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The New York Times

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Galleries



LYLE ASHTON HARRIS AND SALON 94

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS

Through Dec. 21. Salon 94 Bowery, 243 Bowery, Manhattan; 212-979-0001, salon94.com.

Lyle Ashton Harris's new body of work feels charged by a current of liberation. In this show of photographs at Salon 94 Bowery, the artist appears nude or seminude while wearing African masks, some of which come from his uncle's collection. We never see his face, but as he stands and crouches assertively, reclines leisurely or sways his hips, he embodies confidence and pleasure.

Mr. Harris began his career with two series involving self-portraits: "Americas" (1987-88), a set of closely cropped images that feature the artist and others in whiteface, and "Constructs" (1989), which shows him assuming statuesque forms against a black cloth backdrop. Both have an air of playfulness that's shot through with confrontation: The images dare the viewer to grapple with the ways they scramble common expectations of identity.

Thirty years later, Mr. Harris displays a very different relationship with his audience. Although he's posing, he seems almost unconcerned with our presence. He's too busy reveling in nature, his body and his heritage to care what we think.

Still, hints of defiance remain. In "Afropunk Odalisque" (2018), Mr. Harris lies on a cushion that's covered in an African wax print, with his legs bent to one side and an arm flung back, as if he were a female concubine posing for a male European painter in the 19th century. He wears one mask, and two others appear in the frame. Here, Mr. Harris challenges an art canon that was built on the fetishizing of colonized cultures. He reasserts control by staging himself as exotic, emphasizing that the people and objects flattened by the Western gaze have always possessed their own spirits.

JILLIAN STEINHAUER