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ART

chase hall paints the intimate bonds between black jockeys and their horses

By Laura Pitcher | November 13, 2018



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."

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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

