A Lover's Discourse

CHASE HALL

&

JACKSON POLLOCK

July 27–August 27, 2023

Aspen Art Museum

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A Lover’s Discourse

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A Lover’s Discourse is a new series of artist-led presentations introducing unexpected dialogues between artworks from different generations. Each exhibition juxtaposes recent works by an early-career artist with their choice of a companion piece from a private collection in Aspen. Artist selections range from historical to contemporary pieces, and span figurative and abstract painting, sculpture, video, works on paper, and sound.

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Chase Hall & Jackson Pollock

The second presentation of *A Lover's Discourse* features a new painting by New York–based artist Chase Hall (b.1993, St. Paul, Minnesota) exhibited alongside Jackson Pollock's *Untitled* (1951), a work on paper on loan from the collection of Susan and Larry Marx. Responding to a variety of social and visual systems—from sports to music to cultural motifs—each of which intersects with complex trajectories of race, hybridity, economics, and individual agency, Hall generates images whose materiality is as crucial to their compositional makeup as their use of figuration. Key to the artist's painterly palette is the use of unprimed white cotton canvas and the infusion of paint with brewed coffee to obtain a wide range of pigments with different textures and hues of brown.

Hall leaves areas of the cotton canvas uncovered as a way to engage with the weighted history of this material. He also builds the color white into the composition with seemingly accidental shapes and patterns that encode additional imagery and pareidolic forms. This technique reflects the artist's preoccupation with the visibility of the canvas from both a material and conceptual standpoint, in dialogue with traditions of post-war abstraction. Hall's new work for *A Lover's Discourse*, titled *Field Painting* (2022–23), was completed upon identifying examples of abstract pieces in local private collections in Aspen. The direct juxtaposition of *Field Painting* with Pollock's *Untitled* work on paper unlocks a critical reading of the semiotics and cultural values attached to the drip paint technique across histories of abstraction, improvisation, mark-making, and politics of labor.

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List of works

Chase Hall
Field Painting, 2022-2023
acrylic and coffee on cotton canvas
59 3/4 x 71 3/4 x 1 3/8 in
Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

Jackson Pollock
Untitled, 1951
Ink on Japan paper
17 1⁄2 x 22 1⁄4 in
Collection of Larry and Susan Marx.
Courtesy Neal Meltzer Fine Art, NY

Chase Hall's (b. 1993, St. Paul, Minnesota) paintings and sculptures respond to generational celebrations and traumas encoded throughout American history. He was the subject of a solo exhibition at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia from February 28 through August 21, 2023. In 2022, Hall was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera to produce a large-scale artwork, the monumental diptych Medea Act I & II, for its opera house in New York, on view through June 2023. Hall has been included in group exhibitions including *Together in Time: Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Collection*, Hammer Museum (2023), Los Angeles; *Black American Portraits*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2021); *Young, Gifted and Black: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art*, University of Illinois Chicago (2021); and *This Is America | Art USA Today*, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort, the Netherlands. Hall has been an artist-in-residence at the Mountain School of Arts, Los Angeles; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), North Adams, Massachusetts; and Skowhegan School for Painting and Sculpture, Maine. Hall's work is in the permanent collections of institutions including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Baltimore Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Hall lives and works in New York where he is an adjunct professor at New York University's Steinhardt Department of Art.

A Face in the Field

Dr. David Anfam

If absence proverbially makes the heart grow fonder, intimacy can also cause it to turn stranger. These thoughts stem from the French writer Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*—a radical text whose suggestive spirit informs the current series of six presentations that juxtapose rising art stars with far more established names. Of course, Chase Hall features here alongside Jackson Pollock. At first glance, the "conversation" involves wide divisions across time, generations, ethnicity, artistic techniques and ideas. But not just divisions. Connections too. In what way?

For a start, Pollock's premise: "Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."[1] These words from another century resonate in the present context since selfhood is at stake. In art, as in life, notions about the self come, change, go and return throughout history. For Pollock, painting was nothing less than "a state of being," an existential stance that Hall admires. For Barthes, the self pivots on the loved other, its mingled presence and absence, reciprocity and loss. Overall, then, a single factor triangulates these three otherwise completely different figures: identity. To date, Hall's creative arc reflects a quest to discover himself. Consider, now, where this search intersects with his white predecessor from Cody, Wyoming.

Firstly, like Hall, Pollock was an autodidact. He claimed: "I can read by sensing a book—I get what it's saying." Last year, Hall painted *The Autodidact*. That alter ego seems to intuit something by touching a book stack. From my own experience (having gone profoundly deaf as a child), I know that learning alone amounts to self-discovery. Similarly, Hall: "I wanted it [my work] to bring all of me into the picture."[2] Perhaps he is always somewhere in the pictures? If so, Hall echoes Pollock's motive for laying his canvases down flat: "On the floor I am more at ease.... I feel nearer, more a part of the painting and [can] literally be *in* the painting."[3] Enter, center stage, Hall's *Field Painting*. Manifestly, it treats the human factor deep in the field. A face, so to speak, in the painterly crowd of innumerable brushmarks. My allusion is to the film *A Face in the Crowd* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1957). The saga portrays an Arkansas drifter ironically named Lonesome Rhodes,[4] who rises to fame on national TV. Again, the isolated self versus the many.[5] This situation invites further parallels with Pollock's world.

