

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | ART IN REVIEW

Lyle Ashton Harris

By **HOLLAND COTTER** APRIL 1, 2010

The New York artist Lyle Ashton Harris has spent a fair amount of time in Africa. For two years in the 1970s he lived in Tanzania. He later made extended trips to South Africa. Since 2005 he has spent part of every year teaching at the New York University extension in Accra, Ghana. His solo show at CRG is inspired by contemporary Ghana, and like much of his art, it's a knotty fusion of seductive beauty and sharp sociopolitical observation.

The exhibition opens with a color film projection onto a curtainlike hanging of Ghanaian cloth. The film is of festivals and beach scenes in Ghana, but printed on the cloth are shadowy black-and-white pictures hinting at that country's past as a source for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Photographs hanging nearby look like semi-abstract paintings but are close-up shots of wall collages — with cutout images of women, cars and religious figures — made by inmates of an Accra prison that was once a colonial fortress.



Lyle Ashton Harris's "Ghana." Credit CRG Gallery

The show's centerpiece is a mural-size wall collage by Mr. Harris, one of several he has assembled over several years from hundreds of pieces of visual information: newspaper and magazine clips, posters, Post-it notes with written phrases, and photographs. Each collage reflects the specific place and time of its conception. The one in the show blends contemporary Ghanaian history and Mr. Harris's own history, using themes of race, masculinity and homosexuality, which is illegal in Ghana and popularly reviled as a Western import.

A 2006 newspaper article in the collage, with the headline “Gays and Lesbians on Fire,” refers to a gay and lesbian conference that was scheduled to take place that year in Accra but was banned by the government. Mr. Harris surrounds the document with gender-blending images from his past work and with photographs of African men posing like Calvin Klein models. In addition, three videos in the gallery show Ghanaian bodybuilders pumping and preening, in classic scenes of homosocial, and presumably heterosexual, camaraderie.

Mr. Harris neither pulls his political punches here nor forces easy conclusions. He deftly layers his data, leaving us to connect the dots. And as relatively few American artists do, he pulls contemporary Africa, firsthand, into the big global picture, partly by pointing up a big global problem it shares with the rest of the world. **HOLLAND COTTER**

CRG
535 West 22nd Street
Chelsea
Through Saturday