

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS with McKenzie Wark

“What was that guiding force that actually guided or hovered over the archive, that’s not only about me, but is about or for a future generation?”

McKenzie Wark



Portrait of Lyle Ashton Harris, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Rarely does one enjoy the pleasure of being in the company of legendary people. Lyle Ashton Harris is one such person. His work has pushed boundaries and opened zones of creative agency for a generation of young artists. As a gay man he has experienced the deep traumas of losing friends and lovers to AIDS, and has brought that sadness and awareness of the human condition into his work in a way that communicates across many spectrums. What follows is an edited version of our conversation, #30 in an ongoing series that is part of the *Rail*’s New Social Environment, a daily lunchtime broadcast in the time of COVID-19.

McKenzie Wark (Rail): Well, Lyle, you're kind of a legend.

Lyle Ashton Harris: Hi everyone!

Rail: So do you want to tell us a little bit about *The Watering Hole* in 1996 and why you chose this particular show to introduce us to your work?



Lyle Ashton Harris, *The Watering Hole I*, 1996 Duraflex print, 40 x 30 inches. Edition of 6, 2 Aps., New York. © Lyle Ashton Harris

Harris: First of all, thank you McKenzie, it's really a pleasure! I've been a fan of your work for many years. In fact, I was thinking while in the shower before this Zoom broadcast [*laughs*] that the dates for *The Watering Hole* correspond to your legendary book, *I'm Very Into You: Correspondence 1995-1996*, about your correspondence with Kathy [Acker], and that you could speak about that period as much as I can. I decided to open up with *The Watering Hole* because as many of you probably know through a generous donation by my dear friend and patron Aggie Gund, MoMA acquired it a few years ago. At the time, the critic Vince Aletti told me that he

thought it was great that the museum got it, but that it might never see the light of day because of its content. So I'm interested in what's happened pre-COVID-19 over the last five to ten years in terms of social movements, in terms of cultural institutions feeling the need to somehow—I hate the word “diversify”—but in a way to get more “teethy,” in terms of the type of image-making or work that they are engaging the public with. So I thought it would be interesting to start with that.

I like the story of *The Watering Hole*, because before it made its first appearance at Jack Tilton gallery for my second show there in 1996, I remember Jack and I almost got into a fist fight because he said to me, “Where’s the winning image?” My first show with him had been widely successful, critically, etc. It was about the nation, if you will; the second show was about disintegration. Although *The Watering Hole* is dated 1996, there are certain images in this nine-panel work that go back to Act Up in ‘87, the exposé of Jeffery Dahmer coming to light, Magic Johnson coming out with HIV, and the L.A. uprising in ‘92—the images in these nine panels comprise a particular period of personal archive work. [*Harris holds up a typed letter with the letter “D” stenciled in gold on it.*] For the *Brooklyn Rail* (as a little “gift” to share with you), here is the letter I wrote to my father that appears with a “D”—this is the first time I’m actually showing it. This is part of *The Watering Hole* archive. I’ve been looking for this letter, because I did a performance at Participant Inc a couple of years ago after my father passed away and I could not find the original letter. So in order to make that piece [for Participant], which we’ll see later, I had to sample it from a transparency of *The Watering Hole* panel. In this new period of COVID-19, when I’m starting to think more deeply about the archive, I just came across it in a vault that contained all the original content. This is the first time I’m actually sharing this—the letter that I’m actually seeing for the first time just last night since ‘96, so I wanted to share it with you!



Lyle Ashton Harris, *The Watering Hole I-IX*, 1996. 9 Duraflex prints, each 40 x 30 inches. Edition of 6, 2 APs. © Lyle Ashton Harris

Rail: I just want to tease out that remark a little bit, “It might have been acquired, but will it ever be shown?” So what’s in the stack and what is actually ever shown is one thing—on the institutional side—but then you’re also talking about, for you; you have your own archive of this particular slice of culture that’s really not terribly well documented. But then, there’s this selection on one side and this selection on the other side, on the institutional side; and, maybe it’s worth just pausing to ask: What gets left out of both of those?



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Constructs #10, #11, #12, #13* (as installed at the Black Male Show at the Whitney Museum in 1994). © Lyle Ashton Harris

Harris: I think there was a systemic shift, not just in terms of institutions, but also artists, critics, collectors—the whole culture itself. I remember growing up in the Bronx, growing up queer, being called faggot, sissy, etc. and the trauma around that. I remember the Whitney's *Black Male* exhibition in '94 that I was in, and the resistance to the type of imagery that I had in that show, how I did not fall in the paradigm of Black masculinity. But five years later I'm being hired by *Vibe* magazine to shoot Missy Elliot and other hip hop artists. So it's not just within the art world, it's in the larger culture itself.

I'm part of a generation that actually applied pressure, if you will, to the culture, to give it elasticity to expand. And I'm obviously not the first, but I've definitely been inspired by the generation that came before me. [*Harris holds up a letter in an envelope with a "Silence = Death" sticker on it, dated September 18, 1991.*] Here's another thing that I had not seen since I received it—it's a letter from the great, late poet Essex Hemphill, which I posted on Instagram. Remembering at that time feeling numb back then, like I didn't have a voice. It took someone like him, who was a big brother to me, telling me that's how we earn our warrior marks. I'm sharing that with you because I think it's pertinent to where we are today. I remember a couple weeks ago one of my students saying they're bored—this is in the early stages of social isolation—to which I replied that when Gregg Bordowitz was dealing with the advanced stages of HIV in the late '80s, he didn't have time to be bored at twenty-one. He collaborated with Douglas Crimp and created the seminal work of AIDS activism, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*.

