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ART

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Lyle Ashton Harris

Big photographic self-portraits of the artist, posed nude outdoors in African masks, are so playful that their pleasures—visual but also sensual, like the feeling of a soft breeze or rough bark on your skin—register before their intelligence settles in. Since the late nineteen-eighties, Harris, a native New Yorker who grew up partly in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, has been using himself (in performances as well as pictures) as a lapidary tool to dismantle preconceptions about race, gender, sexuality, and life in diaspora. Some of the works here are titled, after the masks, in the Swahili and Guro languages; one striking exception is “For Laure,” an homage to the maid in Manet’s “Olympia,” in which Harris reclines on vibrant green-and-gold Ankara wax cloth, in a red-and-black loincloth and a mask crowned with cowrie shells. A photo of him standing tall on green grass against a black sky, beneath a waning white moon, is titled “Ashé,” a Yoruba word that summons the hope of Harris’s art—it means “the power to bring about change.”

— *Andrea K. Scott*