

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS



Portrait by John Edmonds.

ANDREA BLANCH: *I'd like to talk a little bit about your childhood and your time in Tanzania.* **LYLE ASHTON HARRIS:** I grew up in the Bronx, but I lived in East Africa in the mid-seventies while I was an adolescent, from nine to eleven. **ANDREA:** *What was that like?* **LYLE:** It was a very interesting time. In a sense it was post-Civil Rights, and it was also a time when a lot of African Americans were answering the call to go abroad and to be of service in Africa. And it wasn't the first wave. On the eve of Ghanaian independence from British colonial rule, Nkrumah invited Richard Wright in late '56 to go over and to experience Ghana. So Wright's book, *Black Power*, was a travel log documenting his time there. My mother was probably the second or third wave of Americans who were post-Civil Rights, who were going over to be of service, in my mother's case, as a teacher. **ANDREA:** *How did that experience bear on your 2018-19 exhibition "Flash of the Spirit"?* **LYLE:** Well, there are close to forty years between my adolescence in Africa and the "Flash of the Spirit" body of work, which is the confluence of many different concerns. I had rediscovered some images from my earlier Constructs series that had been shown in 1996, but were shot in 1989, yet people felt that they could have been made the day before. So I was curious about what it would mean for a middle-aged man to go back to the body and see what that older body had to offer at this particular time. It was also prompted by a gift given to me by my uncle Harold Epps. He'd traveled throughout West Africa from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, and he had acquired several traditional masks. While growing up I would see these masks. "Flash of the Spirit" was a confluence of that with the renewed energy towards my earlier body of work. Also I began thinking more about these themes when I was living in Ghana while teaching at NYU Global. I had already moved away from self-portraiture, and my brother, the filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris, asked me to consider what it would be like to somehow re-engage those ideas of the self and subjectivity, and particularly in contemporary culture, which puts so much emphasis on youth. I thought it would be interesting to see what actually happens if I were to open up that space. **ANDREA:** *How did you get from "Flash of the Spirit" to the Shadow Works?* **LYLE:** That's an interesting question, and I'm still trying to understand their complex relation, because this new series of work is still unfolding. There has been an element of abstraction to my work from the beginning, even in the montage work that I had been doing, but I think the Shadow Works were prompted by several things. One was the acquisition and display of *The Watering Hole* at MoMA twenty years after it was originally produced, which led me to think about some of my earlier concerns regarding the relationship of personal narrative to collage and montage work. Then, I believe it was in late 2017, I got a prompt from my Miami gallerist David Castillo, who encouraged me to think about doing a new work; he is a very big advocate of my work in terms of the deep challenges that it poses with its aesthetic and conceptual richness. And I was also thinking about what it would mean to return to the scene of the crime, if you will, and to the archive. Prior to that, in 2013 I'd rediscovered an archive of my earlier Ektachrome work that had been in storage, the Ektachrome Archive, which formed the basis of my installation at the Whitney Biennial in 2017. But there were other images, for example, that didn't fall into that particular trajectory, images that were more personal, images that resurfaced over and over, even if they'd been shot thirty or forty years earlier. So I began to think about why some images kept on resurfacing? What's getting worked out for me conceptually, but also formally? What's getting worked out in terms of the content that I'm

