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*He Is Some Body: Lyle Ashton Harris's Enigmatic Self-Portraits*

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Yes, artist Lyle Ashton Harris packed his current solo show with pictures of Lyle Ashton Harris. But don't expect Oprah-caliber self-revelation.

The artist's images of himself, on view at Adamson Gallery, don't add up to self-portraits in the straightforward sense. Sure, Harris is present in body, but the artist's body acts as a canvas on which he conjures psychic states -- rage, rapture, eroticism.

These theatrical pictures, each with its own pulse and vitality, document Harris assuming a variety of roles. Here he's a boxer; there he's Billie Holliday; here, a transvestite prostitute. As such, they are portraits of various selves, which many of us may be able to identify with, but selves that may or may not be part of the real Lyle Ashton Harris.

And it's these not-really-self-portraits, with their gorgeous colors and sometimes disturbing themes, that carry his show.

Harris is African American and gay. Since his student days in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he has mined those aspects of his identity. Early efforts included posing in whiteface, often graced with false eyelashes, mascara and lipstick. Straddling both gender and race, the works reflected the concerns of the artist and of the times -- it was in those years that identity politics ruled art. (Thelma Golden included Harris in the Whitney Museum's 1994 show "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," one of the era's formative survey exhibitions.)

Two decades into his career, Harris still concerns himself with the game of appearances and perception: how we present ourselves in public, how our bodies -- and the meanings they carry -- are received by others, how gender and race are constructed. But such intellectual questions aren't the sum of Harris's show. He also reveals a poetic sensibility: a desire, shared by writers and poets, to make visible our complicated inner worlds. He acknowledges the ambivalences we carry. From the moment we set foot in the gallery, Harris casts us as voyeurs. We face frank images of his body, many emphasizing musculature or skin.

In "Untitled (Blue #5)," Harris straps himself into high heels and fishnet hose, his thighs splayed as he squats in a dank room that could pass for a drug den. A mask covers his eyes; his mouth opens wide in an expression of pain or ecstasy, maybe both. A sculpture of a massive, erect phallus occupies the floor in front of him and obscures Harris's own genitals. The composition suggests an aggressive fetishization of black men that's reminiscent of Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs of the 1980s.

Here, Harris has assigned himself the role of sexual and racial fetish object. He underscores the theme with accessories of African provenance: a necklace of shells and beads rings the artist's neck; a wooden comb topped by a female figure rakes his hair; the stool Harris squats on is from the Pende people. With these gestures, Harris conjures the Negrophilia of Paris in the 1920s and modernism's roots in African culture.

Many have suggested the point of all this is a refutation. To prove that he is not a body first and human being second, Harris overemphasizes his body so that we are forced to move past it. There's just too much here, too much to read simply at face value or to accept as mere titillation. It's a tricky strategy, one based on identification with the aggressor; but Harris makes it work.



It works particularly well because Harris's pictures are patently beautiful. Every picture documenting him exudes rich, saturated color (this in large measure because of the digital printmaking done on Adamson's presses). The sepia of Harris as a boxer reveals the depths of that color. The cerulean cast to the Billie Holliday pictures calls smoky nightclubs to mind. And the most ethereal color of all seeps from "Untitled (Blue #1)," a close-up image of Harris with his face obscured. Electric purple, aqua and pink pop from the page. They make us forget the anguished subject matter for a moment because the prints themselves are such remarkable objects.

Sensual, nuanced color is less important to Harris's other body of work on display in the show, which documents crowds. Taken in the early 2000s, these pictures show spectators and police gathered at Italian soccer matches. In several images here, Harris plays with a picture by mirroring it or by fabricating a kaleidoscopic pattern where individual figures are all but lost.

The conceit is exciting in theory. We watch people who are watching; we examine the act of looking. Yet the results, while dazzling at times in their saturated reds and blues or their visual complexity, don't reveal much. They devolve into a carpet of image devoid of power.

The most intriguing of the crowd pictures, "Untitled (Bourgeoisie)," retains our attention precisely because individual spectators remain visible. Here, we see the paradox of the group -- it is both one large unit and the sum of so many individual needs and urges. The group can be stereotyped, and yet it can't. As we look at the wealthy occupants of the stadium's prized seats, we reach for generalizations. But then our eye alights on an individual who, by definition, blows those generalities to pieces.

Lyle Ashton Harris at Adamson Gallery, 1515 14th St. NW, Tuesday-Friday 11:30 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday noon-5 p.m., 202-232-0707, to Feb. 23; <http://www.adamsongallery.com>. (A survey of 20 years of the artist's work goes on view next week at Arizona's Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.)