



i-D

By Laura Pitcher  
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## chase hall paints the intimate bonds between black jockeys and their horses

Exploring the complexities of America's racist past through the plight of its first black sports heroes.



Entering the studio of New York-based artist Chase Hall is like entering a shrine of African-American history and culture. Obama's picture sits framed on a bookshelf, opposite photos of his grandparents, Michael Jackson handkerchiefs, Uncle Remus and Mammy towel holders, and countless collected ornaments and books all neatly archived.

The 25-year-old's work continues to deep-dive into racial injustices in the US. Reclaiming loaded memorabilia and symbols, Hall's work forces America to confront the painful realities of the past and present. A statue of Jocko Graves, the young slave George Washington put in charge of the horses while he and his

soldiers ventured off to fight against the British in the Battle of Trenton, sits in one corner of the studio. Deemed too young to join the fight against the British, Graves ended up frozen to death with his lantern still in his hand.

“As a young kid in school, I was taught my ancestors were not much more than a bunch of kidnapped chained-up numbers,” Hall says. “Through research and stories like Jocko’s, you are able to further the conversation of our inclusion and replenish the humanity we have been denied for so long.”



Hall’s work, in fact, is filled with horses and jockeys. Growing up surrounded by horses — his mother was a horse trainer — they’re a nostalgic and familiar part of his life. “I used to look at them as if they were dinosaurs.

I was really interested in horses growing up,” the artist says. “Then I started doing some research and discovered they actually relate a lot to the history of America and the history of black people.”

That research soon turned into a fascination. Hall can tell you how many African-American jockeys rode in the first Kentucky Derby in 1875 (13 out of 15) and articulate their stories. “It just opened my eyes to so much of our history that has been removed from the normal dialogue of schooling and the cookie cutter version of American history were told to believe without question,” he says. “When in reality there’s a lot of untold truth and stories that have existed and are important for us to learn from.”

The further he would dig into the history of African-American horse racing, the more stories he would find of opponents beating black jockeys off their horses to sabotage these first black sports stars. “Looking at horse racing now, it’s a very white, upper-echelon thing,” he says. “But the early success of the sport relates very closely to the men who would tend to the horses and the intrinsic bond they shared.”

Hall's solo exhibition earlier this year, *You Can Lead a Horse to Water*, curated by Lolita Cros, was dedicated to this exploration. Bringing to life the famous idiom "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink," the exhibition led viewers through a painful past with hope for the future. Judging by the reaction of those in attendance, he's building an audience that not only wants to drink this powerful message, but to have another glass of it.

Hall is self-taught, and it's clear painting comes naturally to him. Pairing primary blues and greens with deep browns, he is less worried about portraying every detail perfectly than he is about creative expression, as someone who was "always listening and looking." Growing up with a single mother living across Minnesota, Chicago, Las Vegas, Colorado, Dubai, and Los Angeles, he spent much of his time watching movies, skating, and hanging out at friends' houses, on a quest to ask as many questions as possible. Inspired by entertainment, art, and cartoons, Hall realized the potential for expression in these mediums once he was older. He decided to use art to articulate the "more nuanced realities of racism and life in general" as authentically as possible.

"I asked myself, 'How can I talk about this in a true and authentic way?' Pursuing politics or becoming a lawyer or those routes didn't seem honest but rather corrupt to me growing up," he explains. "Then I started to realize there's actually more truth in Tupac or Prince than in these lobbyists and sideways politicians pushing their cryptic agenda on people."

Since *You Can Lead a Horse to Water*, Hall has continued to work on the series. He also recently shot Trevor Noah for the *New York Times*' Sunday newspaper, as Noah was nominated to be the first black talk show host to win an Emmy, and is currently is part of *No Name* exhibition at Museo Nacional de San Carlos in Mexico City.

And, of course, Hall is always focused on growing his collection of archived memorabilia, which he is now working into forms of sculpture. "I am interested in finding proof of racism in our recent past," he says. "Once you realize that there are postcards and advertisements of black babies being eaten by alligators, and records of that happening at Central Park Zoo in 1908, you're like, 'Oh wait, that's why cops are killing our people for no reason. That's why racism is so deeply ingrained.'"