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CRITIC'S PICK

A Photographer Widens His Gaze to Loss, and It's a Gain

Pieces add up to an archive of a life lived deeply in Lyle Ashton Harris's compelling survey at the Queens Museum.

By Holland Cotter
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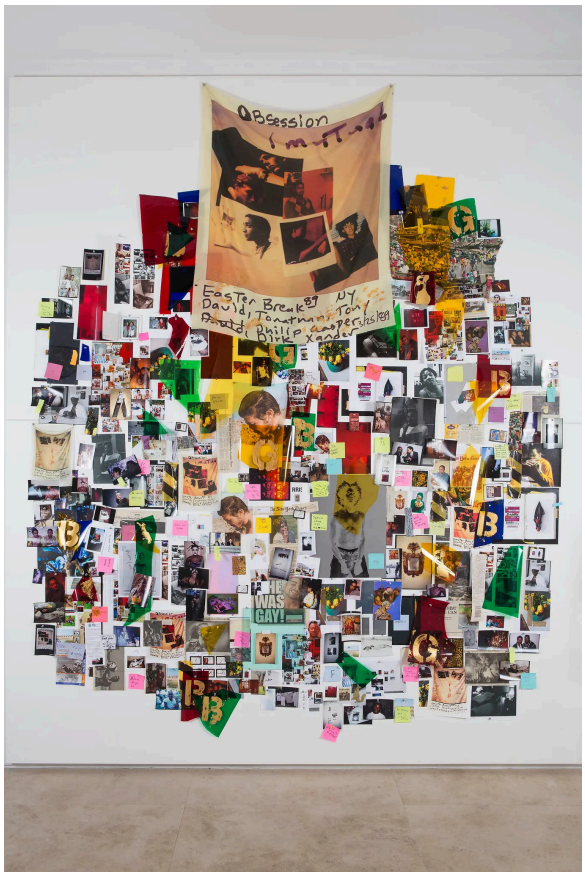

If you're a habitual saver, not to say hoarder, of personal memorabilia — snapshots, postcards, clippings, ticket stubs, notes-to-self, — the time comes when you need to figure out what to do with the stuff — sort-and-toss, or deep store? — if only to clear space for more.

The artist Lyle Ashton Harris is just such a saver, and he's found a terrific solution. He's turned some three decades-worth of loosely curated personal accumulation into one of the most remarkable bodies of American art around, a data-dense, visually compelling archive, not just of one life but, as seen through that life, of the social and political history of Black queer culture in the post-Stonewall years.

The basic dynamic of his method and perspective is encapsulated in the phrase used as the title of his first New York survey, "Lyle Ashton Harris: Our First and Last Love," now at the Queens Museum. He came across the phrase on a slip of paper in a Chinese fortune cookie back in the early 1990s, and pasted it, as he regularly did other finds, in a notebook.

That notebook is in the show, and if you track it down you discover that the "fortune" actually reads in full: "Our first and last love is ... Self-Love." And right from the start, Harris has used

[1] Lyle Ashton Harris, "Obsessão II," 2017. Mixed media collage on panel at the Queens Museum. The artist has been collecting images, materials and memories from Tanzania to Ghana to New York, which all found a place in his art.

self-image, directly or indirectly — who he is, what he has — as a tool of personal and political investigation.

"Succession," 2020, two dye sublimation prints on Ghanaian fabric and the artist's ephemera. The bewigged Harris is here, and one of him as a toddler, sitting on the lap of his father, Thomas Allen Harris Sr. Credit: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University

His earliest work is a form of theatrical self-portraiture. As an undergraduate in the late 1980s at Wesleyan University, where he came out as gay and was one of the few Black students, he photographed himself in a blond wig and whiteface, flipping old machismo and minstrelsy tropes that still attached to Blackness. In self-portraits from a few years later he pushed a little harder.

For one called "Saint Michael Stewart"— named for a young Black graffiti artist who died in 1983 after lapsing into a coma while in police custody in Manhattan — Harris wore full female makeup and an N.Y.P.D. uniform. For another called "Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera #2," he posed nude in a mouth to-mouth kiss with his older brother, the artist Thomas Allen Harris, who was also nude and pointed a gun at his chest.

Both images are in the show, organized by Lauren Haynes, former director of curatorial affairs and programs at the Queens Museum and Caitlin Julia Rubin, former associate curator at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. And they give a sense of the spectrum of identities Harris was critically examining related to race, gender and sexuality. Each of these subjects was getting attention from other artists at the time. But no artist, at least in New York City, was so consistently tackling the whole range from a queer Black position.

And to these subjects Harris added still others. One was family. In his first New York solo in 1994 he showed, along with "Brotherhood," a beautiful studio portrait he'd made of his grandfather, Albert Sidney Johnson Jr., a prolific amateur photographer who had himself been photographed by James Van Der Zee and whom Harris considered an inspiration.

