

Lyle Ashton Harris

Hours and Days

By James Balla

“I remember that life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea. Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning.”

— James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2017 WHITNEY BIENNIAL WAS AN INSTALLATION TITLED *Once (Now) Again*. It featured projected images, video, and music, all overlaid and interwoven. The artist was Lyle Ashton Harris. The still images were taken from his *Ektachrome Archive* series, which was first presented in any form in 2015, and has since established itself as an important landmark for chronicling a decisive epoch in late-twentieth-century culture.

Lyle's years-long documentation of close friends, lovers, and acquaintances includes images of some icons of the emerging international community of writers, academics, theorists, and artists of the Black and queer world at that crucial time. It is a rich and deeply interwoven tapestry of contemporary life in the 1980s and 1990s. It has provided context for the era and a historical record of its events, including the LGBTQ+ response to the AIDS crisis, as well as giving lasting testimony to some of the seminal, groundbreaking conferences and exhibitions of this highly influential and important period—one marked by development and change in the public discourse around race, gender, and culture. The installation was acquired by the Whitney Museum as part of their permanent collection, as well as by the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, Switzerland.

MY HUSBAND, Albert Merola, and I first met Lyle when he came to our Provincetown gallery (the Albert Merola Gallery) one summer day, years ago. He had been coming to Provincetown for years before that. We hit it off, and, soon after, he brought by two photographs that he thought we might be interested in showing. They were images from his *Roman Stranger* series, which was a part of a broader series titled *Italia*. Albert and I had attended the Venice Biennale in 2007, where we had seen other images from *Italia*. Over the years since then, we have presented several exhibitions of Lyle's work at the gallery, including a selection of *Ektachrome Archive* works, as well as other photo collages and photographs from Rome. We also exhibited one of the first of his *Flash of the Spirit* series, titled *Zamble at Land's End*, which incorporated Lyle's self-portraits with a range of African masks that were from the collection of his uncle. Some of the images were created here in Provincetown, when he was teaching at the Fine Arts Work Center. And so it seems fitting, and is very satisfying, that his new work, *Hours and Days*, will be presented for the first time here in Provincetown.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS was born in the Bronx, New York, in 1965, and was raised in both Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (1974–76), and in



Untitled (Outtake, Black Is . . . Black Ain't, Koreatown, Los Angeles, 1992), 2022, gelatin silver print, 18 x 12 inches

New York. His mother, Rudean Leinaeng, was a professor at Bronx Community College for thirty years. After participating in the struggle for a free South Africa during the 1980s as a member of Women for Racial and Economic Equality, she and her husband, Pule Leinaeng, an African National Congress activist who was also a serious amateur photographer, took up residence in Bloemfontein, South Africa. In 2002, Rudean coproduced the acclaimed documentary film *Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela*, which was directed by Lyle's brother, Thomas Allen Harris. In 2012, Rudean was inducted into the Hunter College Hall of Fame for her activism and leadership. She is the author of the novel *Coal, War & Love*—a love story based on the extraordinary lives of her grandparents.

Thomas is an award-winning filmmaker, interdisciplinary artist, and documentarian with whom Lyle has collaborated on numerous occasions. Thomas's 1995 film, *Vintage: Families of Value*, focused on three groups of queer siblings, including himself and Lyle. The two of them later collaborated on *Alchemy*, a multimedia installation that explored the cosmologies of the global African diaspora. Lyle's grandfather, Albert Sidney Johnson, Jr., was a photographer; he and his wife, Joella, were deeply involved in the historic Harlem AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church. Albert's voluminous photographic documentation of family, friends, and visitors throughout decades was handed down through the family to both Lyle and Thomas. The collection included over ten thousand Ektachrome slides, as well as 8 mm films that dated back to the 1940s.

This richly developed portrayal of a greater extended family, which included influential members of the Black community as well as neighbors and relatives, certainly can be seen as a precursor to Lyle's *Ektachrome Archive*. Albert gave Lyle and Thomas their first cameras, and encouraged them to document their lives and the lives of those around them. In so doing, he presented a way for them to empower themselves to create their own narratives, rather than having to react to the cultural narrative that was routinely presented to them—through advertising, media, and countless other subtle or not-so-subtle devices. This was a life-changing experience.

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“A sissy by five, a faggot by seven, a bitch by twelve, a cunt by eighteen. These were all called to me.”

— Lyle Ashton Harris

THE NEED FOR LYLE to move on from the schools of the Bronx, where he was sometimes taunted by his peers, and into a more open, liberal, and structured learning experience brought him to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. At first, he studied economics (as his grandfather had before him). After a trip to visit Thomas, who was in Amsterdam, Lyle came back with a different outlook, a restless energy, and orange hair. He dropped out for a semester, and spent a lot of time in New York City, hanging out in clubs and discovering the city's super-charged gay social life as well as the emerging and vibrant downtown art scene.

