



SALON 94

COLLECTOR
DAILY

Lyle Ashton Harris, Flash of the Spirit @Salon 94 Bowery

By [Loring Knoblauch](#) / In [Galleries](#) / November 20, 2018

JTF (just the facts): A total of 12 color photographs (11 single images and 1 diptych), framed in silver and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the entry area and the main gallery downstairs. All of the works are dye sublimation prints on aluminum, made in 2018. Physical sizes range from roughly 25×19 to 65×49 inches (or the reverse, with the diptych consisting of two of the largest sized panels), and all of the images are available in editions of 3+2AP. (Installation shots below.)

Comments/Context: The artistic form of the mask, particularly as embodied by works by African artists, has a complicated and arguably dark lineage in the white-dominated art historical canon. When seen and studied in the museums of the West, a historical African mask is most often a colonial treasure, stripped from its local context and recategorized by outsiders (however scholarly or well intentioned), and too often discounted (or at least subtly undervalued) by characterizations of “primitivism” or simple native craftsmanship. And when portrayed or reused as subject matter by white artists, an African mask has typically been a potent symbol of “otherness” or some version of untamed wildness, the cultural appropriation of its stylistic differences meant to shock or disrupt a viewer’s assumptions about primal energy, spirituality, animal urges, and sexuality.

But when a black artist, particularly one whose family or ancestors were part of the wider African diaspora, employs an African mask in an artistic project, the engagement and resonances are altogether different. In some cases, the thoughtful use of the mask or artifact represents a straightforward reconnection with the past or a retracing of roots, giving the lives of the present a link back to something elemental. In others, it is a more profound declarative reclamation of identity, a statement not only of belonging, but also a direct repudiation of all the connotations that were layered onto the African artifacts by whites. In a sense, these artists are reformulating the whole context of how these objects are seen and can be interpreted, reimagining new echoes and amplifications that look forward not back.

Lyle Ashton Harris has been probing the layers of his own black homosexual identity for the better part of the last three decades, and his newest works return to his recurring exploration of self-portraiture, adding elaborate African masks (borrowed from an uncle) to his artistic toolbox.

His most direct engagement with the arc of art history in these new photographs comes in *Afropunk Odalisque*, an image where he remakes the classic reclining female nude pose (famously used by Ingres, Manet, Matisse, Delacroix, Boucher, and countless others) using his own male body as the central figure. Wearing a cowrie shell encrusted African mask, surrounded by African sculpture and imagery, and laying on an African wax fabric pillow, he smartly inverts the usual tropes of courtesans and heterosexual desire.

Most of the pictures in this show find Harris outside, prancing and posing in the grass, in the woods, or near quiet still ponds with watery ripples. Either nude or wearing a small patterned wrap around his waist, he gestures and performs for the camera, the various African masks simultaneously obscuring and transforming his identity. At night, under the light of the moon, his figures turn spiritual, the long

nose or large round eyes of the masks exaggerating the sense of primal forces in flux. During the day, Harris is more grandly present, the oversized masks with long flowing grass hair giving him a more confident regal air.

Many of the images were made in Provincetown and Fire Island, two communities frequented by gay vacationers (predominantly white) during the summer. By posing himself in these particular landscapes, he boldly makes space for his black masked body within those social frameworks. These pictures provide a counterpoint to Harris' earlier self-portrait works in the studio (particularly his *Constructs* from the late 1980s), where his costumed posing was more formally driven and controlled; in these images, there is more freedom and action, the open Edenic settings providing something to respond to and find balance within.

The most compositionally complicated of Harris' new works then take this posing one step further, introducing sheets of tinted or reflective plastic as interactive filters. In one series (*Zambie at Land's End*), a rectangular sheet of red plastic interrupts our view of Harris in an elaborate mask with curved horns and a chicken on top, creating angled geometries that attempt to contain the body that lies behind. In *Shadow Play*, the sheets are reflective, creating moody shadows in purple and blue, the distortions lurking in the twilight. And in *Flash of the Spirit*, dappled light falls through angled blue and red sheets, the ancient mask, the nude body, and the modern color forms working together to create a sense of energetic, almost futuristic, time jumping, where memory is reshaped into something new right before our eyes.

Posing with a mask always has the potential to feel like a photographic gimmick, but Harris consistently evades that trap here, the masked versions of himself multiplying out in ways that feel searchingly authentic. In trying out the alternate personas offered by the masks and then situating his costumed but simultaneously vulnerable self in personally resonant places, he has successfully reclaimed the masks and given them a splash of contemporary richness and relevance. Harris' search for the nuances of individual identity is clearly an evolving process, and the best of these new photographs successfully add another powerful layer to his complex journey of artistic self-definition.