The Atlantic

IDEAS

'Post-Victimhood' Storytelling

Chase Hall makes art made of coffee, cotton, and his own fierce individuality.

By Thomas Chatterton Williams

Clement Pascal / David Kordansky Gallery

NOVEMBER 25, 2023

IN HIS *SURREALIST MANIFESTO* of 1924, André Breton wrote, "The marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful." That line came to mind when I stood before *Mother Nature*, a giant canvas depicting a killer whale lifting a naked man into the air, eye level with a flock of gulls. The image

was a highlight of "The Bathers," Chase Hall's standout debut at the David Kordansky Gallery in Chelsea this fall.

The show, of mostly immense paintings priced from $60,000 to $120,000, was billed as an investigation into "nature, leisure, public space, and Black adventurism." The playful and enigmatic scenes involved men swimming, surfing, and sometimes levitating, in solitude or among a living bounty of fish and birds. They were at once beautiful and formally striking meditations on the richness and versatility of a single color: brown.

At the time of the exhibition, Hall was on the cusp of turning 30. He floated through the gallery in a white tank and loose gray slacks that broke over a pair of leather house shoes, looking like a West Coast rapper from the G-funk era who'd recently studied abroad in Florence. His aura was jubilant. The crowd, full of name-brand artists, collectors, and old friends, seemed both taken by the artwork and genuinely happy for the artist—two responses that do not always mesh.

As recently as three years ago, Hall was working odd jobs, scrounging for free materials, dumpster diving for the stretcher bars from NYU students' cast-off canvases, discovering the signs and symbols of his own vernacular. Now he teaches at the university as an adjunct professor, and his work has landed in the permanent collections of numerous major institutions, including the Brooklyn Museum and the Whitney.

Brother's Keeper, 2023

During the after-party for his opening, at a dive in Lower Manhattan, Hall slipped away from the crowd to an empty stool beneath a flat-screen. The third set of the second men's U.S. Open quarterfinal was happening, Ben Shelton losing to Francis Tiafoe. "Shelton's gonna get it," Hall said, smiling confidently, seconds before the floppy-haired teenager ripped a merciless forehand down the line, saving the set and quickly snatching the match in the next. I realized my mixed-kid radar had failed me. It was only through Hall's attention that I recalled Shelton's biography and saw the tangled ancestry in the young player's triumphant face—an ancestry like Hall's, like mine.

"Boy, you look like the weather!" is how a woman once described Hall's own tawny complexion as the sun bounced off it. The son of a Black father who was raised by his single white mother, Hall had a peripatetic childhood, even spending his seventh-grade school year in Dubai. When I first met him last spring—at a blue-chip artist's opening where it seemed like every other attendee I encountered, whether a collector, party hopper, or critic, wanted to talk about Hall—he spoke of his younger self and the experience of being a "Black" kid with "white-looking" features as a kind of racial "acne" marring his appearance. Today, he notes an evolution, not only in his artistic practice but in his sense of himself in the world. "Over the last 10 years of really trying to navigate life and family and career and mixedness," he told me, he's been asking himself: "Am I the conduit for my own experience, or am I just going to try and hope no one says I have a white mom? It was like, 'Why don't I just stand up for my own shit?'"

As James McBride once wrote in *The Color of Water*, "being mixed is like that tingling feeling you have in your nose just before you sneeze—you're waiting for it to happen but it never does." You're waiting to become one thing or another, but you never do. Hall has chosen to embrace this irresolvable aspect of his identity, not to oversimplify it. He's grappling with what he calls "these dichotomies of genetic shame and genetic valor"—playing with them through the juxtaposition of color and blankness.

Hall uses acrylic paint but primarily relies on an extensive scale of brown tones realized through the medium of brewed coffee. It is an art-making process he's been tweaking since he was a teenager in Southern California working after school at Starbucks, "smearing receipts" with doodles to cope with the boredom.

Over time, it has become a method of calibrating a sophisticated spectrum of beige, brown, and nearly ebony tones. Darker browns are finer ground; lighter ones are coarser. Through trial and error, and many, many gallons of coffee, he's developed 26 distinct hues out of a single bean and cultivated extensive relationships with the various baristas of his East Village neighborhood. He can easily purchase 200 to 300 shots of espresso in an outing, which his contacts have learned to pull to his precise specifications, and which he takes home and applies to untreated cotton canvas through a technique he describes metaphorically as "melanin being soaked into the cotton."

Coffee beans and cotton bolls are not just representational opposites of lightness and darkness; they are also emblematic of the legacies of Africa and Europe colliding in the New World through slavery. To this day, these materials represent often invisible ecosystems of poverty and coerced labor—smallholder farmers in Ethiopia, sweatshop workers in China. (The Brazilian artist Vik Muniz has also made art out of the materials of the

slave economy—in his case, coffee beans and sugar.)

Hall's vision is achieved not only by the melanated fields of expression he superimposes over whiteness through the process of, as he puts it, "corralling and containing a water-based form," but to a significant degree by the preservation of raw open spaces he pointedly leaves unpainted. Many of these voids of "conceptual white paint" are also interspersed within his subject's bodies—white noses, kneecaps, even genitalia—making explicit the base-level hybridity we are conditioned to deny or gloss over.

It is a technique he has pursued to such lengths that, as he explained in a talk at Kordansky, he now owns a small part of a craft-coffee company. The coffee the audience was gratefully sipping that morning in the gallery was derived from the same source that was used to make the surrounding artworks. He spent three years developing a process to

Whitewash (Pelicanus Occidentalis), 2023

reclaim even the grounds left over from the paintings, which he then turned into a series of gorgeous prints that went on display two blocks away at Pace Prints the same week as "The Bathers." Nothing is wasted.

Despite his medium's symbolism, and despite the arduous physical labor that goes into making it art—the pouring and repouring of a crop-based liquid onto crop-based surfaces—the images that result are not overtly political. This sets him apart from many other minority artists he is sometimes compared to (and from whom he draws inspiration)—people such as Henry Taylor—who are thriving in a time of revived interest in figurative painting. His male subjects are decidedly not responding to tragedy; they are, he said, "liberated figures outside of stereotypical Black spaces." In a painting called *Whitewash (Pelicanus Occidentalis)*, a ripped nude man stands astride a longboard. His face is drawn tight not with worry or heavyheartedness but with the deep concentration of diligent focus: His only struggle is to remain vertical atop the water.

Hall himself concedes that, in terms of technical drawing, some NYU students he teaches are more capable than he is. But Rashid Johnson, another Kordansky artist, told me he sees in Hall a young painter with "a real willingness to evolve and develop, and to build a language." Art, he says, is more than "strokes on a canvas."

The effect, both of Hall's individual paintings and, in a more profound way, of his cumulative work, is a refreshing challenge. Hall forces us to meet the people he depicts on their own terms, without the usual lens—or crutch—of our inherited, fetishizing, or condescending projections.

One of his central goals, as he put it to me later, is "redefining our relationship with the landscape, outside of basketball, enslavement." He's concerned with matters of agency, world building, and individuality—what he calls "post-victimhood" storytelling. "I really believe in life," he told me. "I go out and try to make the best of it."

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