Rail: Speaking of which, I think maybe we'll move onto the "Ektachrome Archive," Ektachrome being a standard of color film reproduction shared by several different companies. I love it, actually, that you named it after a media technique, you know, it kind of speaks to me.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Ektachrome Archives (New York Mix)*, 2017 Three-channel high-definition video, color, sound Edition of 3, 1 Ap. © Lyle Ashton Harris

One thing I want to say is that it's a body of work that is working with archives that are not just yours. You're drawing in several that are kind of a family legacy if you like, you broaden it out that way a little just as well.

Harris: My grandfather was a photographer and shot over 10,000 slides documenting his friends and family, the church, etc. Ektachrome was first produced in the 1940s, and I think he was shooting in the late '40s. In fact, I inherited his Leica and his archive. My first show at Jack Tilton gallery titled, *The Good Life* consisted of formal Polaroid portraits that I took of my family juxtaposed against printed Ektachrome images that my grandfather had taken of his family. But the "Ektachrome Archive" itself is a separate project.

I lived in Ghana after being invited by Yaw Nyarko, an economist who was then vice provost of NYU, to go to Africa since I'd lived there as a child; he thought it would be good, as I could be helpful in setting up the NYU program in Accra. NYU, at that point, had campuses in Paris, London, Tel Aviv, etc., and he felt it was important to have one on the continent of Africa. So I went over in 2005 for a semester, I fell in love with the people, the culture, and someone there. That one semester appointment ended up lasting seven years. In fact, my tenure at NYU is based on the research I had done there.

Upon my return from Ghana in late 2012, I rediscovered a trove of Ektachrome slides shot in the late '80s to the early aughts that I had deposited at my mother's home before leaving in 2000 for a Prix de Rome fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. Then coming back from being a professor in Ghana and the director of an art center there, I re-engaged with an earlier punk aesthetic, if you will, from the early '90s to 2000. The initial prompt for me to re-engage these

images for the first time in over a decade was a request from Isaac Julien to use some of my snapshots in *Riot*, the catalogue published for his MoMA exhibition of 2013-14.

The first time I showed them was as a series of fifty images for a presentation that Gregory Crewdson and Rob Storr invited me to give at Yale, thinking at the time that I would eventually use these snapshots for college-making. But then a lot of the students there (who might have been infants when these images were shot) didn't care about who was who in the pictures, but they were able to have a formal read of the work, which was interesting to see because several months later I premiered 200 of them at *Carrie Mae Weems: Live* at the Guggenheim, and that was a very different story. People were actually crying—like Elizabeth Alexander, the poet—because it captured something from a period that they had lived. And it also captured and evoked for them a memorial of the people who had gone on.

I remember when Eva Respini, who was a curator at MoMA at the time, came for a studio visit and she said, “You have this archive of over five thousand images and journals, but what is the work that comes out of the archive?” And that felt like Greek to me, I didn't quite understand—I knew what she was saying, but that was a formal challenge to me: How do I take all these images and begin to massage, to extract?

It was curious to me because when I first showed these—I mean, they're images of my friends, you know, Iké Udé, Carrie Mae Weems, or being in London shooting Isaac Julien or the great Stuart Hall, or nudes, beaches. Unlike my grandfather, who had a label for each one actually written in pencil, mine were just in plastic bags. The question was, “Is that Black's Beach in San Diego? Or Martha's Vineyard? Is that Provincetown?” to the point of actually having to look at the grain of the sand, you know, really trying to get into the minutiae—“What bed was that exactly? Who was that?” That was the initial editing process, separating between beds and beaches, West Coast and East Coast, London and Paris, etc.

Rail: You wonder what is really the important information there—does it matter where this beach was? Or is it the gesture? Or is that these things are together? Is that the thing we really want? I mean, they both matter, I guess, but you know I think about that.

Harris: I mean, for me—I studied with Allan Sekula and Catherine Lord at CalArts—that level of specificity was important, whether or not the audience needs to know it. But for the sake of a book, we really drilled down on that. It has its own poetics. In the context of a slideshow, for example, one doesn't really know the specifics, it's more about affect. But in the context of a book, which is a different iteration, then that level of specificity for me is important.

Rail: Alright, well, let's give it a little sound check for a sec . . .

[*Video plays*]

Harris: Marlon Riggs, bell hooks . . .

Rail: Yeah, you wanna take us through it?

Harris: Yeah—Greg Tate, Cornel [West], Hilton [Als], my mom [Rudean Leinaeng], my former partner/soulmate Tommy Gear, Venice, Rome, Nan [Goldin], Klaus [Biesenbach], Stuart Hall, the Whitney ISP. Can we pause McKenzie? There was a slide that just passed that had the handwritten text “his cum and blood” This image—which is from the Whitney Independent

Study Program in '92 and would later become part of *The Watering Hole* in '96—that Ektachrome image functions for me almost like a drawing, it's mark-making. In a sense, to answer your question, it does give a level of specificity as to when the project began. That particular image offers evidence that although *The Watering Hole* is dated 1996, it is something that was initially triggered in '91, and it took five years of drilling down, you know, back and forth, East Coast/West Coast. The idea of having to move, if you will, through very difficult content, and apply a formal pressure, if you will, to allow stuff to emerge.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Nan, Berlin*, 1992, 2015, Chromogenic print, 15 x 20 1/2 inches, Edition of 3, 2 APs. © Lyle Ashton Harris

Rail: And I love that Nan Goldin is in the set, sliding by there, because Nan would be the grandmother to the trans women who are mothers to me. So there's a kind of temporality of it that works differently, because Nan's about my age I think, and looking at those pictures, they'd be my age had they lived, and most didn't.

