

By Ashleigh Kane
September 26, 2018

Chase Hall reclaims racist memorabilia and painful pasts in new art show

The New York-based artist is using America's painful past and present to guide its future



New York-based artist Chase Hall's work is testament to the very real – and devastating – proof that racism is still alive, dangerous, and ugly as hell in America. Working across multiple disciplines, Hall uses the country's abhorrent history of slave trading as a lens to observe, and document, how racism unfolds today. Exemplified best in his latest show, *You Can Lead a Horse to Water* (curated by Lolita Cros) on display at the Metropolitan Pavilion from September 27 – 30 2018.

Comprised of a mix of paintings and sculptures, as its title suggests, *You Can Lead a Horse to Water*, focuses on the horse as a key symbol. At its foundations, the horse is a symbol of freedom, strength, and travel in African American culture, and appears in multiple paintings from Hall. Not only was the horse a way to escape enslavement, but it was later a means for making money once horseracing was made legal as a sport.



Another key figure in the show is 12-year-old boy Jocko Graves, who was a slave. The story goes that Graves was made to keep watch on George Washington's estate while he fought at the Battle of Trenton. Ordered to keep a lantern alight so to guide soldiers back safely, Graves was found frozen to death with the candle in his hand, in the same place that Washington had left him. Washington commissioned a commemorative statue. However, Hall recalls that in the following decades, this landmark was watered down into a "thankless lawn ornaments" and racist memorabilia. Born into mixed-race heritage, the ornaments were a haunting presence in Hall's childhood. However, he recalls that he felt more of an affinity with the lawn jockeys than he did with the white people he was often surrounded by.

Reclaiming these figures as readymades, Graves regains the legacy he deserves, with Hall explaining the personal connection he felt to the historical figure. "I grew up with a single mum who, for a good portion of my childhood, was a horse trainer," he reveals. "In a way, I found more of myself in these insensitive satirical portrayals of black life than the white bourgeois who employed my mum." It was during this time of his life that Hall first witnessed the racist stereotypes placed on PoCs that would go on to inform his work as an artist. "It was haunting and uncomfortable," he reflects. "A lot of my work makes you feel something that is deep and not talked about and that is important to me. Jocko's story has a duality to so many young black men that give there all but still end up falling short due to whatever the circumstance. He was a young boy who tried his best and put others before himself. I wanted people to look further into his story and understand that we have been ripped, beaten, killed, and told we are stupid, while people profit and excel off our backs. Jocko is a beacon of hope, resilience, power and so much more but overall a reminder of our inclusion in history – not only as chain gang slave archetypes but full of humanity and worthy of inclusion and admiration in the scope of American history."

For Hall, however terrible those experiences were, he believes it's important to connect the past to the present in order to look forward. It is not only Jocko's story, twisted throughout time and therefore almost lost entirely, that is important to bring forth, but many more examples of figures and moments who have been lost or warped within history. "So many heroic moments of our history have been untold or ignored – not only in the quotidian but also in our school systems," Hall says. "The neglect or lack of exposure to that importance and resilience is very intentional. People have spread disinformation peripherally for so long to further buttress the idea that blacks were lesser. I am focused on filling these voids of our racial literacy and proving that we are not only brave and brilliant but worthy of a new understanding of our past. It is vital that we preserve history and analyse it, but we should never pretend it didn't happen or re-write it."



By reclaiming figures such as Jocko, Hall is helping his audience to unlearn history, as well as art history, which benefits the few – mainly the pale, stale, and male art world – while being detrimental to many others. "A lot of art type people mention the canon of art history but rarely do we analyse the canon of history itself, and how that relates to the marginalised society we all exist in," he muses. "I think of history in a very non-linear way and how it still perpetuates so much disinformation. Generational traumas effect nearly all of your innate emotions. Whether it's your father or your grandma... that is apart of us and our DNA. How do we reveal these painful inheritances of racism and work to better understand the pitfalls so we can jump over them next time they turn up? I make work to expose truth, and help people not only unlearn but also aid the removal of wool that has been pulled over our eyes uncritically for so long."

You Can Lead a Horse to Water is on at Metropolitan Pavilion, 125 W 18th Street, New York, from September 27 – September 30 2018.

