

ARTFORUM

Lyle Ashton Harris

By Alpesh Kantilal Patel | May 22, 2015



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Jenny and Cathy*, *Sunset Junction Street Fair*, Los Angeles, Circa Early 1990s, 2015, chromogenic print, 15 x 20 1/2".

Lyle Ashton Harris's current solo exhibition at Miami's David Castillo Gallery features a series of unstaged pictures from his archive of Ektachrome slides from the past twenty-five years. As a curator, he recently cocurated—with Robert Storr and Peter Benson Miller—the group show "Nero su Bianco" (Black on White), which examines radical shifts in perceptions of African identity, subjectivity, and agency. It will be on view at the American Academy in Rome from May 25, 2015, through July 19, 2015. The exhibition at David Castillo Gallery, which Harris discusses below, is on view through May 30, 2015.

IN LATE 2012, I received a Facebook message from my longtime friend Isaac Julien asking to use some of my photographs in his autobiography, *Riot* (2013), a book that was published on the occasion of his MoMA exhibition. This inquiry reconnected me to an archive of 35-mm Ektachrome reversal slides that I had stored in my mother's basement in the Bronx before moving to Rome in 2000. I hadn't given these slides much thought over the past fifteen years and was surprised that I had amassed at least three thousand of them, dating from between the late 1980s and 2000. I dived into this archive—in hindsight, this was partly due to the ending of a seven-year relationship. The experience of editing was cathartic and helped me to reengage with the pulse of New York City after having split my time between Accra and New York from 2005 to 2012.

The exhibition at David Castillo includes a concise distillation of images from that archive. There are candid portraits and snapshots of friends and acquaintances, such as the late Marlon Riggs taking AZT while on break from shooting his last film, *Black Is, Black Ain't* (1994); bell hooks in repose at home in New York; Nan Goldin applying eyeliner in Berlin; and Catherine Opie in an embrace. Also included are photos of family, boyfriends, and lovers, plus self-portraits, landscapes, and interiors of bedrooms and now-closed nightclubs. It is the quotidian quality of these images, which captured people, places, and moments long—and often tragically—gone, that most intrigues me and stands in stark contrast to the theatricality of the more iconic works that have become a hallmark of my practice.

This show is the first time I am showing prints of the slides. Last year, Visual AIDS commissioned me to produce a video version of the archive for “Day With(out) Art.” Also, as part of Carrie Mae Weems’s “Live Past/Future Tense” retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum last April I staged a performative lecture with projected images from the archive accompanied by a mash-up of Grace Jones’s *Nightclubbing* album. This presentation functioned as a memento mori of sorts for several of the audience members who were intimately familiar with the subjects and the texture of that period.

In contrast to that audience, I recently showed this work to photography students at Yale. They were equally engaged, but they focused on the more formal aspects of the work. In this way, the title of the exhibition, “Lyle Ashton Harris: Ektachrome Archive 1986-96: Part I – Recovering Identity and Desire,” is a red herring—I see the archive not as a repository of things past to be unearthed but as something that shapes the now and the near future in ways that I am just beginning to understand and which has a relevance beyond me.