Is it worth pausing just to reflect on what's our responsibility—maybe that's not the right word—what's our agency in talking about the '80s and '90s now, for people for whom, like many of our students were not even born, we're talking about an era before the internet really became a thing, when we were still living through the end of the Cold War—what's your feeling about how this presents, what work we're attempting to do to process that time, but particularly through these more specific lenses of experiences?

Harris: Fascinating question. I actually feel younger today than I did ten years ago, and I think it's a result of excavating the archive and the energy of today's youth, the hunger. In fact, I remember seeing Gregg Bordowitz doing a performance in his curated evening at the Whitney of

readings of works by Black gay men writers from the '80s and '90s such as Essex Hemphill, Donald Woods, etc. This was part of the *Blues for Smoke* show that started in L.A. and then went to the Whitney, and of course Douglas Crimp was there. But I was struck by the young generation, you know, the way they are pushing or applying pressure to our generation to give it up, to share those archives, because they are looking for models, if you will. Or even going back before to the other social movements, whether the Black Power movement, people are looking for strategies to think about forms of self formation, social formation, political agency, etc. I am actually drawn and enlivened by this young generation who are asking that—I'm not saying all of them—but I think there is a very strong energy coming from that direction.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Flash of the Spirit*, 2018. Dye sublimation print on aluminum 48 x 64 inches. Edition of 3, 2 APs. Signed on verso © Lyle Ashton Harris

Rail: Shall we talk about *Flash of the Spirit* bit? I love these photographs with masks, some of these are shot at Fire Island, some of these you made upstate, I think we established this before.

Harris: I think it was in 2018 that my friend and dealer Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn had asked me to show some works that the Tate Museum has recently acquired—the “Constructs” series—which were in the Whitney’s *Black Male* exhibition in ’94. Those works had been in storage for twenty-five years, and when they were shown again in New York at the Armory on the occasion of the publication of my book, I remember people thinking that they were made yesterday, because they had a certain freshness, even though they were done in ’89.

I can remember Thomas Lax, curator at MoMA and a friend, saying that he saw those works as a teenager when his mother took him to see the *Black Males* show—you never know what seeds you’ve planted. For example, when I read your book, *I’m very into you*, I didn’t know that many years later we’d be having this conversation. You never know the effect—that’s the power of work, the power of ideas, the ability to disseminate.

After I showed the vintage prints from the “Constructs” series, I began to think about whether it would be possible to make a new series of images to experimentally investigate the self. That

happened to coincide with my uncle Harold Epps, a collector of African art who traveled throughout Africa in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, having gifted me a couple of masks. The synergy of these occurrences prompted me to explore what it means for a middle-aged person to return to the body as a site of pleasure and play. It also made me think about how to move beyond projecting onto the other. These images are a way to engage the landscape, to go into it and think about notions of the body and the landscape.

It's so interesting just thinking about the wisdom that comes with that—the grace of being alive number one, having lost so much through the AIDS crisis, archives etc. And what does it mean to have the wisdom of having lived through that? Or as my friend Leyden says, having seen the devil and being able to tell the story, being able to live through that *and* to take pleasure in play, if that makes any sense.

Rail: That immediately makes me think of that bit in Sarah Schulman's book, *Rat Bohemia*, where she talks about walking down the street and seeing a dumpster full of playbills and knowing that another gay man has died. It's an image that trades on a cliché but it's also real. There are pieces of culture that fell away, and perhaps more intensely then, for Black and brown and queer people—and trans people as well.

Harris: Oh absolutely. Getting back to issues around the Dahmeresque in my earlier body of work, just thinking about—prior to Disney moving into 42nd Street—the longing for the pleasure and the sensuality of the city, but let's also talk about the element of violence. *The Watering Hole* was a way to work through that.

Rail: Do you want to tell me about *Untitled (DAD)*—who is the letter to and from?



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Untitled (DAD)*, 2018 Mixed media collage. Approximate Dimensions: 104 x 100 inches. © Lyle Ashton Harris

Harris: That's the letter that I mentioned earlier, a letter to my late father, who I had a challenging relationship with. I remember talking to a long-time friend, the philosopher Anthony Appiah, about the fact that although we had a difficult relationship, maybe my father's ultimate sacrifice was that he wasn't around—because, in a way, it gave me Africa. After he left, my mother, brother, and I moved to Tanzania, where we lived for two years. Thinking about what it meant to be a second generation Saint Kitts' man, being handsome and beautiful, and not being able to cope with racism, the inability to deal in a way. It's curious to me because he produced two queer sons, and what does it mean to embody certain gifts from him, also as a way to pay forward to the next generation?

The *Untitled (DAD)* collage actually had its origins in my 2018 performance/installation at Participant Inc., curated by the lovely, brilliant Lia Gangitano. I was in Paris when I found out that my father passed away, and I didn't know what I was going to do for this show. I decided to do a performance, exploring loss through ritual expressions of public grief and mourning. It was interesting because people like my mother, Mickalene Thomas, and Zadie Smith were there, and I was moved by the level of identification that people felt, the level of agency it gave them afterwards to come up and tell me their own father stories. It was interesting to me that something which is a highly personal archive engendered the possibility for others to reveal their own experiences, which up that point I was not aware of.

Rail: Now the first thing I want to ask you about these ones, the dye sublimation on aluminum, can you just tell me a little bit about the process?