And there were repeated references to contemporary Africa. Harris, who is now 59, was born and raised in the Bronx, but in 1974, after his parents divorced, his mother, a chemistry professor, took a teaching job in Tanzania and brought her two young sons with her. They lived, enthralled, in Dar es Salaam for three years. In 2005, Harris returned to Africa and stayed for seven years, this time in Accra, Ghana, teaching art in New York University's Global Programs and collecting images, materials and memories that would find a place in the increasingly collage-style format of his art

Collage and related forms of assemblage dominate a survey that spotlights Harris's newer work, though a collage sensibility was at least as evident as studio-based portraiture even early on. In 1990, for his graduate project at the California Institute of the Arts, Harris pinned snapshots of lovers and friends to a gallery wall — much as he did in his studio — and called the informal and expandable mural "Secret Life of a Snow Queen." (A version is in the Queens show.)

Through the 1980s and '90s, years of crucial developments in Black intellectual culture, and in LGBTQ+ activism spurred by AIDS, he carried a camera everywhere, photo-documenting conferences, protests, dance clubs, and his own life, public and private. By the time he moved to Ghana he had amassed some 3,500 color slides that he deposited for safekeeping, along with a stockpile of Polaroids, videos, journals and ephemera, at his mother's house in the Bronx.

Back in New York in 2012, he retrieved what he calls the "Ektachrome Archive," and it has become the wellspring for much of his subsequent work. Portions have been presented as video slide shows and as large-scale wall pieces like "Obsessao II," a towering, floor-to-ceiling

[2] Lyle Ashton Harris, "Saint Michael Stewart," 1994, Polaroid, featuring the artist in full female makeup and an N.Y.P.D. uniform. Credit... Lyle Ashton Harris

patchwork cascade of printed and written matter, Post-it notes included, topped by the single hand-scrawled word, “obsession.” And for the survey he has filled two vitrines with handpicked choices, each item identified and annotated in the catalog.

Lyle Ashton Harris, excerpt from “The Secret Life of a Snow Queen,” 1990, mixed media. In a graduate project, Harris pinned snapshots of lovers and friends in an expandable mural. Credit... Lyle Ashton Harris

These vitrines preserve the starter materials for the show’s most recent pieces, a group of complex, tightly edited multimedia assemblages called “Shadow Works,” of which a dozen are on view. They share a format: Each is a photographic still life composed of different archival elements in the vitrines, with the prints displayed against backgrounds of Ghanaian textiles, most of which, in their original context, have ritual and specifically funerary associations.

The still lifes are built around themes, and some seem straightforward. A piece called “Queen Mother” (2019) is a globe-spanning bouquet of female images: a Byzantine Madonna and Child; an ivory carving of a royal Benin matriarch; a print of Andy Warhol’s “Liz,” and a shot of a glum-looking young Harris in a blond wig.

Other pieces are barely accessible. “Untitled (Red Shadows)” from 2017, with its murky tangle of Calvin Klein underwear models, naked Abu Ghraib prisoners, and planes speeding toward the World Trade Center towers, is actually hard to see clearly. Here Harris seems to be bringing his

long-running critique of masculine power to a sharp point. And it makes sense that the Ghanaian fabric framing the ensemble is sewn with traditional emblems signifying anger and grief.

Most of the work in the series, though, is not so dramatic. It has a reflective, even pensive air. “Succession” (2020) does. The bewigged Harris is here again, but so is another image of him, as a toddler, sitting on the lap of his father, Thomas Allen Harris Sr. When his father died a few years ago, he and his son were still distant. So it’s nice to see the same photo turn up in another piece, “Legacy,” set among Ghanaian emblems of reconciliation.

Autobiography — alertness to lived experience, and nurture of the memory of it — has always been Harris’s natural mode as an artist. I guess you could call such a focus a form of self-love. For sure, it guarantees that you have an inexhaustible archival resource to work with. And it’s an archive that expands over with time, meaning with age.

Naturally, loss — loss of family, cherished places, treasured friends — shapes its mood and contours. But for an artist, an alert one, loss can also be gain, because it can make work richer, which is happening in the case of this artist, judging by this meditative midlife retrospective.

Lyle Ashton Harris, “Queen Mother,” 2019. A Byzantine Madonna and Child; an ivory carving of a royal Benin matriarch; a print of Andy Warhol’s “Liz,” and young Harris in a blond wig. Credit... Lyle Ashton Harris

“Untitled (Red Shadow),” 2017, with Calvin Klein underwear models, Abu Ghraib prisoners, and planes speeding toward the World Trade Center towers. The Ghanaian fabric is sewn with traditional emblems signifying anger and grief.
Credit... Lyle Ashton Harris, via David Castillo Gallery

Lyle Ashton Harris: Our First and Last Love

Through Sept. 22, the Queens Museum, New York City Building, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens, 718-592-9700; queensmuseum.org.