With some encouragement from his stepfather to pursue what he wanted, Lyle returned to school, switched majors, and embarked on his artistic career. He spent time at the prestigious Maine Photographic Workshops, and then—with the encouragement and support of Catherine Lord—applied for and was accepted into the California Institute of the Arts. The formal structure of Wesleyan gave way to the informal, churning, critical theory environment of CalArts. It took Lyle about a year to fully incorporate his ongoing formal interests with the freedom of expression presented at CalArts, but, once he did, he never looked back.

The importance of that integration has been an ongoing facet of Lyle's work. Much of his art has been performative in nature,



Untitled (Valencia, California, 1988), 2022, gelatin silver print, 18 x 14½ inches

both in the sense that the creation of the work is itself an act(ion), and that it exists within, and comments on, the societal and cultural role in which that performance takes place. The essence of Lyle's voice comes from using his own story and body as material for his art, something presented in his earliest exhibitions, including *Americas* (1987–88), *Constructs* (1989), and *The Good Life* (1994).

Americas was first presented in 1993 at Simon Watson's Living Room in New York City. The large, black-and-white gelatin silver prints in the series confronted issues of race, gender, and sexuality through both performative and formal means. One of Lyle's personae, “Miss Girl”—who appears in some of these iconic images—is also represented in the upcoming exhibition at our gallery, albeit in a different context. In 2012, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York acquired *Americas (Triptych)*, 1987–88. The photograph *Man and Woman #1* was acquired by the Getty Museum in 2016.

The Good Life, which was shown at the Jack Tilton Gallery in New York, combined large, dye-diffusion Polaroids with C-prints that reproduced some of Lyle's family photos, arranged in a dizzying ensemble that presented explorations of gender, race, and what constitutes a family. Writing in *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (Thames & Hudson, 1997), Richard J. Powell described *The Good Life* as a “complete subversion of various notions of identity—gender, sexual, and familial—which, ironically, caused another indicator of identity—blackness—to twist, snake, and splice itself into a complex yet irreducible ingredient.”

Today, at the age of fifty-seven, Lyle can look back as an elder in the continuum of queer Black artists and activists and see how important his body of work has become. At this point in time, some twenty-five years or more later than many of the events in the *Ektachrome Archive* images, there is an entirely new generation of young people in the LGBTQ+ community that can now see their predecessors as they appeared—not only in a formal intellectual/educational arena, but also interacting in casual, loving, supportive relationship with one another. These people have been seen. The

narrative is theirs. For many LGBTQ+ artists today, there is already a community, a support system within which they can function and express themselves with relative freedom. It wasn't always the case.

ONE OF THE MOST beautiful essays I have ever read about an artist was written by the remarkable playwright and actor Anna Deavere Smith about Lyle on the occasion of the 2002 exhibition of *Billie, Boxers, Better Days*. A few lines from Smith's essay could sum up Lyle today as he contemplates his own early work:

He is not here, he is not there,
He is in between here and there.
He is looking for something more in himself.

And Lyle is always looking for something more in himself.

He has always unflinchingly put himself at the center of that endeavor—the looking for; the desire for; the wanting; and the loss. And the wanting more.

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“In the World through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.”

— Frantz Fanon

FRANTZ FANON (1925–1961) was a political philosopher, psychiatrist, and intellectual from Martinique, still a French colony during the early part of Fanon's life. His writings on anticolonialism had profound and far-reaching impacts across the world, and especially in the United States—notably, through his later book *The Wretched of the Earth* (François Maspero, 1961), which spoke of violence as an acceptable tool for the oppressed/colonized to use to gain independence. But his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Éditions du Seuil, 1952), was an analysis of the negative psychological effects of colonial subjugation on Black people. In it, Fanon psychoanalyzes the oppressed Black person, who is perceived to be a lesser creature in the white world in which they live, and studies how they navigate the world through a performance of whiteness. Fanon's writings are incredibly complex and wide-ranging, and deal to a large extent with the use of language as both an oppressive tool, as well as a means of freedom from that oppression.

Many significant points can be taken from Fanon; his argument that it is difficult, or impossible, for a Black person to exist in our society as an individual outside the history of “Blackness” in relationship to “whiteness” is chief among them—and, unfortunately, a valid one. Thus, an independent voice as well as new social systems need to be created. But to do this, one has to confront the oppression, the system of power in which it exists, and the symbols and tools of that power. One must take that system and both use and reinvent its own language in order to dismantle it by the roots.