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Untitled (Red Shadow)*, 2017. Ghanaian funerary cloth, dye sublimation prints, and ephemera 62 1/2 x 75 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami. © Lyle Ashton Harris

Harris: Dye sublimation is a printing process in which the ink is baked directly onto the aluminum itself. *Red Shadow* was the first one, which was done, I believe, in 2017 for my friend and dealer David Castillo in Miami. What I love about this one in particular is the sense of mark-making. I'll shoot something, then it may be another ten years before it really emerges, if that makes any sense. The Shadow Works are definitely another deep dive into the archive. For example, if you look at the upper right image in the left panel, that image is the figure of an early romantic obsession of mine from high school, actually in my bedroom in the Bronx. I kept that image that first surfaced in *The Watering Hole*. You think you're done but then images have a way of resurfacing.

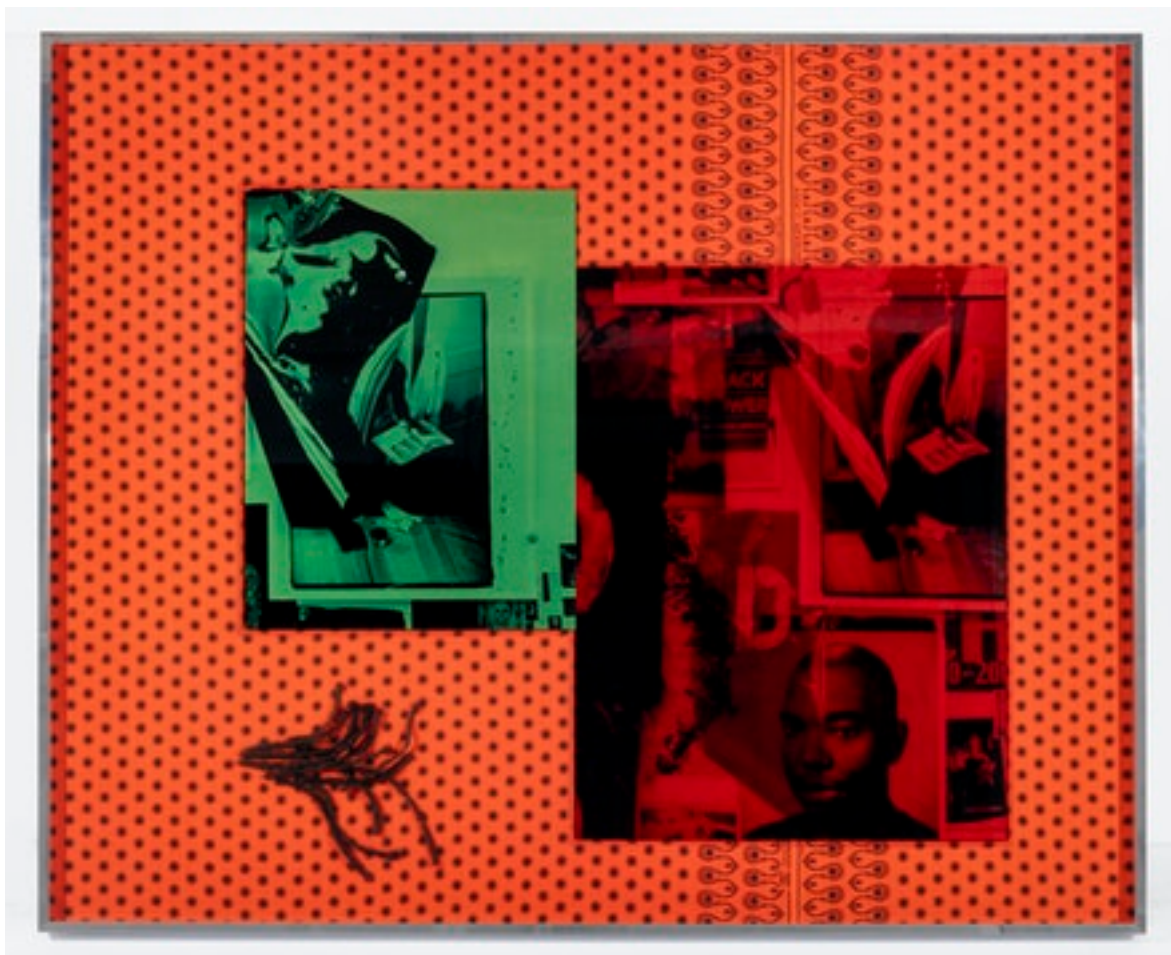
The backgrounds are all materials that I sourced in Ghana, as I mentioned, when I was living there. My partner at the time, Prince Marfo, was the grandson of the village wife of a former president of Ghana. It was great that I had the academic experience there, but to be involved with him, who's a bodybuilder, I also had sort of a high/low culture experience, if you will. I was able to gain access to Ashanti funeral rites—you don't just happen upon an Ashanti funeral. It's a very deep, rich, ancient culture. I was struck by the relationship to death—unlike the West, where there is a certain finality. In fact, I was doing some research and African American funerary practices are more akin to Akan funerary practices. There is an arc within that: There is clearly the grieving of the body, but within that there is thanksgiving, one is able to honor the ancestors and to be able to have an element of rejuvenation and celebration after that. The majority of the fabric I'm using is Ghanaian funerary fabric. This work is titled *Black Power*, which is a term that a lot of people credit to Stokely Carmichael after Malcolm X died, actually it came into cultural significance about a decade before when the author Richard Wright was invited by President Kwame Nkrumah to visit Ghana as it was making the transition to independence as the first sub-Saharan African nation. Wright's travelogue about his journey to Ghana in 1956–57 was titled *Black Power*.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Black Power*, 2019. Ghanaian cloth and dye sublimation prints 40 5/8 x 49 3/4 inches. © Lyle Ashton Harris

Rail: They seem to have a different relation to the archive in terms of a kind of elegiac feeling, maybe? That the memories come back with a different feeling? A kind of formal beauty that is maybe going on here that is kind of different. I just wonder how you feel about reprocessing one's past at a certain, shall we say, life-stage, that these things start to feel a little different, how one starts to give aesthetic expression to that?

