

ALEXANDER

HARRISON

SELECTED PRESS

Alexander Harrison's Intimate Vignettes Are Imbed with Tension and Mystery

JEWELS DODSON

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Portrait of Alexander Harrison in his studio. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

Looking into the distressed trompe l'œil wooden frame, there is a beautiful scene. Underneath a large midnight sky is an herbaceous spread of land. In the foreground sits a flower with a kelly green stalk lined with leaves. And atop the stalk is a cluster of buttercup flowers, their cornflower blue petals kissed by the light of a soft, distant moon. The scene would be perfect if not for a fallen flower detached from the bunch—its bittersweetness palpable.

This four-by-four-inch painting, *Moon Lite Doom* (2023), is part of several miniature works in Alexander Harrison's current exhibition "Big World," on view at New York's Kasmin through March 4th. In 14 new pieces, Harrison creates snapshots into his ethereal world filled with mythical figures and robust themes.



Alexander Harrison, *Moon Lite Doom*, 2023. Photo by Diego Flores. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

Harrison's work is an alchemy of feelings, imagery, and mystery. Oftentimes, the artist does not indicate when and where his scenes take place, leaving the viewer to infer from the sweeping skies filled with saffron and marigold hues whether it's dusk or dawn. Meanwhile, his night skies, delightfully dark, are almost always illuminated by more than the moon naturally allows. Like the Italian Old Masters, Harrison dabbles with chiaroscuro, dancing between the contrasts of light and dark, not just visually, but conceptually, too.

In *Forgive and Forget* (2023), a butterfly fights to release its pear green wings that are nailed to Harrison's omnipresent worn wood frames. It manages to liberate one wing, but not without lacerating it, its remnants still nailed onto the painted frame. Behind the butterfly's torment is a lush landscape of pine green hues enveloped by a violet sky. Harrison weaves contrasting elements throughout his oeuvre; the result is a quiet but potent tension.

Harrison's use of landscape is the only clue about locale that he will lend to the viewer, and even that is obscure. For the artist—a native of Greenville, South Carolina—picturesque backdrops are almost always a reference to his Southern roots. Harrison grew up in a close-knit community in an area referred to as "the gold mine," where much of his family still lives.

As a child, he wanted to be a paleontologist and constantly drew dinosaurs, an early iteration of his artistic practice. His mother enrolled him in art-focused courses and schools, where a teacher encouraged and assisted Harrison in attending collegiate summer programs. Later, as a student at Maryland Institute of College of Art, he shifted his studies from illustration to painting. But Harrison had to pivot once again when he was unable to complete his costly degree, and had to return home.



Alexander Harrison, *Forgive and Forget*, 2023. Photo by Diego Flores. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

By 2017, he moved to New York and got a job designing record covers and album art as an illustrator at the record label Fool's Gold. When he was spontaneously invited to participate in a one-night group exhibition at the now-defunct Fisher Parrish Gallery, Harrison's dream of becoming a working contemporary artist began to actualize.

His painting *Keep It Movin* packed a punch and sparked interest, leading the gallery to want to represent him. In late 2019, it mounted "Sundown Town," Harrison's first solo exhibition. "I just needed time to breathe and figure out my voice as an artist," Harrison said. "I've had to just figure it out as I'm working." In his debut solo show, he was just beginning to discover his voice as an artist, developing the visual language he continues to explore now.

Portrayals of insects, foliage, fruits, flowers, and Black men in various circumstances have all become part of Harrison's lexicon. The Black cowboy, a protagonist in several pieces, is particularly special. "The cowboy hat is an homage to a strong, fatherly, paternal figure. It's not necessarily like the western cowboy," Harrison said. "The cowboy [is] based off my

grandfather, because he always wore a cowboy hat. I always looked up to him, he's a jack of all trades. He's kind to everyone, will help anyone."

Symbolism is a way for Harrison to have a dialogue with viewers without being overly explicit. "I don't like spelling my paintings out, it's more so I want a feeling there," he said emphatically. Keeping some aspects covert adds a level of complexity and dimension. Like many artists, the work isn't really an independent act, it's a symbiosis between him and the audience. He trusts they will not only decipher, but intimately understand the layers in his work.



Alexander Harrison, *Down in the Mouth*, 2023. Photo by Diego Flores. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

Intimacy is a constant undercurrent in Harrison's practice; it shows up in the size of the work and how he layers his concepts. "I like for people to get lost in my paintings and feel the distance from the furthest star you see in the sky to the antenna on a butterfly," he said. "I've always been interested in creating distance and intimacy with my paintings. And I feel like I can really convey that idea with smaller paintings."

Small-scale works demand viewers to get close, step in, and look intently. They may even be rewarded for their rapt attention. "I like to have hidden gems in my paintings. If you are just blowing past my painting, you might miss something," Harrison warned. In *Two Birds* (2023), for example, a small cerulean bird sits atop a tree stump fractured by an ax, as a panorama of flora cascades in the distance. It's only with deeper engagement that viewers find a dead bird steeped in the depths of the foreground. The life of one bird and loss of another triggers a myriad of thoughts on death, evolution, jealousy, and survival. Harrison's hidden gems garner intimacy physically and conceptually.

