



SALON 94

# DAZED



M. Lamar, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 1993© Lyle Ashton Harris

## The artist who explored ethnicity, gender, & desire in 90s America

### ART & PHOTOGRAPHYFEATURE

Lyle Ashton Harris's work is a deeply personal documentation of his life and the scene that surrounded him – including Nan Goldin, Mickalene Thomas and Rashid Johnson

8 February 2018  
TextMiss Rosen

In the early morning on 17 October 1997, Lyle Ashton Harris wrote a poem “For Lawrence,” which he printed out and pasted into his journal, asking, “*is there other ways to know thyself? / I guess in a sense I am still waiting / peaking through / I cry / fear, wondering, what, if I let it go, / to discover, to unveil another, to write, / to share myself with another, to trust myself. / i am still that little boy.*”

The poem goes on to reflect on dying and death, on fear and desire, on the nerve it takes to be true to one's self. It is something we all face in one way or another in this life – though the artist may grapple with these issues openly in their work, taking vulnerability to new heights of the sublime.

For Harris, the ascent began in 1993, when his exhibition *Face: Lyle Ashton Harris* opened at the New Museum. Here, he used photography, video, and audio to examine race, sexuality, and gender during a period when multiculturalism, globalisation, and Aids activism dominated the world stage, transforming the conversation around black masculinity to expand beyond the rigid boundaries proscribed for African-American men.

The following year, Harris exhibited *The Good Life*, his first solo show, at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, where he subverted markers of identity to show just how vast blackness is when seen from the inside looking out. The show solidified Harris's place in a new generation of artists transforming the art world.

At the same time that Harris was making works for museums and galleries, he was also documenting his life in 35 mm Ektachrome snapshots and journal entries that take us deep into his personal life, capturing the people and places around the globe that were essential to the emergence of the radical culture scene that was taking hold in New York, London, Los Angeles, and Rome.

In 2013, Harris returned to the archive and began to reflect on the path his life had taken, distilling a profound picture of the path he had travelled. The work has been collected for the recently published book, *Today I Shall Judge Nothing That Occurs* (Aperture), which features a selection of snapshots, portraits, journal pages, and memories that paint a picture of a formative period in art that continues to speak to the present day.

The book includes photographs of luminaries including Angela Davis, bell hooks, Nan Goldin, Klaus Biesenbach, Vaginal Davis, Faith Ringgold, Thelma Golden, Carrie Mae Weems, Renee Cox, Dread Scott, and Gary Simmons, along with a series of recollections written by friends and colleagues including Mickalene Thomas, Sarah Lewis, Johanna Burton, Vince Aletti, Iké Udé, and Rashid Johnson to create a cosmic collage that captures the many facets of a complex and fascinating man coming into his own. Described by Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, owner of Salon 94 who represents Harris, as “equal parts femme fatale and ancient god” – we catch up with the artist below.

## THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Born and raised in the Bronx, Harris moved to Tanzania and lived there in the mid-1970s, during the height of the African Independence movement. When new nations were being built after suffering the ravages of Western imperialism. As an African-American in Africa, Harris was able to see life from a new perspective that was not centred in Western thought and biases.

“I was growing up in a very spiritual family, who was very race conscious. My grandfather was a disciple of (historian, activist, order, and more) W.E.B. DuBois. My mother's generation was very much into Pan-Africanism and the Black Consciousness movement. After my parents' divorce, my mother took my brother and I to live in Dar-al-Salam, Tanzania, from 1974-76, just a few years after the country's independence. As an American kid coming from the Bronx it was radical for my brother and I to be in a country where there was Ujamaa (collective community) inspired by the great leader Julius Nyerere.

“Being in a community where there was a plurality of identity, there was an openness and a gentleness. In Tanzania, there was much more fluidity around masculinity. It wasn't such a

hard pose post-Civil Rights, that exists in the United States. There wasn't the highly stratified or highly racialised consciousness of the US. or New York. I'm not saying it was idyllic but we had a reprieve from the violence of the post-Civil Rights era for two years. It definitely allowed me to be more expansive and more open. I was fortunate to have those formative years being an American abroad."