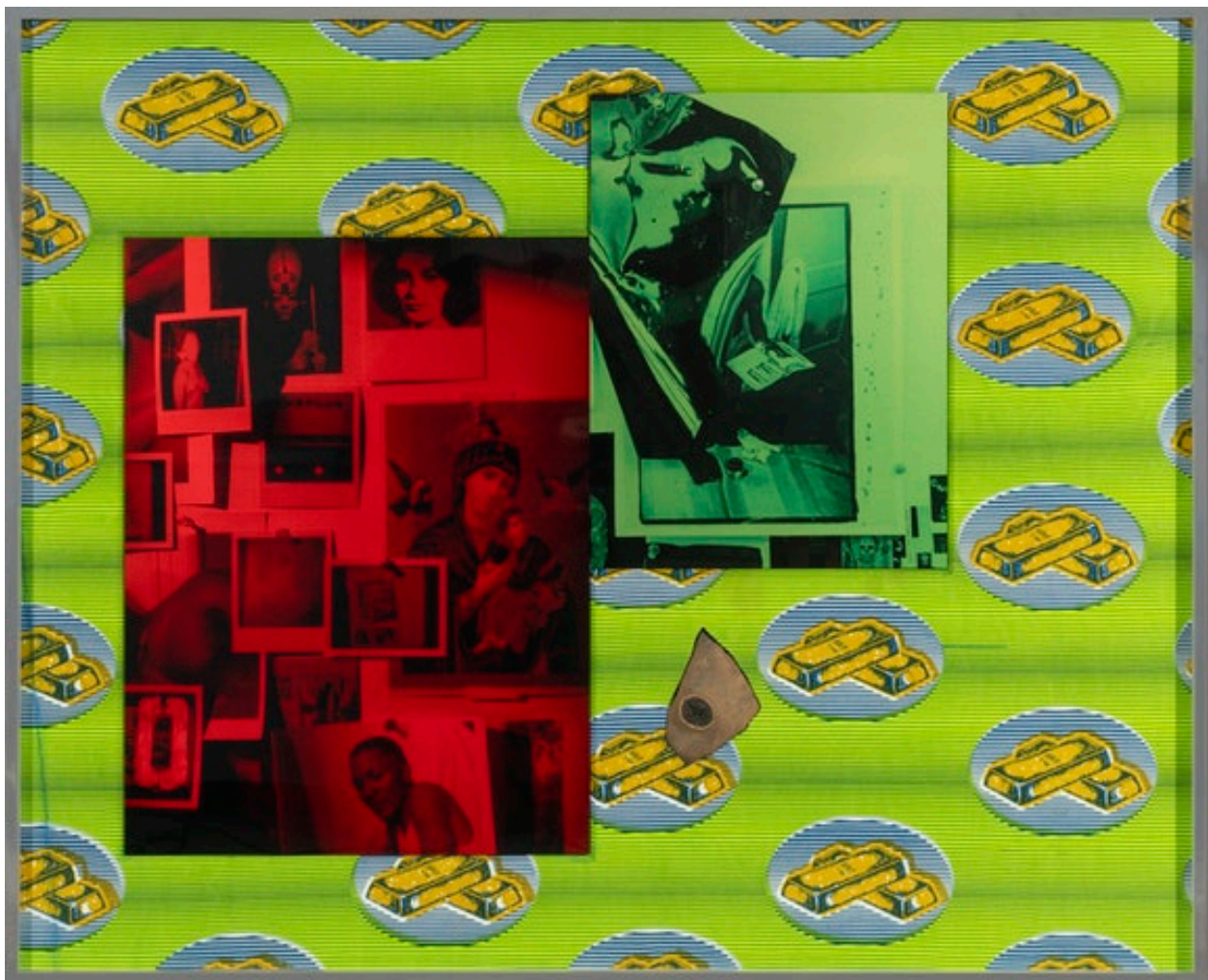
Harris: Well, it's curious, because some images are clearly sourced from the past, then you have a portrait of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who I photographed for a cover story in *New York* magazine. In this particular piece, *Double Gasper*, dreadlocks from my 20s are embedded, that I rediscovered in my archive after thirty years. I don't know, I guess it gets back to some of the early concerns of *The Watering Hole* in terms of applying a sort of formal pressure, if you will. I guess there is an elegiac element, through the use of filters, the mirroring, and also the veiling. I think that's been a repeating motif in the work, trying to somehow excavate the surface.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Double Gasper*, 2019, Ghanaian cloth, dye sublimation prints, and ephemera 40 5/8 x 49 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami. © Lyle Ashton Harris

For example, the piece of pottery in *The Gold Standard II*, (2019) is actually from something I purchased while I was in Ghana, something used to crush pepper that you get in the market for less than a dollar. This was something that I transported as if it were a very precious object. My dear friend and soulmate suggested that if something was that precious to me, after leaving Ghana to return to the states in 2013 it allowed me to hold on to the memories that were so important to me, so influential.