One of the most intense and striking works in “Big World” is also incredibly heart-wrenching. In the background of *Land of Infinite Wonders* (2023), a valley gleams with nature’s bounty. But in the foreground, a large melanated foot, most likely belonging to a man, is enraptured in thorny vines that puncture into the skin, causing blood to stream. Here, Harrison is less inconspicuous, but the work isn’t a tell-all; there’s still so much the observer has to infer. The imagery reminds me of an anecdote about Frederick Douglass that said he prayed incessantly for his freedom, and one day, he prayed with his feet—he ran. Looking at *Land of Infinite Wonders*, I am reminded of all the enslaved Africans who ran toward freedom with bloody feet and brave hearts.

Having landed on stable ground after periods of uncertainty in the art world, Harrison is looking toward new horizons. “I’m excited for the next chapter moving out of New York and seeing where that takes my work, like the change of pace, the change of scenery, being down South and having access to that inspiration directly,” he said.



Alexander Harrison, *Two Birds*, 2023. Photo by Diego Flores. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

Midnight Everywhere

Alexander Harrison Debuts on the West Coast

SASHA BOGOJEV
MAY 26, 2021



Various Small Fires in LA is currently running the final week of *Midnight Everywhere*, Alexander Harrison's West Coast debut, and a first solo exhibition at the gallery. And if it wasn't already the unusual and intriguing small-scale of the works in this presentation, we'd be definitely fans of this exhibition cause of their dark yet enticing atmosphere and diligent use of the trompe l'oeil effect.

"I love the intimacy of a small piece. I want the viewer to feel even smaller," Harrison told Juxtapoz about the reason behind creating a body of work that includes works as miniature as 4x4in. Such an approach certainly affects the experience of seeing these acrylics on panels, as they transform from mere squares on a wall into an often literal window into his narratives. And in order to fully utilize such effect, Greenville-born artist is frequently using a simple, yet potent trompe l'oeil technique. "I first give trompe l'oeil a shot for a group exhibition on windows and been hooked since," the artist told us about his personal affection towards creating an optical illusion that the depicted objects exist in three-dimensional space. "I tend to gravitate to use trompe l'oeil to convey, constraint, or isolationism and rarely voyeuristic points of view. I feel, there is so much to explore technique." And indeed, in order to fully utilize its potential, the artist applies multiple layers of acrylic paint over a whittled-down panel, adding to the textural illusion of stone or wood surfaces. In such constrained format, he creates simple arrangements of recurring and evocative symbols such as a shooting star, a flower, an apple, the landscape, or the figure.

The repetition and interaction of these allegorical images suggest the existence of interconnected stories. For example, the watermelon pits from *Midnight Picnic, 2021*, can be seen on the window looking at an apple tree in *The Moon, 2021*. But then again, the bitten apple in *A Story We've Been Told, 2021*, connects to the apple slices in *Portrait of an Artist in the Penumbra of the Moon, in Hopes for a Brighter Future, 2021*, which is somewhat of an autobiographical hero, whose psychological portrayal continues in *Counting Sheep, 2021*, and *If I Had one Wish..., 2021*. Although, without a certain chronology or determined timestamp, these stories seem to exist beyond the depicted image itself and closer to the viewer's imagination. Planted there by the artist, using the believable formatting of still lifes and the indicative darkness of vanitas, they construct an ethereal and timeless ambiance. And the artist admitted that such an appearance isn't fully planned and is greatly influenced by his process that relies on subconscious sketching and drawing. "My paintings are almost a surprise to me when they're done, which is both exciting and frustrating at times," the artist told us. While working with easily recognizable imagery and simple compositions, Harrison has a great eye for adding a strong character or hints of history to all the elements, imbuing life into an otherwise frozen and peculiar moment in time.

Alexander Harrison at Various Small Fires

AARON HORST

MAY 13, 2021



Alexander Harrison, *Why'd I Have to Go n' Dream so Big?* (2021). Acrylic on panel, 12 x 12 x 2 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul.

A rural, otherworldly (or other-timely) tenor marks *Midnight Everywhere*, Alexander Harrison's current exhibition at Various Small Fires. Harrison depicts tightly-rendered vistas, zeroing in on fruit, flowers, and occasional faces, typically from the vantage of a window frame. This "frame" bounds the edges of several works, rendered as a craggy wooden border suggestive of a raw opening in a premodern dwelling. The dreaminess and wander of Harrison's depictions form a story of a sleepless, if not wholly uncomfortable night, full of awe, hunger, and bloom, as well as trouble that turns to tacit pain in the teary eyes of *Counting Sheep* (all works 2021).