## BECOMING AN ARTIST

Raised in a family that embraced representations of blackness, Harris became aware of the power of images to inform, influence, and inspire ideas and beliefs. His exposure to visual traditions provided a solid foundation upon which he built his own modes of expression dealing with the times in which he lived.

"I grew up in a family where there was a consciousness around images, photography, and black representation. My grandfather was active in the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, which was all about pedagogy and the passing on of tradition as well as creating communities. It was a spiritual space and within that sphere, it was always about the transmission of history.

"Visually, I understood at an early age the power of the image to control or to liberate. I don't want to engage that binary exclusively because I think it is more complex than that but I do understand energetically how people can be transformed by the image, not only in the art world but on a larger scale. Whenever we speak truth to power through the image, it is a language.

"I think there is a continuity in the culture. I was in the Guggenheim show, *A Rose is a Rose is a Rose* (1997), which was dealing with gender and sexuality – just like it was in the 60s, and in the Weimar period. It was exciting and challenging time. This was during the Aids crisis when we were dealing with multiculturalism and identity issues. The mainstream art world had embraced that and was transformed by it. There was an organic nature to it then, maybe a necessity, if not a pleasure."



Barron Claiborne and friends, New York, mid- 1990s© Lyle Ashton Harris

## TAKING ON DIFFICULT SUBJECTS

Harris created *The Watering Hole*, a series of Duraflex prints accompanied by a pair of mixed-media works, to investigate the crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer, the American serial killer and sex offender, who raped, murdered, and dismembered 17 men and boys of colour between 1978 and 1991.

Using the metaphor of the watering hole as a place of rejuvenation as well as a site of violence, Harris's work examines the "Dahmer-esque" aspects of culture beyond the killings themselves. The series was first exhibited in 1996 at Jack Tilton Gallery, and In 2013, it was collected by the Museum of Modern Art, both in New York.

"*The Watering Hole* came out of hearing about the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer killing and consuming young boys, primarily African-American and Asian boys. I was struck by the complicity on the police, who in some cases ignored the people who had raised red flags and in one case turned a young boy, who was naked and bleeding, back over to this man. I was struck by the negligence and the vulnerability of young men of colour, many of whom did not have a father and were seduced and lured into the environment in which they were actually consumed and killed.

"It became more of a metaphor about how we consume each other. It wasn't just a black and white thing – it was also about the way certain mainstream cultural institutions respond. For example, *Ebony* magazine did not cover the story because of the sexual difference (of the

black boys who were killed). The work was a way of looking at the how communities are involved in the systematic consumption of the other, often the poor and the vulnerable.”

## EXPANDING THE LANGUAGE OF PHOTOGRAPHY INTO COLLAGE

Understanding that the limitations of the single image, Harris began to examine new ways in which to communicate the intricacy of ideas he was dealing with. Collage revealed itself as a viable solution to dealing with the intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic depths of subjects that challenge our moral core. Liberated from the strictures of the single image, Harris discovered a powerful vehicle in which to express his ideas in a complex visual form.

“I was trained in the language of creating singular, distilled images and I was looking for a new form in which to deal with the complexity of the material of *The Watering Hole*, which included materials such as newspaper clippings, advertisements from magazines, and photographs I had taken.

“I was looking for something to deal with that equation between very disparate elements while thinking about ideas of how we can remain in unison formally on the same page. I started photographing them and they became montages. Here, I was thinking about Dada’s relationship to the war and the sense of anxiety that World War I brought about, and how they used collages as a way to construct a formal narrative.”



Lyle Ashton Harris, *An Educated Heart* (Journal #1), 1997© Lyle Ashton Harris

## TRANSFORMING THE ARCHIVE INTO AN ARTWORK

The *Ektachrome Archive* features a series of chromogenic prints selected from Harris's personal archive of 35mm Ektachrome colour reversal slides. Set against the radical shifts in the art world, the emergence of multiculturalism and globalization, and the second wave of Aids activism during the late 1980s and 90s, the photographs capture candid moments from the artist's life. The series includes images of Harris's a close circle of friends, lovers, and acquaintances including Nan Goldin, Catherine Opie, Glenn Ligon, Renée Cox, Klaus Biesenbach, bell hooks, Essex Hemphill, and Isaac Julian.

