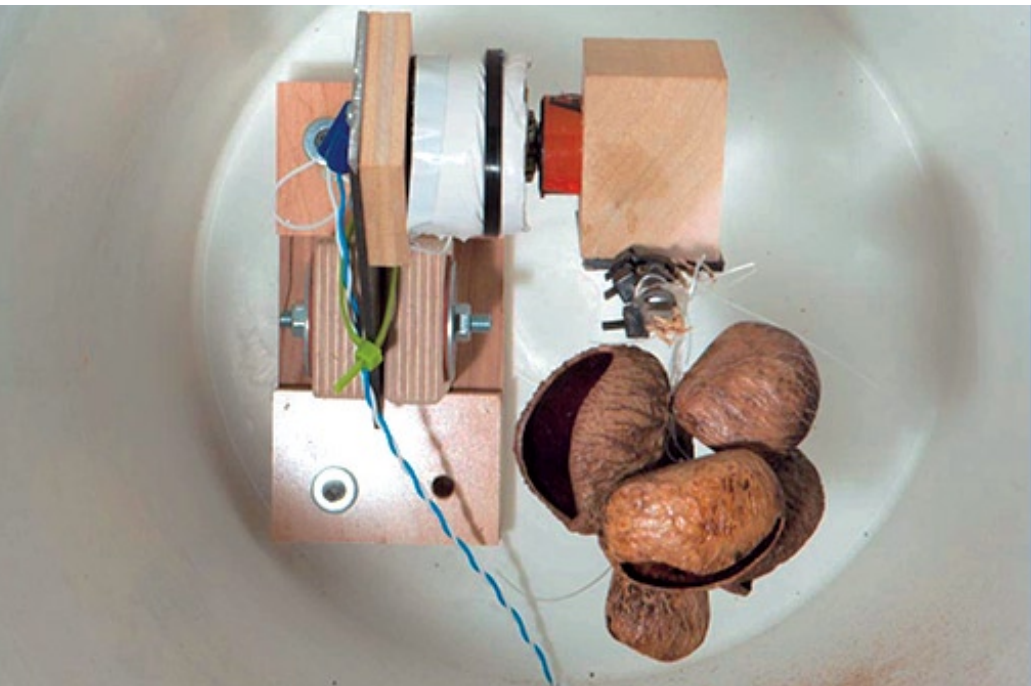






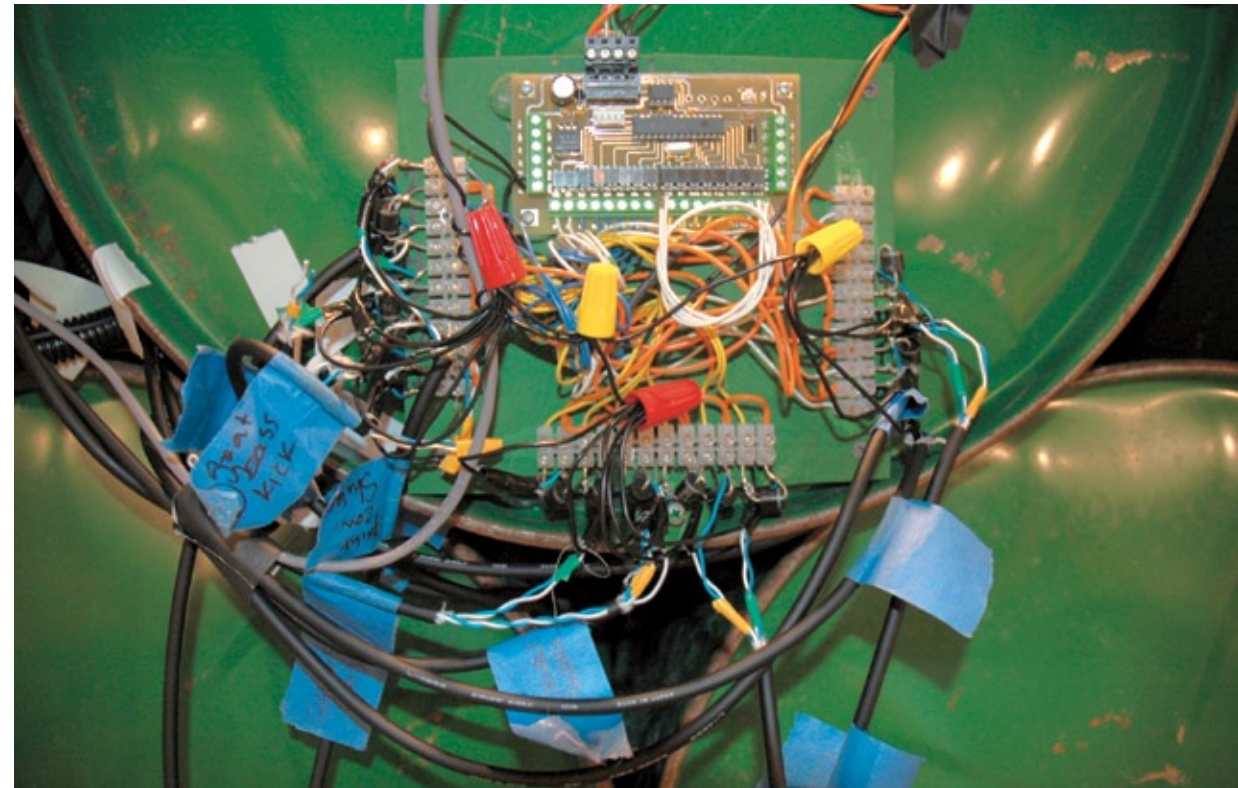
















about the artist

David Ellis was born in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1971, and received his BFA from The Cooper Union, New York, in 1993. Solo exhibitions include *Dawn's Early Light* (2006), Red Gallery, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia; *Motion Paintings* (2005), Zoller Gallery, Penn State University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; *Orchestrion* (2005), Jessica Murray Projects, New York, New York, and *Beat Box, a Painting is a Drum* (2004), 222 Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Group exhibitions include, *The Barnstormers: Motion Barn* (2006), Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), Winston Salem, North Carolina; *Greater New York* (2005), MoMA/P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Queens, New York; *Beautiful Losers* (2004), Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, and *Apostrophe* (2003), Mori Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Ellis lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



David Ellis, *Conversation*
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery
19 January – 5 March 2006

David Ellis, *Bound*, Site-specific installation
(video projection) at Rice Gallery
19 January – 5 March 2006

Bound was commissioned by Savannah College of Art
and Design, 2005
Producers, Matthew Mascotte and Tent Content; Director of
Photography, Chris Keohane; Post-production, Chris Keohane,
Anaitte Vaccaro and Matt Woo
Filmed in Savannah, Georgia, August, 2005

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