trying to unpack? When the first one of the Shadow Works premiered, it was very different from my previous work, but it had something that I think has always been there in terms of my thinking about imagery, applying pressure to the imagery, letting it somehow bubble up. I began to work with other media, thinking about how, materially, the surface could at once flatten and at the same time reveal. And as opposed to trying to fit it all in one image, I began to think about the possibilities of maybe one or two or a few surfaces that were embedded together. **ANDREA:** *How long have you been working on the Shadow Works?* **LYLE:** I've been working on them since December 2017, and it's taken a while. There's something about this new work that took longer. **ANDREA:** *It's so layered, drawing on images from your archive as well as current images, and you seem to be using color in a new way, too. What are you trying to communicate?* **LYLE:** I think the Shadow Works are deploying multiple formal and conceptual strategies that have been part of my work since the beginning, but there's something additional here that I feel is a reflection of age, something that feels like an acknowledgement of my influences in a more well-rounded way: Afro-fusion, global cross-references, and drawing on or alluding to certain cultural histories. There's an element of sampling, too, that has a curious relationship to my large Blow Up wall collages that you're probably familiar with, which I began producing in 2005 and in some cases are comprised of hundreds of individual elements. There's something about that approach for me that felt deeply generative and multivalent, as opposed to trying to distill something into one image or two. That earlier collage work had elements that might signal something to one who knew the references, but it was also able to signal something to a broader viewing public as well. It's more democratic in that way, which I like because we are all in the process of gathering materials—collaging our refrigerators, so to speak—and I love that energy! But with these Shadow Works, I think there's something more going on in terms of really drilling down. There's a new level of focus and precision, an economy in terms of the amount of imagery that's being used, a constellation of chiaroscuro and color that all works together to create a more nuanced formal play. And if one chooses to go deeper into the substantive content of each unique piece, that's available, too. **ANDREA:** *It's a very mature work. What's the relationship between the Shadow Works and the work that came before them?* **LYLE:** I'd say that it's not necessarily born directly from the previous work, but it does come from some of those concerns that have been the hallmark of my practice, whether that's subjectivity, self-portraiture, collage, or issues of gender or sexuality. In addition to that, however, there's a way in which it's more about us as a nation of multiplicities as opposed to the specificity of difference. **ANDREA:** *Would you consider it more intimate compared to other works you've done?* **LYLE:** I think there is, perhaps, a refinement, if you will, and a higher level of disclosure. Something is becoming much more revealed; in a way, it's getting stripped down. That said, there's another layer of veiling that's happening, the veiling through color and shadow. There's a simultaneity of both revealing and masking, and I'm interested in that tension. **ANDREA:** *You've said that the Shadow Works aren't born directly from your earlier work, but they do seem to make reference to it, and to earlier historical moments, as well. What was the impetus for this?* **LYLE:** I think any artist overlaps with their previous work. Take, for example, early Picasso to the late Picasso, or Van Gogh for that matter. What I'm interested in is a deeper reveal in terms of subjectivity. What does subjectivity mean exactly? In Van Gogh's case, the public fetishizes the cutting of the ear, but what we don't talk about is the trauma of the family. We don't talk about

Lyle Ashton Harris, *Oracle*, 2020.