"In my early work, I was creating iconic images but while doing those, I was drawn to document life as it is. The camera became a tool through which to do that. They were both working in tandem.

"About ten years ago, I realised the potency of working with the archive and thinking about how the every day, the quotidian image can resonate differently, that it didn't depend on having a more distilled, iconic image. I was interested in trying to draw the line between high and low and this was a way of doing that.

"I was living in Ghana from 2005 to 2012. I was invited to help develop the NYU program there, and I fell in love with the people, the culture, and someone there. I was very much involved in the Ghanaian community, an art centre there, and Ghanaian society as well. I was in a seven-year relationship that ended in 2012.

"When I returned from Ghana, a friend of mine asked me to use some of my snapshots that I had taken 20 years ago to illustrate his upcoming catalogue for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. In 2013, I revisited this archive after not seeing it for over 15 years and that became the basis of the *Ektachrome Archive*."

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOOKING BACK

There comes a time when the past returns to the forefront, allowing us to explore where he has been in order to consider the present and future. For Harris, the experience of transforming the *Ektachrome Archive* into an artwork allowed him to tap into the fresh perspectives and energy of youth, one that is both specific and personal as well as universal and relatable.

"Reconnecting with my photographs from a long time ago helped me to connect to a vitality from my work before I had the career. It wasn't so much about making work for an exhibition or a museum or a magazine. This is how I was seeing the world and experiencing the world. It reconnected me with the pulse of that type of energy.

"I think artists, no matter where they are in their career, always have to go back to that primal scene. I was really fortunate to have documented all this stuff. A friend of mine had said to me that a lot of people have these experiences but the beauty is that I had the camera and I allowed them to be part of my experience, and now I am able to share that.



“(In the *Ektachrome Archive*) there is the collapsing of the professional and the personal, the interplay between pleasure and the family, giving it a different way of thinking about the family we are assigned, the families we create, and the fluidity among that.”



Gail Burton and Peggy Nelson, Fort Greene, Brooklyn, late 1980s © Lyle Ashton Harris

## BRINGING TOGETHER MANY VOICES

*Today I Shall Judge Nothing That Occurs*, Harris’s fifth book, showcases works from the *Ektachrome Archive* alongside a panoply of essays written by the artist’s friends and colleagues, along with Harris’s journal entries from the period. The texts add layers of meaning and experience to the work, providing a diverse array of insights and perspectives from many of the people pictured in the photographs. Taken together, the image and text reveal the personal history of the artist as a young man coming into his own.

“We wanted to have a range of voices be expressed in the book, with essays from Mickalene Thomas as an artist’s voice to my friend Clarence Otis, who I have known for 25 years. I wanted to get his voice in as someone who went from Watts to Yale to Vassar. I wanted him to talk about the Crips and the Bloods as a way of countering the stereotype we have around the other, in this case, gangs.

“(For the essays) I wanted people who could speak with specificity around a certain type of experience. I left it open-ended so that the archive could be a living document as opposed to something that was proscriptive in terms of how you should be thinking about it.”

## PAYING IT FORWARD

It has been said that “God is in the details,” and we can recognise this when we feel a profound connection with stories that we have not lived. By sharing the *Ektachrome Archive*, Harris has created a space for young artists, writers, and radicals to connect their present-day experiences with the not-so-distant past as a means to show the continuity from one generation to the next.

“When I first showed the images from the *Ektachrome Archive* in a lecture at Yale, the kids were less interested in the narration of who X, Y, and Z were – as opposed to the formal language of the work, which was raw and intimate. They responded well to that.

“These are the grandchildren of the Revolution and still, they are dealing with these issues. They are hungry for images that counter those types of cultural amnesia that is so much a part of the culture today. They are seeing images of the fluidity of gender, racially, ethnically, sexuality that the book creates a form where you can imagine a community and a multiplicity of identities without erasing difference to enhance difference.”



“Altar, Koreatown (Journal #1)”, 1997© Lyle Ashton Harris