Growing up as an almost-Black youth (the "almost" is key) in a white society, even at the millennium Hall experienced the usual racism. Take an anecdote. Hall loved TV cartoons: "I had VHSes of *The Lion King* and *Snow White* and *The Sword in the Stone*, anything about a hero's journey." However, the fun had a flip side. "Why is that little Black character being laughed at while he's being run over by the wagon and Arthur with the blue eyes and blond hair has the Excalibur sword? I'd be like, Wait. I don't look like Arthur. I look like the guy who's being laughed at." Barthes explores the same emotions—attraction, yearning and loss—in an utterly dissimilar setting. By chance, Pollock anticipates both.

Early on, Pollock realized his predicament. A loner. "People have always frightened and bored me," he wrote to his two brothers in 1929, "consequently I have been within my own shell," and later added, "the more I read and the more I think I am thinking the darker things become." Darkness, from which we instinctively tend to recoil, portends night's blackness. Not long after these confessions, whom did Pollock depict? In at least two mid-1930s compositions he blurred boundaries and chose Black cotton pickers laboring in their fields. The faces are hidden; their clothes mingle white with the muddy colors of the land on which they toil. Serendipitously, therefore, *Field Painting* has distant ancestors except for its crux – the full-face, central countenance.

Fields possess a vast significance in modern American art and its European forebears. A few

examples will do. In Vincent van Gogh's imagery literal Provençal fields begin to fuse with the outsider artist's impasto brush marks. The former are mimetic, that is, depictive. The latter are tactile and, in themselves, abstract—that is, signifying touch and embodying pigment's raw matter rather than resemblance.[6] Flash forward from fin-de-siècle France to mid-century America. Our attention should fasten upon Pollock and his fellow Abstract Expressionist soulmate Clyfford Still. Like Pollock, Still was an outsider and a Westerner.[7] Their singular techniques reconfigured into a fresh formulation what in Van Gogh and other European artists—such as J. M. W. Turner's late landscapes and Claude Monet's expansive *Nymphéas* murals—had formerly served representation. Namely, pictorial fields fusing the self's traces with space, time and motion (each a non-representational phenomenon). Pollock's fragmentary notes in late 1950 state: "Technic is the result of a need/new needs demand new technics…. States of order/ organic intensity/energy and motion made visible/ memories arrested in space."

Vincent van Gogh, *Enclosed Wheat Field with Peasant / Landscape at Saint-Rémy*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 × 36.2 in.
Gift of Mrs. James W Fesler in memory of Daniel W. and Elizabeth C. Marmon

In studying Pollock's feather-light filigree seen, for instance, in the Untitled 1951 ink on paper composition, it seems to transport us into the rhythms of the artist's bodily dynamism. The lightning-quick flicks dance, intermingle and flit like memories flung to the winds—a nervous system, as it were, suspended in space. No wonder Pollock considered painting "a state of being," the mind made manifest through mercurial lines.[8] Questioned about his intentions, "You mean being and becoming are one?", Jackson replied, "Exactly." The equivalence with Hall is breathtaking: "When I paint, I am being and becoming."[9] Time to catch our breaths with a few quick tweets before closure.

To wit, although Pollock is a dead white male, he was also a multiculturalist well before multiculturalism became mainstream.[10] Among various touchstones, Pollock identified with the Native American/First Nation sand painters of the West; dropped Christianity in favor of pantheism;[11] and loved jazz. On the last point, Hall follows in Jackson's footsteps (on a minor note, they both have adored pet dogs). Nor might it be fanciful to discern in Pollock's traceries and *Field Painting*'s buzzing, green-brown-white-blackish chromatic crossfire[12] certain beats reminiscent of the polyrhythms African music bequeathed to jazz. And both artists broke with conventional materials. In Pollock's case, it was industrial enamel paints and supports ranging from linoleum to pottery and glass. For Hall, coffee counts. The wheel has come full circle: back to identity.

Coffee has a history, sometimes darker than the darkest roast.[13] In a nutshell (and only too aptly for the bitter seeds in question), coffee—like sugar, tobacco and cotton—is inseparable from slavery and the ghastly Triangular Trade. There's an awful lot of coffee in Brazil—but even more people of color around the globe since the seventeenth century or earlier whose harsh labors have brought the booty to colonial and then corporate capitalism's cups. Behind the Starbuck mermaid or siren,[14] lurk stark historical exploitation and tragedy. Turning the coffee tables, Hall exploits this bitter-sweet medium to create tapestried tableaux that give a whole new meaning to the kaffeeklatsch.