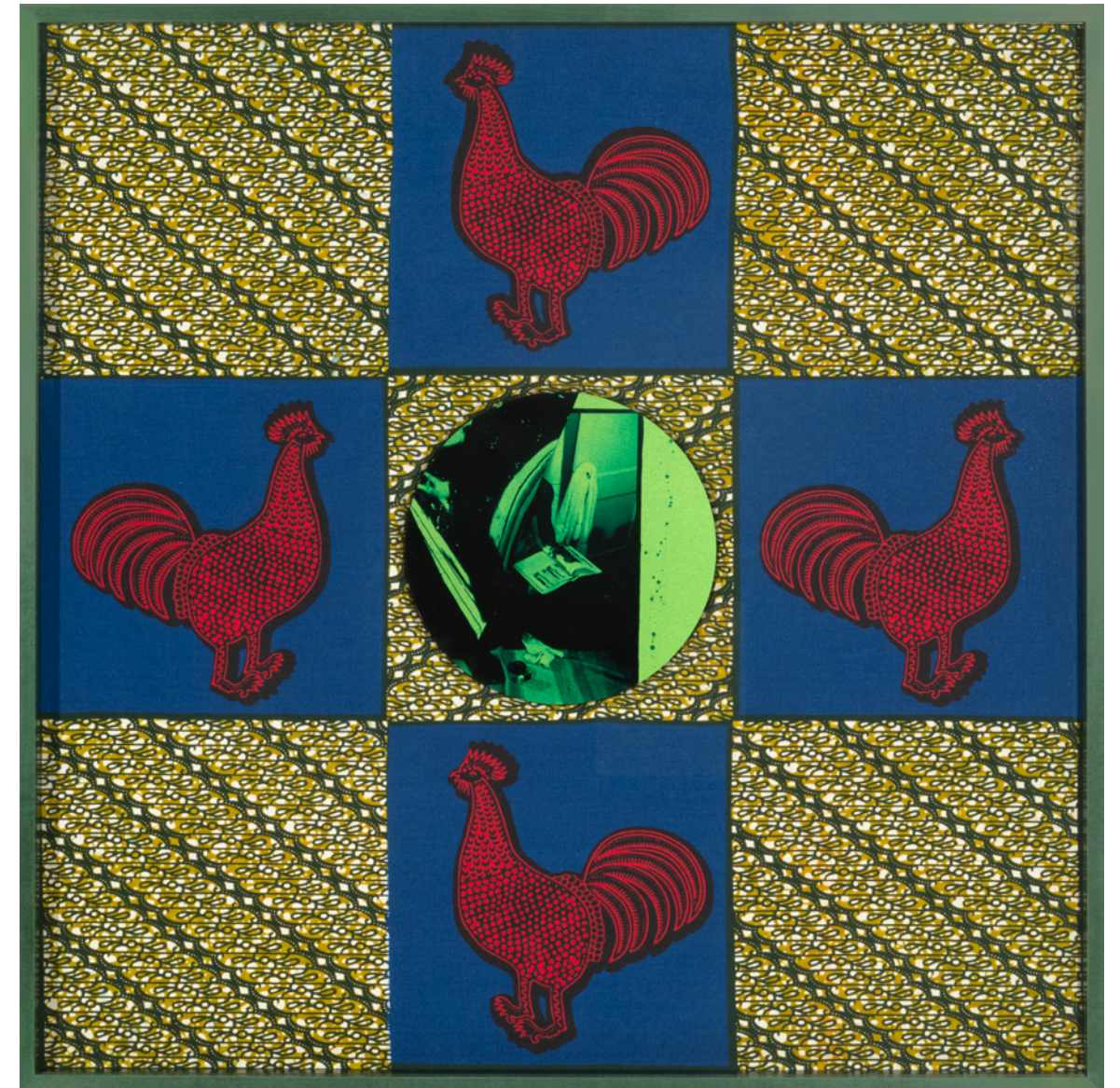




how the mother's and the father's petty bourgeois anxiety got displaced onto the vulnerable one. I'm sort of digressing right now, but I am interested in those layers. I'm interested in work one could actually "pepper," if you will, with some of those other urgent subtexts. Let's take, for example, the piece titled *Black Power* [2019], which is part of the Shadow Works series, and features a self-portrait that Kathy Ryan commissioned for *The New York Times Magazine* in 2000 as part of that election year coverage. When I initially submitted that image for publication—an image portraying me in handcuffs with a tattoo that reads "my n-i-g-g-a"—Kathy had to advocate for it with the magazine's editor at the time due to the potency of the image. And so I'm interested in how an image that was shot in 2000—which was also recently featured on the cover of the *Brooklyn Rail* earlier this year—how that's now speaking to what has shifted in the last twenty years, in terms of Black Lives Matter, the racism and violence in policing, et cetera. So there are multiple cues and references to earlier works, both formally and content-wise. There is a tension, a pull-and-push, that I'm trying to excavate, while at the same time producing a rupture in the visual experience of the work. **ANDREA:** *I love what you named your archives, the Ektachrome Archive. Can you speak a little bit more about it? What time period does it capture?* **LYLE:** The Ektachrome Archive dates from a period beginning in the late 1980s to the 2000s, and much of it hovers around 1992. But in terms of its origins, I had been taking snapshots from adolescence on. My grandfather shot over ten thousand slides documenting our family, friends, the church community, picnics, et cetera. I was very much influenced by that while growing up—being photographed and documenting everyday moments. And then later, when I was in grad school at CalArts, I read an essay by a friend, the writer bell hooks, which mentions that in the segregated south, photographs on the walls of people's homes or in churches *were* the galleries, these *were* the galleries in which Black people would actually get that sense of self, that collective reimagining of what was possible, since the images might not have been in larger circulation, particularly in segregated America. I traveled to Europe in 1992 during which time I spent a week with Nan Goldin in Berlin and experienced her level of focus and intensity. I feel there's something specific about the Ektachrome Archive that captures the confluence of Black diaspora communities with queer communities in Los Angeles to New York to London to Paris—collectives of people gathering together long before social media. It also documents more public gatherings, such as the Black Popular Culture Conference in 1991, which is one of the first convergences of people interested in reflecting on Black popular culture as part of the challenge to, or as an expansion of and engagement with, the wider cultural avant garde. In a way, the Ektachrome Archive also reflects a certain sphere of intimacy that's not often associated with otherwise public occasions. For example, the current generation might recognize the writer bell hooks in a photo, but not have seen an image of her warmly kissing the late filmmaker Marlon Riggs on the ear—it captures a very intimate space that we often don't see portrayed. **ANDREA:** *Did you use some of those images from the Ektachrome Archive in the Shadow Works?* **LYLE:** There are a few folded in there, without question. A selection of thirty-eight photographs from the Ektachrome Archive will be presented at the ICA in Miami this fall through Spring 2021, accompanied by a set of personal journals that I kept over the same period the images were shot. **ANDREA:** *You have a lot of work ahead of you.* **LYLE:** I have a busy fall. It's good to be able to be productive during COVID. **ANDREA:** *I was going to ask you about that. How have you been handling it?* **LYLE:** I think it's been a challenge for all of us. But it's been



