

BROOKLYN RAIL

Lyle Ashton Harris: *Flash of the Spirit*
Jan Avgikos
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Lyle Ashton Harris, *The Gaze (For Laure)*, 2018. Dye sublimation print on aluminum, 27 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Lyle Ashton Harris has channeled many memorable personas over the course of his thirty year practice. Whether in his startling photo-performances from the 1980s in whiteface, his self-transformation into likenesses of female members of his family, or his charismatic impersonation of Billie Holiday, his gender-fluidity has been abetted by his own lush physicality and demeanor. Yes, critique was a ready component of his work. His masquerades are explicit in their capacity to interrogate societal constraints regulating gender behaviors, racial identities, and sexual orientations. His various photo-performances were vital to the huge coming-out party that hosted the revolutionary emergence of multiculturalism in the '90s. With much of this work produced in the age of AIDS, his defiance ignited passions that shone like beacons in the darkness.

But quite apart from a political or activist agenda, Harris's art communicates sense of his own personal *jouissance*. In the many guises he has adopted, it is his radiance that makes them so compelling. He is gorgeous in whiteface, rapturous as Holiday, tender in his embrace of the female side of his family. We marvel at Harris as much as the characters he showcases, for he is always present, foregrounding the parade of deeply personal portrait-performances that manifest the plurality of multiple selves he seeks to express.

After a hiatus of many years, he has returned to the mode of self-portraiture; but now the performance of self is far more circumspect and obscured. We take it as a matter of faith that it's Harris beneath the various West African masks he wears in his exhibition of new work, *Flash of the Spirit*. Nowhere do we actually see his face. Rather, it's as if the enigmatic masks wear him and motivate his nude or minimally clothed body to assume strange, quirky postures. In several of the photographs—all dye-sublimation prints on aluminum, all 2018—we glimpse the masked figure at a distance, trekking across the landscape at night, resting against a tree trunk, or residing alongside a pool of water. In what might appear as a game of "becoming other," it's as if we viewers have popped down a rabbit hole in pursuit of an exceedingly elusive and rare creature we've managed to apprehend in its natural habitat. Wildness ensues.



SALON 94

In other portraits, we are privileged to see the mythic figure in close proximity, as if we had entered its private space. In three portraits, *The Gaze (For Laure)*, *The Thinker*, and *Flash of the Spirit*, a magnificent lion-like mask with a flamboyant raffia-like mane is the lead character. In *Flash of the Spirit* (the title borrowed from Robert Farris Thompson's groundbreaking book on African art history, and the eponymous title of Harris's exhibition), the figure crouches in a naturalistic environment studded with shapes made from red, reflective plastic, one of which it manipulates to create mesmerizing visual effects that might be construed as part of a ritualistic event. In *The Gaze (For Laure)*, the recumbent figure bearing the super-size lion mask looks over its shoulder and up to meet our gaze, in a pose that speaks volumes of history and serves as an erotic invitation. No matter provocation, there's no negotiating our way around the profound communicative barriers the mask enforces. We might witness the dream-like reveries that abound in these portraits, but we remain outsiders.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Flash of the Spirit*, 2018. Dye sublimation print on aluminum, 48 x 64 inches. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Many factors are at play in these complex pictures. We learn that the tribal masks—several of which represent animal spirits—were collected by Harris's uncle, Harold Epps, during his travels in West Africa in the '60s, and that Harris grew up around them. As a child, the artist must have wanted to try them on, to play with them and imaginatively bring them to life. Who knows what's carried over here from this childhood play. We also learn that in his youth the artist lived in Tanzania, and, more recently, that he has lived and worked in Accra, Ghana. Harris's associations with Africa are enduring, and they impart an idea of what might be at stake in these masked adventures in self-portraiture.

We can imagine the creation of these photographs might have entailed an attempt to recuperate childhood play, to reengage with the magical, mysterious, and talismanic masks, to remember his boyhood experiences in Africa. Childhood games of pretend evaporate as we become adults, gradually and continually becoming other to ourselves. And yet that very divide seems to be activated here as Harris unabashedly performs multifaceted identity: his African self, his child self, his artist self. While the "flash of spirit" he conjures might remain fundamentally fragmented and elusive, it does not obviate the desire to become one with all of one's authentic selves, as if one could usher them collectively into the present. What's so edifying about Harris's new work, given its self-consciousness and reflective capacity, is that he seems fully aware of the impossibility of this suture. The conundrum remains: there is no going back home, no going back to who we once were or imagine ourselves to have been; and yet in forging the present into the future tense of our lives, we yearn to retrieve the fundamental experiences that have given meaning to life. In these photographs, we see Harris marshaling his enduring sense of the carnivalesque to produce something that approximates ritualized presence.