

# ARTFORUM

Lyle Ashton Harris | Salon 94  
David Frankel  
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Lyle Ashton Harris, *Afropunk Odalisque*, 2018, dye sublimation print, 18 × 24".

On the gallery counter at Lyle Ashton Harris's show were two books for the public to leaf through, Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* (1983) and Amber Musser's *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (2018). Harris named his new project after the first of these, an influential, even inspiring attempt to describe aesthetic and cultural continuities between Africa and the African diaspora, but his work in general seems closer in temper to the second—a more theoretically informed book than Thompson's, and addressing complexities of queer identity that were not Thompson's concern, but still, happily, one sensually and erotically attuned to the art he discusses. On the surface, Harris's new works themselves—a series of photographic self-portraits showing the artist naked but for a loincloth and a succession of African masks (and not always the loincloth)—seem to stage ambiguities and opacities apparently out of tune with the mood of Thompson's book, but the prompt to view them under that umbrella calls for consideration.

Since those enslaved during the centuries of the slave trade were brought to the Americas with no or few possessions, art historians tracing continuities between African and African American cultures must largely do without their usual tools, their temporal chains of vintage material objects. But Thompson not only worked with what objects could be found, he detected similarities and connections in life practices, in verbal vocabularies, in dance movements, in whatever signs and symbols he could come by. And his imaginative invention of a different kind of art history was poetically infused with his admiration for black cultures on both sides of the Atlantic. Harris's titling of his show calls us to view his images with some of that *jouissance*, to use Musser's word, but doing so isn't immediately straightforward. For one thing we never see Harris's face; it is always hidden by this or that mask, producing a double effect of withdrawal and assertion: on the one hand the artist refuses us the ability to identify him, to connect with him as an individual, and on the other



the masks are powerful, imposing. Or maybe those effects are the same thing? There's protective strength in keeping something secret. For a third resonance again, the masks are incongruous: while Harris's environment in each image is not immediately identifiable, it is clearly not the context the masks were made to be worn in, and there is something weirdly out of place about their appearance here. To the push and pull, the reveal and conceal, of identity, we can add a touch of the strange. As comments on the place of African Americans in the United States, these works seem more equivocal than Thompson's story of triumph over adversity.

The twelve photographs are dye sublimation prints on aluminum, which gives them a glamorous sheen. Close looking to identify details can be counterproductive: the eyes start to pick up reflections, including one's own, behind which the image recedes. In some images Harris handles sheets of colored Plexiglas, multiplying the sense of slick-surfaced reflectivity and adding artifice to an otherwise mostly outdoor palette. The landscape settings are "bucolic" and "idyllic," according to gallery materials—New York's Hudson Valley; Provincetown, Massachusetts; and New York's Fire Island (the latter two, as historically gay vacation spots, being more than merely picturesque in their connotations)—but the photographs aren't panoramic and often foreground Harris's body, denying us much view of those places while giving us enough that we don't think they're Africa. *Afropunk Odalisque*, 2018, taken indoors, is close compositionally to Paul Gauguin's well-known *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892: Wearing a mask lined with cowrie shells, Harris lies stretched on a bed, facing up where Gauguin's female figure faces down but with an African figure at his feet in the same position as the painting's Tahitian phantom. Surely the echo is deliberate; if so, the choice of Gauguin introduces a whole history of the Western sense of aesthetic entitlement. With all of these tensions and undertones, do these photographs in fact play out Thompson's proud "flash of the spirit"? On one level they're about claiming a heritage, but they can't help but signal complication.