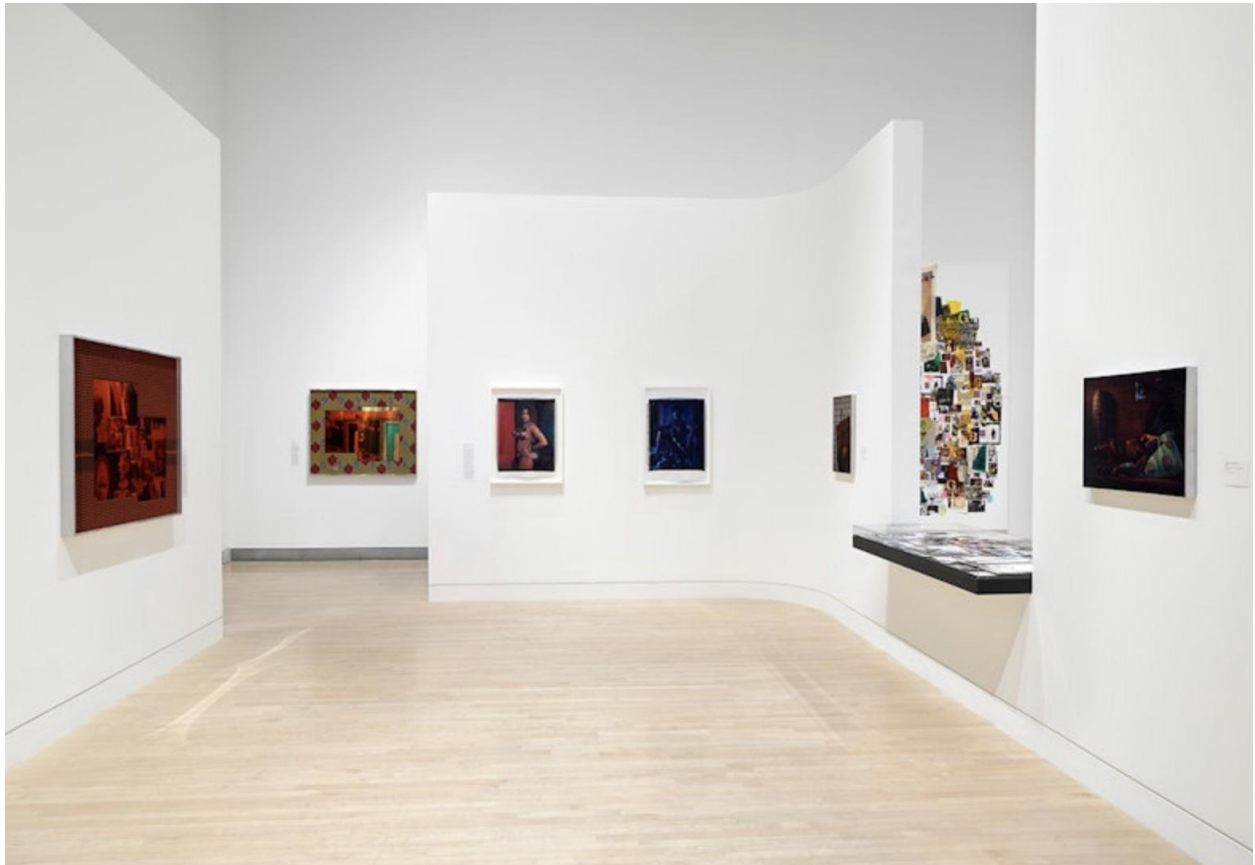


ArtSeen

Lyle Ashton Harris: *Our first and last love*

By Leah Triplett Harrington



Installation view: *Lyle Ashton Harris: Our first and last love*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 2023. Image courtesy the Rose Art Museum. Photo: Julia Featheringill.

Lyle Ashton Harris: Our first and last love presents thirty-five years of the artist's work, which often veers into collage, installation, and performance in an exhibition that is as much a cumulative self-portrait as it is something of a mid-career retrospective. The show, which traces Harris's consistent exploration of how identity intersects with social and cultural contexts, is titled after a fortune cookie message he received in the early 1990s, an affirmation that he's kept close ever since. He uses the phrase materially in *Our First and Last Love Is Self Love* (1993), scripting it in red neon lights within a black rectangular frame. Like much of Harris's photographically-driven installation work, this piece accumulates and alchemizes light, color, and contrast to suggest a cumulative whole with an emotional depth far greater than that of its singular parts.