When I traveled there, I remember going to the airport and there was a sign, and as you know Ghana still has the British form of colonial buggery laws. So what did it mean for me to go in “professorial drag,” if you will? Often I was carrying three or four laptops as gifts for people. I know how to dress the drag, in this sense “professorial,” so I’m not checked at the border. Meanwhile, at the corner of my eye there’s a sign that says Ghanaian society does not condone pedophilia and other such things, and we know what that’s a code word for. So it was a way to reclaim that aspect. Why did I collect these materials? I had no idea how they would manifest—I’d given a lot of these fabrics away—I guess in a way it speaks to my process, in terms of, let’s say, accumulation.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *The Gold Standard II*, 2019. Ghanaian cloth, dye sublimation prints, and ephemera 40 5/8 x 49 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami. © Lyle Ashton Harris

Rail: I mean how do you make work that doesn't ignore, but kind of reprocesses western art history tradition? That's in here somewhere, but it's not necessarily featured, you know, it's not the controlling discourse. How is that then reprocessed through an everyday life, through the archive of a life or a set of lives that those aesthetic practices ignore or are never accounted for or repressed? So to me it seems you've sort of gone through all these stages to build the material and the layers and the practices and the experience to be able to make these things, to me of extraordinary, formal beauty at this stage of your career and life.

Harris: Going back to the work you also love—*Flash of the Spirit*—I remember when Nancy Spector walked through my show at Salon 94 with me in 2018. She said it was daring, considering the controversy around the '84 MoMA show on primitivism. What does it mean to return to that scene of the crime? Are there certain things that are left undone, that still need to be processed? And similarly, I think there is a certain masking that's going on in these works. I always think that I am constantly in the process—in terms of making work—of leaving cues, leaving traces. I'm not sure if it has to do with living with HIV for thirty-one years—the fact there's evidence that there's something that exists, if that makes any sense. I mean, it's curious. I'm just thinking, what does it mean to be anointed, to be able to tell a story in and of a griot. Does that make any sense? To reimagine what is possible and to claim that space. So it's a

personal archive, but one that is actually mapping out. And getting back to the fact of the incendiary reactions that I got to *The Watering Hole* [. . .] if all my “acting out,” of all the pleasure of youth—what was that guiding force that actually guided or hovered over the archive, that’s not only about me, but is about or for a future generation?



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Marlon Riggs, Black Popular Culture conference, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, December 8-10, 1991*, 2018. Chromogenic print. 15 x 20 1/2 inches. Edition of 3, 2 APs. © Lyle Ashton Harris

For example the *Black Male* show in '94, and before that the Black Popular Culture conference in '91 that happened in collaboration at the Dia Center for the Arts with the Studio Museum in Harlem—there is a level of cultural amnesia around these art historical moments, where there was a certain synergy happening, and if there's not any evidence of that then it doesn't exist. So my question to myself (and I'm not sure if that's the burden of representation or not) is what was the guiding force? I think that comes up within the ancestral play that's happening whether in *Flash of the Spirit* or in the *Shadow Works*. What *was* that energy? Now—and I don't know if I can describe that, I'm not sure if it's my role to name what that was—that was acting as a custodian of that—being a sissy, a queer from the Bronx, negotiating that and expanding out.

What does it mean to somehow apply the pressure to the culture to open up, whether that's in the Bronx or Ghana or Paris—wherever that makes any sense? I'm thinking of a show that I co-curated with Rob Storr and Peter Benson Miller at the American Academy in Rome in 2015 because professor emeritus Frank M. Snowden, a fellow trustee at the Academy whose father (Frank M. Snowden, Jr., who was at Harvard around the same time as the great W.E.B. DuBois)

had gone to the American Academy in the mid-1950s to transcribe, or to massage if you will, his thesis on Blacks in antiquity into a book. At the time, he was informed by the director of the American Academy that there were White southerners who did not feel comfortable being housed under the same roof as an African American person, a Black person. And the irony is, a few years later Frank M. Snowden, Jr., was appointed as the Cultural Attaché, the first African American in history, alongside Clare Boothe Luce, who was the first female ambassador. Basically the show was a trigger to talk about issues of Black culture in the diaspora in relationship to Italian culture. I'm just thinking about the trajectory of this young kid in the Bronx, and what does it mean to apply pressure? I'm interested in the energy that helped. I also want to give voice to those that did not make it. Let's be clear that in 2020, how many young queer youth and trans youth today are being murdered or are committing suicide? I had a student at NYU who is queer and her father was going to pull the plug on the tuition because she came out. I think it's important to think about how expansive we've been, but in the arena of what we might think of as progressive, there are deeply conservative strains and how do we deal with that—that's what I think makes the work so much more important today, if that makes any sense.

Rail: Oh, totally, yeah. How does one create and hold space so others can come into and make work with strikes me as particularly important, you know not least in the current moment we're in now.

Harris: I've been talking a lot, but I want to just say that I was sheltering down with a friend for twenty-seven days—and I've been cooking! It's amazing, I've made wild cod soup! I can't wait to make dinner for you and Phong—that's one thing I love to do, that's what I'm probably best at, is making food and hosting. That's one thing that gives me tremendous joy. *[Laughs]*

Q & A

Malvika Jolly: Our first question is coming from Nick Bennett from the *Brooklyn Rail* staff

Harris: Hi Nick!

Audience: Hi! Thank you so much Lyle, and my question kind of goes back to where the conversation started, and I had the pleasure of working with Phong on the 2017 Occupy Mana show, which was sort of a reaction to the beginning of Trump.

And it was incredible to see *The Watering Hole* series for the first time in person in that show, and I remember looking at it very closely, and you used these news clippings of men in Africa that would lure other gay men and then attack or even kill them. And then, of course, you used images of Jeffrey Dahmer. And I'm curious how in that work you were thinking through and personally relate to the predator in the gay male gaze, that sense of violence?

Harris: That's a very interesting question. But just for clarification, in the show there were two *Watering Hole* works, but there were also some more recent work called *Deceivers and Money Boys*—that's what you're referencing—and that's actually from 2013. So can you repeat the question for me please, in terms of issues of ambivalence and desire and violence?