Just by Chance shows a hinged window opening onto a rolling, foggy hill; a streak in the pane reads as either a falling star or a light-reflecting smear of grease on the glass. In *Just Over the Hill*, a jagged line of smoke replaces

this streak, rising from a similar rolling hill in the distance. But here, the frame oppresses: the hilltop appears as if seen from a peephole within a thick, nearly-closed wooden surround. *Just Over the Hill* is dreamy to the point of mirage: the denial of access to this receding, somewhat unremarkable landscape seems arbitrary.

Harrison uses the sensory, and sometimes physical, escape that a window promises to instead evince claustrophobia in both *Counting Sheep* and *Why'd I have to Go n' Dream so Big?* In the latter, he paints wooden dowels that resemble jail bars within the frame. In *Counting Sheep*, the small scale of the painting amplifies the tension: a crying, creased face presses against and fills the small opening as if seeking escape. The fraught interiority of these pieces lends friction to the moony mood, while the solitary nature of the works suggests that the body flickering throughout Harrison's frames is our lone source of these visions. The tiny *Beyond Me* pictures this figure walking, maybe peeing, along a winding dirt road under the moonlight, free again. Harrison's subject, when framed as a wanderer—moving through and making do with paucity—suggests a tentative kind of adventuring, both precarious and elusive of purpose.

Portrait of an artist in the penumbra of the moon, in hopes for a brighter future acts as the exhibition's fulcrum. Here, Harrison reverses the vantage to reveal the figure at the window's sill, canvas in hand, and clad in an oversized cowboy hat, a casually stylish bandana ringing his shirt collar. The figure's expression, proud yet discomfiting, captures excitement bordering on derangement, with a toothy grin and slightly crossed eyes that reference racist caricature. *Portrait of an artist* lends the show's counterbalancing moods—dreamy wandering tinged with claustrophobic threat—a space to blend.

Acting as the backdrop and site of Harrison's yarn, the countryside toggles between the deep familiarity of the rural-bucolic and the threat and wonder of the frontier. The "familiarity" of the countryside is relative, of course, and far from a frontier, Harrison's landscape looks to have been settled—if also deserted—long ago. The visual confines of Harrison's works render a meager, even abandoned reality that remains subject to unspoken rules governing movement through and around its boundaries. Harrison pauses at contingent moments of freedom, captivity, and escape, cataloging the turbulence and peace of our wanderer's long night.

ARTSPACE

6 Artists to Watch: December 2019

TORY AKERS

DECEMBER 9, 2019



Alexander Harrison in studio via Fisher Parrish Gallery

ALEXANDER HARRISON

Harrison's subtle, active acrylics convey a low-humming longing for idylls that may or may not exist, using the leitmotif of windows, portals, or frames to invoke the viewer's own unmoored nostalgia. Harrison deploys luscious swathes of paint and clandestine visual coding to ruminate on race and its intersection with personal and popular notions of home; the title of his current solo exhibition at New York's Fisher Parrish, "Sundown Town," refers to the post-Reconstruction practice of terrorizing black visitors to predominantly white districts, thereby ensuring off-the-record segregation. His discomfiting subject matter (a dark, fleshy watermelon, a veiled policeman) is belied by a distinctive pictorial relationship with time; his hazy horizon-lines and technicolor skies connote the movie backdrops of old, but also speak to slow-creeping twilight, the threat of an unjust darkness. Harrison, who is based in New York and will be featured in a solo booth at NADA Miami with Fisher Parrish, originally hails from South Carolina and locates much of his content in the legacy of those roots. He received his BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art in 2017, and has shown his work in New York, California, and throughout the Southeast.

The Black Artists You Should Know

JULIE WALKER
DECEMBER 5, 2019



"Welcome to New York" (2019) Acrylic on panel. Fisher Parrish gallery Image courtesy of Fisher Parrish gallery NADA Art Fair

[EXTRACT]

The art world's annual December pilgrimage to Miami for Art Basel is currently underway. The glamorous mega fair and the more than two dozen satellite fairs that exist in its orbit draw tens of thousands of attendees each year. Some go to schmooze, some go to buy, and everyone arrives ready to party.

So who's invited? Most of Art Basel Miami Beach takes place in a convention center a few blocks from the ocean. Million dollar paintings are sold by blue chip galleries, and over the years the event has expanded to include emerging artists from mid-tier galleries. Other shifts have occurred, too. While Black artists have always had a

presence at Basel Miami, over the past several years there has been a significant uptick in representation and recognition.

This cultural shift is essential. It shines a light on the work Black and brown artists create — artwork that often speaks to the Black experience and chronicles the lives we live. Events like Basel help Black artists claim a piece of the billion dollar art market, which historically has excluded pretty much everybody save rich white men.

Below, some Black artists to know at Miami Basel and surrounding fairs this month.

[...]

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Alexander Harrison is a New York-based painter whose work speaks to growing up as a young Black man from Marietta, South Carolina. His work incorporates Black culture and the South. *Welcome to New York* explores visual tropes such as a Black cowboy taking a bite out of the big apple. The artist had a solo show this fall at Fisher Parrish Gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn before the gallery brought his work to Miami to show at the NADA art fair.