a rich period, too—to drill down into things from a different point of reflection. I’m grateful for being busy, and I’m grateful to be thinking about how a lot of those photographs [from the Ektachrome Archive] document people who’ve been highly influential to what’s going on now—Angela Davis, for example. Also to reflect on what it means to have a unique visual document of these particular people. It’s good to see how younger generations are drawing from certain people who’ve been highly influential in the academy, and how they are putting into action the theory that the older generation taught. **ANDREA:** *I think your work has always been relevant to the times. What do you think about self-portraiture, how it’s evolved now that anybody can take selfies with their phones? Does that affect your work at all?* **LYLE:** It’s a complicated question. I think like anything, one can get over-saturated. But I also think that now more than ever, people—particularly our youth—are stepping up in a way that’s quite remarkable. It’s amazing to see how the youth, and for that matter their parents, are answering the call. Whatever it takes to make that happen is quite extraordinary. **ANDREA:** *When you see all these selfies or people doing self-portraiture, though, does it ever make you think that you have to do something else now?* **LYLE:** Maybe there’s an element of that for many artists. But I think one can return to things over and over and over. Think of some of the best artists you’re recurrently drawn to! I’m interested in how an artist’s early concerns can get refined or revisited in one’s later work. I think, if anything, it’s more about me waking up to my middle age, because I often still think of myself as a young person making stuff out of necessity or maybe survival, or just to be heard. I think all artists, no matter what age they are, have that experience. They’re trying to clear the path, get beyond the distractions—maybe that answers your question. I will say that I never thought that I would go back and do a series



of self-portraits like the ones I did in previous years. At the time I was speaking more to our earlier generation because there’s been an emphasis on youth and beauty, particularly in a culture in which the nonconforming have been historically marginalized. But I think that that’s actually shifting right now in the wake of COVID. In that sense, this is a historical moment; there’s a greater emphasis on the fragility of life, and it’s not just in terms of older people or middle-aged people regarding COVID, but also in political terms. Things have shifted, and I want to use whatever energy I have to support that. In the course of the first two weeks of COVID, initially some of my students might have been bored, but after they got over that, they put themselves out there, really putting their bodies on the line in street demonstrations, et cetera. I highly respect and appreciate that. So in a way, as an artist I’m taking up the challenge of trying to answer the question: How can I remain true to myself and engage specifically with where I find myself at this particular moment, as opposed to trying to morph myself into something that I’m not? And I believe that, as we increasingly become more earnest and honest in engaging with such questioning, the answers we find will be undeniable.