Audience: I'm curious how you personally relate to that sense of the predator or violent predatory behavior within a gay context or within the gaze?

Harris: I think *The Watering Hole* is equally influenced by, let's say, Jeffrey Dahmer or *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. I don't think one is specific to queer culture. I'm struck by the level of provocative imagery, even on the internet, let's say Instagram and the suggestiveness in COVID-19. How much exercise equipments is being sold? The using of the body, if you will, to solicit a reaction. It's curious, I'm thinking about in the early '90s, studying with Connie Hatch. There's some unfinished business in terms of the study of image-making and how images are used to control people. I'm interested in the awareness of that, the extent to which and how that filters, pollutes—I mean, for me—other forms of transaction. I don't think it's just about violence occurring—I mean, clearly there is—as we spoke about trans violence or psychic violence within queer communities—and clearly there's physical violence.

There's a well known gay therapist, Walt Odets, who's the son of Clifford Odets—he came out with a book recently, titled *Out of the Shadows*, about gay male identity and to what extent in the arena of gay marriage, what's going on with the inability for people to have human connections. So, I'm less interested in fetishizing violence. Clearly the Jeffrey Dahmer piece or the piece you mentioned, *Deceivers and Money Boys*, that's an extreme iteration, but I'm also interested in the more subtle ways—and equally dangerous—how we consume the other. And particularly in COVID-19. I remember a student of mine last year who just graduated from NYU—he came from an affluent Chinese background—who was told on social media that there are more Chinese here than on the great wall of China. So I'm interested in the realm of, let's say, pleasure or desire, the level of violence that maybe an extreme serial killer is one version, but how we are all implicated in the consumption of the other, and how can we find other ways of relating to each other, if that makes any sense.

Audience: It does, thank you. And thank you for making that work.

Jolly: Our next question is coming from lovely JC—JC are you here?

Audience: Yeah, I'm here. Lyle and McKenzie, thank you so much for this conversation. Hearing these histories is such a bright spot in my week. My question is a little ramby so I apologize in advance. The *Roman Strangers* images in your "Italia" series express what feels like really intimate desire in a very public setting, and the viewfinder almost feels implicated. You can feel the actual camera apparatus, which to me feels like you're sort of forcing the viewer into your vision, and the viewer is very much present in your eye there. And I feel like those images share an interest—I'm going to connect this to McKenzie's work—I feel like they share an interest with *Reverse Cowgirl* in making queer desire something to be kind of publicly reckoned with. Yes, those are the images and they're beautiful—I really love those. And they do something so many different ways obviously, but the images kind of eroticize the public anonymity, and the book sort of makes extremely intimate moments public, but they both put the audience into a queer perspective. So I'm curious if you think about your viewer in a kind of literary readership sort of way in those images—like are you thinking about the viewer as somebody who is going to be reading through and looking through your eyes there? And then McKenzie, if you have anything to add about those images or how you think about images in your work, I would be grateful to hear from either or both of you.

Harris: Well, that's a great question. I guess I'm the ultimate viewer, and I want company to accompany me to the edge, if you will, but there may be a core group of people that in any

project are going to push me to that next edge. But I'll respond to these . . . I mean, there's an element of scopophilia, obviously . . . this was in Rome when I was at the American Academy in 2000 and it was an amazing experience. I was shooting with a Nikon with a 180 lens; I could be a good 15 - 20 feet away from the subject. So they were only strangers—I didn't know any of the people. In fact, it wasn't until a couple of years after I shot them that I found out that one of the people in the photographs was the fourth wife of the late [Alighiero] Boetti—the great artist, Boetti! And I was not aware of that—it wasn't until it was a curator at the British School in Rome who identified her. So these are people that I was photographing on the street, places like Piazza Navona, other places throughout Italy, in Verona or Bari, etc. So I think they give a sort of longing, if you will, in the act of looking or desire, without question.

Rail: I think what troubles and puzzles and intrigues a lot of trans artists and writers is the—what do we do with the cis gaze and what even is it? It's not even really been thought yet. So I folded that into the book, so there's at least one scene of public sex in *Reverse Cowgirl*—maybe only one—but this one comes at a key moment where it's me getting fucked in a dungeon that people will recognize if you do that sort of thing in New York. I just sort of described the layout of it, but there aren't that many, so people will go, "Oh yeah, I've been to that one for such and such a night," you know, which is kind of hilarious. But, you know, I'm getting fucked while being watched, and so then it's the men with their dicks in their hands watching that happen, so I've put the reader into the book—it's the same thing of the viewfinder occurring in the book. And I think that's paired with a quote from Robert Glück who describes exactly the same thing. The thing is that it's not unique to me, and I think this relates to this question of, yeah, when you're digging in an archive or in memory, on the one hand it's personal and on the other hand it's not—it's immediately implicated in these quite specific social fields that you might want to selectively bring back into the present. To me, that's the work—how do you kind of construct the possibility of ongoingness of certain lives that are not necessarily institutionally very well represented.

Jolly: Our next question is for Lyle and it's from me. I really love what you were saying about Black culture in the diaspora, it really resonated with me. I was thinking a little about the feedback loop, or the reciprocity between American Black liberation and African anticolonial liberation—specifically in Ghana, specifically what you were saying about how Black power came from the travelogue, from someone going through Kwame Nkrumah's era of Ghana. I really love that moment of the radical international solidarity projects that people like Kwame Nkrumah was taking up, really successfully inviting people, that there was a marvelous sort of cross-pollination or cross-travel happening then from which people could draw strength on the US side.

Harris: It was back and forth, in a way.