In short, Hall employs liquid coffee to inscribe signs of difference or alterity—call otherness what you will. In his semiotics (Barthes, intriguingly, was a supreme semiotician too), coffee's various tints and shades—rustled up from a filter drip, stovetop or an espresso machine—denote corresponding existential states. On the one hand, slavery's exhaustion. On the other, this psychoactive drug's commodification[15] in a zillion everyday wakeup caffeine swigs. Now *Field Painting*'s full complexity surfaces.

Pollock chose raw canvas to allow his enamels to bond with their ground in an optical dance. Hall's

12 oz. army cotton duck canvas signals whiteness's shifty guises. By weaponizing coffee and cotton, he interrogates those associations. *Field Painting*'s vibrant greens in juicy acrylic impasto convey an almost Joan Mitchell-like joy in nature. By contrast, notice how the coffee's thinness embeds itself into the weave as shadowy stains.[16] The gamut of touches looks tantamount to camouflage.[17] A forested game of hide-and-seek surrounding a full-on gaze that might bespeak a prisoner, a nature boy or Everyman. White underneath haunts mocha above, emphasizing in-betweenness. Neither quite wins. A quick fact completes this artful intrigue.

Hall has a blond white mother and a Black father. And I, for one, think he is right to champion "mixedness"[18]: "I didn't want my work to just be about Blackness. I wanted to bring all of me into the picture." As in nature, so in culture and vice-versa (Barthes said we tend to confuse them[19]). Both domains offer myriad examples of how a rich mix often yields strength, diversity and newness. Remember Charles Darwin's "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful," the statement with which he closed an epic celebration of life on earth, *Origin of Species* (1859)? By comparison, the dark twentieth century proved far too many times that "purity"—though such an absolute might be fine for vodka, diamonds, horses and Clement Greenberg's modernist flat color fields—can lead to disastrous human ends.[20] Instead, hooray for hybrids!

Endnotes

1. Pollock (c. 1956), in Helen A. Harrison ed., *Such Desperate Joy: Imagining Jackson Pollock* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), p. 54. As befits a concise brochure, these notes are streamlined. After a first citation appears, the source does not repeat. Interested readers can further peruse said scholarly leads at their leisure.

2. Hall, in Dodie Kazanjian, "The Awesome Audacity of Chase Hall," *Vogue.com* (July 14, 2022).

3. Pollock (1947/48), in Pepe Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 17.

4. Note, in passing, that Pollock's and Hall's childhoods were alike peripatetic.

5. The Czech-British film director Karel Reisz mentioned "its attack on the jungle values" of American television. Does the phrase hint at a twist on the racist dimension to American culture?

6. On the genesis and evolution of the mark ("tache" in French), see Øystein Sjåstad, *A Theory of the Tache in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (London: Routledge, 2019).

7. For Clyfford Still's manifold fields and deep engagement with Van Gogh, see David Anfam, "Still's Journey," in Dean Sobel and Anfam, *Clyfford Still—The Artist's Museum* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), pp. 57–112.

8. Anfam, "Pollock Drawing: The Mind's Line," in *No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock—Paintings on Paper* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2005).

9. Hall, in Antwaun Sargent, "Troubled Waters: Meet Painter Chase Hall. On Blackness Beyond White Imagination," *SSense.com* (October 6, 2020).

10. Mindful of today's preoccupation with gender, the word was already out some years ago that Pollock was non-binary. See Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989).

11. Pollock: "Fuck all the God shit! Way I see it, we're part of the one, making it whole."

12. I choose the word carefully. *Crossfire* (dir. Edward Dmytryk; 1947) is a film noir that dealt daringly with anti-Semitism, i.e., racism.

13. By coincidence, I cannot help remembering my unintentionally savvy shtick when unexpectedly confronted with a billionaire's fake Pollock: "It has a history."

14. For a while Hall worked for the multi-national coffee shop chain.

15. Hall, in Emma Leigh Macdonald, "Chase Hall's Artworks Closely Consider Life's Gray Areas," *WMag.com* (March 7, 2022).

16. The coffee takes longer to dry—almost twenty-four hours—changing in the process. For this and many another helping hand at the eleventh hour, I thank Chase Hall.

17. Here Hall approaches the venerable trope of the Black trickster and his/her invisibility. See Anfam, "The Music of Invisibility," in *Norman Lewis: Pulse. A Centennial Exhibition* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2009).

18. True, on this score I am not altogether objective. With an extended family tree that encompasses Cockney, Irish, Jewish and African members, how could I be?

19. Roland Barthes, transl. Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, [1957], 1972). Another corollary here is the venerable racist association of Blacks with nature and that of their white overlords with "civilization."

20. After all, even thoroughbred horses developed from crossbreeds.

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