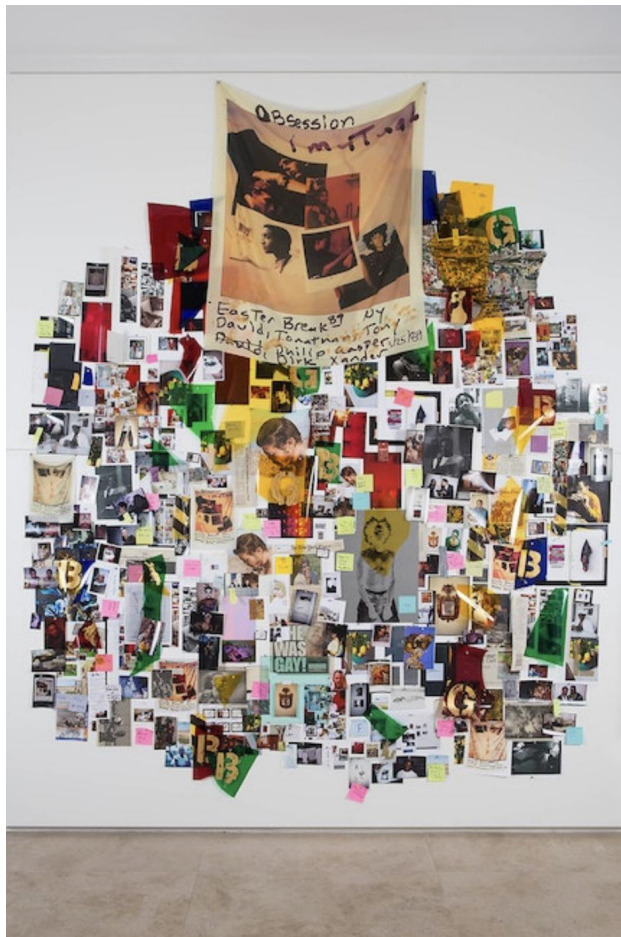
Our First and Last Love Is Self Love is installed at the far corner of this compact, almost compressed, exhibition. The fortune cookie message, which Harris had taped into his journal, circling it with a star and scrawling beneath it “I Choose to Live,” is also on view, in one of two vitrines that neatly display collections of the artist’s personal ephemera dating from 1961 to 2021 (the collection includes material from before Harris was born). The sentiment, as well as the additional handwritten notes to himself or others, adds a stratum of documentative and poetic meaning to what might otherwise be fleeting and forgotten. Its message echoes throughout the show.



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Harris’s recent series of “Shadow Works,” in which he collages photographs, news clippings, Ghanaian cloth, and personal ephemera such as shells, beads, or even his own hair serve as thematic nodes threading through the labyrinthine installation. *The Gold Standard I*, (2019) is one of several of these collages that includes depictions of Harris’s childhood friend, Gaspar. Here, Gaspar is a seated figure, his head hidden, flipping through a magazine next to an image of collaged pin-ups of cultural icons, the photographs placed within a stretch of bright green

Ghanaian fabric punctuated by crisscrossed yellow gold bars. Harris, a queer Black man, often returns to Gaspar's image, presenting it as a symbol of the "Black urban and masculine beauty" paramount to his youth, as a nearby wall label attests. His presentation of a man casually looking at some form of mass media—a book or magazine, the image is indistinct— amidst a composition of wildly contrasting color, pattern, and a universally understood emblem of capital wealth seems to suggest the tension between individuality and social norms.



The Gold Standard I coalesces a section of the exhibition contending with how our interior condition interacts with or is influenced by others. This cluster includes the earliest works on view, three black-and-white silver gelatin prints from 1987, each depicting a concealed or fragmented body. In two of these images, *Ecstasy #1* and *Ecstasy #2*, a deliberately blurred figure screams—whether in pleasure, pain, or both, the condition is enigmatic. *Saint Michael Stewart* (1994) also hangs nearby, a polaroid self-portrait of Harris in full makeup and dressed as a New York City police officer, standing in profile with his gaze defiantly meeting ours. Taken eleven years after the 1983 death of Michael Stewart, a Black artist killed while in police custody, this photograph conjures the structural violence that continues to plague Black communities today.

Echoing the colors of the exhibition's

title work, *Saint Michael Stewart* is awash with black and red, traditionally worn by Ghanaian mourners to demonstrate their grief.

Our first and last love pulsates with these two colors. Placed at the show's entrance is *Queen Mother*, a "Shadow Work" from 2019, which evinces many of Harris's formal and conceptual concerns. In it, a piece of geometrically-patterned, red and black cloth frames a collage of photographs cast in the same hues, depicting postcards of Byzantine statues, Egyptian icons, Yoruba carvings, and Andy Warhol's Elizabeth Taylor. Juxtaposed alongside this

¹ Lyle Ashton Harris, *Obsessão II*, 2017. Mixed media collage on panel. © Lyle Ashton Harris.

transcultural iconography are personal snapshots assembled with a strategy anticipated in the “Blow Up” series (2004–2019), in which Harris arranges personal and public ephemera (such as polaroids or magazine clippings, respectively) into repetitious, puzzling patterns. Presented here from the “Blow Up” series is *Obsessão II* (2017), a vast cascade of such hand-annotated items in an arrangement that foils the tidiness of the nearby vitrines. As with all of Harris's work, *Queen Mother* and *Obsessão II* contain multitudes of meanings that ricochet between personal and universal, resisting flatness for figurative dimensionality. And while much of this work is almost elegiac, there's also a hopeful note, as *Our first and last love* illustrates Harris's ability to endlessly return to moments, moods, and themes again and again, making new, nuanced meanings from singular images.