Jolly: Yeah—and this is obviously a weird question—but we know how that ended, right? With a kind of US covert take down of those moments, both on the Ghanaian side but a little bit here as well. And so my question is what would the American liberation leaders of this moment, who do you imagine they would look to as international collaborators? From where can we draw strength in this moment that might have a similar kind of base or relationship?

Harris: Fascinating question—you mean in COVID-19 or in general?

Jolly: I was thinking in general, but I feel like COVID-19 has doused gasoline over so many of the problems that were already aflame here.

Harris: I think what's become apparent is that we can no longer look for the "hero." I think it's much more lateral. You know, I think of movements such as Black Lives Matter, or #MeToo, or trans movements, or the energies that are happening, let's say, with the indigenous movements throughout Latin America—just thinking about the importance of harnessing those and thinking about collective dialogues among those people. I think for us, that's where agency lies, as opposed to looking for one. You can think about art for social justice, and I think it's important to really look at ways to move beyond a model that empowers the hero or just one person. I think we have to look for the heroes inside of ourselves and to somehow support social movements that are happening globally today. I think that is really critical.

Jolly: Thank you. We have a question from the audience. Are you here?

Audience: Oh my gosh! Hi, I'm so excited to ask my question to Lyle—hi Lyle!

Harris: Hi!

Audience: I've always wanted to ask you—I'm very interested in the process—I think you're known for your two-dimensional work mostly, and the transition of bringing performance and video into the spectrum of your work. Did you have to negotiate with your gallery to include it, and how was that transition for you? I'm interested because for my own work, I'm struggling with that.

Harris: Thank you for your question. I don't think the negotiation is with an outside entity, whether that's an institution, etc. I think it's about having to give oneself the agency to move into that particular field. To be able to explore. I know for me, my work had been performative for many, many years, but it wasn't until I did a performance at Yale for the Michael Jackson conference that I had threatened to do a live performance—and I actually did one. So, I think it's really about, in trusting oneself, can one actually push one's boundary, if you will. And I think the audience will always be there. I think it's really about to what extent is one able to push oneself, and the audience, from my experience, comes. It's there—it comes into formation.

Jolly: And our last question will come from our very own Phong Bui.

Audience: Hi Lyle!

Harris: Hi Phong!

Audience: I want to ask you, maybe both in a way, because when I last saw the work, Lyle, was at the Guggenheim show, *Implicit Tensions*, the Mapplethorpe show that you had three beautiful works in. One is the collage piece and the other is a little bit earlier, but wherever the work was there, it always spoke so much in the betweenness of your interest in sub-culture—there's a graffiti quality to the work, for sure. Your use of collage is unlike anyone else's, but there's also a strong solemn ceremonial presence in the work too. So between that I feel what makes your work so unique, and I just felt like asking—I know each work has a different kind of mediation—but tell us more about your sense of collage. How did that fit into the very early formation when so much is going on, particularly in the late '80s when people were trying to get out of the idea of *Simulacra and Simulation*? And I know you're one of the few artists who, by the early '90s were able to break free from that.

Harris: Interesting question. I'm trying to put my head around it. I think I could respond to that by saying that the form came out of necessity. Particularly after my first show, which was about the nation, the family portraits, etc. I was looking for a form that could encapsulate the disparateness, as opposed to the pressure to distill and make an iconic image—which is something I can do—there was pressure to engage the discursive. This I credit to my experience being at CalArts. Wesleyan was amazing, but there was something about trying to find a form or that with which I could encapsulate the multitude of experiences, if you will. I think there's an important conversation between Mike Kelly and Larry Clark in *Flash Art* with a small, little reproduction. And just seeing their early mark-making—that was one influence. Clearly looking at the work of the great Hannah Hoch, for example, thinking about how it took decades for her—it was Lynn Zelevansky—because she was a stepchild of the Dadaists, and several decades later she has emerged as being the representative of that particular movement, thinking about her ethnographic series. So I was also trying to think about how that form could engage the content but also interrogate the viewer. If you think about the early black-and-white works and the way in which they were being fetishized by the art world, etc.—I felt like I needed something, a methodology that could—to use Essex Hemphill's term, to make it harder for myself—to apply pressure to a way of visualizing the very ambivalent, complicated space where there wasn't any answer, the fact that the work did not become a space in which it was nicely tied up, but the fact that it was about the unfinished business. It was temporarily about the fact that one could have a necessary stopping point, but the fact that it was in formation. That's the kind of work that most intrigues me, the fact that a viewer is implicated but they're also a part of a process for its completion. It's never complete, but trusting the viewer (including myself) to present them with a series of clues and a pattern they most formally, conceptually, theoretically engage, but to be challenged by it. That's for me some of the most interesting work, and that's what makes it lasting. What am I battling with in this work? I remember Adrian Piper said to me many years ago—I met her through Maurice Berger—she said my work was ancient. And I didn't quite understand what that meant, but the fact that there was something. There were stories, there was something that I had touched in her. It's never complete—the fact that it continues. The fact that one maybe has to put a necessary framing on it, but the fact that it continues to breathe, it continues to grow is something that gets completed over and over and over through someone experiencing it.

Audience: The reference about graffiti, I don't mean graffiti in the East Village, in the Bronx, Harlem, I meant early on, like cave painters. Maybe Adrian was right to call it ancient, but that's the solemn ceremonial aspect of the work that I always find very interesting. Thank you.

Harris: Thank you.

Jolly: Thank you Lyle. Thank you McKenzie. And now to end with a poem. Today our reader is Charles Schultz.

Audience: Thanks Lyle, Thanks McKenzie. I'm going to read the Rilke poem, "The Panther," translated by Robert Bly.