There is verbal language, with its corresponding marks and symbols and nuances, and there is visual language, with its own set of marks and symbols and nuances. In some of Lyle's important early work, such as *Americas* and *Constructs*, he has taken on Fanon's deconstructionist challenge. His use of “whiteface” as a parody and mockery of both the concept—and the futility—of “passing,” which implicitly comments on the demeaning and dehumanizing history of “blackface” in our American culture, is crystal clear. At the same time, he wraps this around his portrayal of the gender-released, queer Black body. *Black Skin, White Masks* indeed! It is an incredibly powerful display of self-expression and self-awareness by an artist at the beginning of his mature career—and the reason that these works still resonate so strongly today. The depiction of the Black queer body as self-represented was—and remains—so important. Throughout the 1980s, as the AIDS crisis was decimating the young queer cultural world,

and as Lyle learned of his own HIV positive status in 1989, that self-representation became all the more urgent, and the need to make such art, and to exhibit it, took on a whole new imperative.

For Lyle, the crux of the matter is not solely about queerness, or blackness, or gender. He walks a tightrope among the three—a tightrope woven from the threads of them all—because for him there is no other choice. It is a sometimes terrifying and dizzying place to be, but that is also what makes it so exciting and rich and rewarding. It is life. It is what makes his work so unique.

LYLE'S EXHIBITION *Hours and Days (A Suite of Ten Photographs)*, which will be on exhibit from July 29 to August 17 this year, covers a critical early period of maturation and development in his work. It was, naturally, also a critical time in his own life. Some of the pieces in this exhibition precede the *Ektachrome Archive*, and others overlap it in time. But they are all expressive of an even more intimate and private record. They reveal the private face behind the public persona. Lyle has repeatedly shown how the process of reexamining and reevaluating the past becomes the work. These photographs are not “new,” but examining them and presenting them is. In them, he is looking for something more in himself.

Albert and I worked closely with Lyle in choosing images for the show. It is a small, focused exhibition, but we know it will serve as a cornerstone for expanded manifestations in the future. These photographs have not been shown before, and we are grateful to be the first venue where they will be exhibited. Starting from a greater selection—which included both a broader time range as well as color images—we felt that keeping the focus on the black-and-white images (differentiating them from the rich color of the *Ektachrome Archive*), and using only images in which Lyle appears, was the most effective way to introduce them. They are 35 mm or Pentax 6-by-7 format, and printed as gelatin silver prints, which brings a physical sensuousness to the photographs, and aligns them within the traditional, historical narrative of photography, as well as with some of Lyle's earliest seminal works.

As his gallerists and friends, we have a responsibility to honor Lyle's intention for the exhibition, and to understand the vulnerability depicted within it. And for some reason, at this time more than ever, the fact that they are tender, vulnerable, and, yes, *sweet*, feels important. These are photos about being young, about being seen, about sex and love, about the search for happiness and the drive to feel everything one can. There is a kind of slow intimacy depicted here, a tenderness of touch, of softness, of the ease of the familiar. As such, it seems an especially appropriate time to be revisiting them, and recontextualizing them by bringing them into the dialogue and succession of contemporary gay images, while at the same time demonstrating their interconnectedness with Lyle's other work. The photographs in this exhibition are intrinsically joined to both narratives.

Hours and Days drifts through days and nights of intimacy between Lyle and some of his close lovers. It hovers around him on a bright summer day, in a reverie, masturbating. An open porn magazine lies nearby, next to James Baldwin's *Evidence of Things Not Seen*. And it weaves its way through other personal, intriguing, and haunting images. Some of these reveal more intimate sides of personae we have seen before. The iconic whiteface female figure that was first seen in his groundbreaking *Americas (Triptych)* is present in two of the photographs. In the first example, taken while he was the still photographer for Marlon Riggs's final film, *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*, we see her reflecting on herself in a mirror. This is a private moment, a self-loving one: an affirmation. But we don't really see *her*. We get to see only her reflection, the projection of identity, but the person making the reflection is off-camera. Access denied. This is Lyle taking control of the narrative, and the



Untitled (Middletown, Connecticut, 1985), 2022, gelatin silver print, 18 x 12 inches

way in which his image can be “consumed” by the public. It is yet one more example of him being the creator rather than the imitator. And it reinforces the sense of these being personal, intimate glimpses, as opposed to a staged or performed presentation.

The second example, *Untitled (Valencia, California, 1988)*, is related to another photograph that was taken on the same day. The title of the other image, *In the World Through Which I Travel*, references the Fanon quote. Shot in 35 mm and first exhibited in 1990, it was included in the 2019–20 exhibition *Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now (Part 2)* at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York, and is part of their collection. The photograph in our exhibition has never been shown before. It was taken with a Pentax 6-by-7 format camera, and is one of only a few images taken that day with that camera. In the photo, this ethereal creature has turned away from the viewer, and is making her way off to an unknown horizon. The boots, crinoline, and wig that had served as a form of armor are now symbolic accoutrements evidencing a different strength: the inner strength and desire to keep pushing on, to explore what is over the next ridge. It is Lyle on the edge again—vulnerable, exposed, and ever-curious.

The earliest image in the exhibition is *Untitled (Middletown, Connecticut, 1985)*. Taken before any Ektachrome photos, before any of his exhibitions, the photo is of Lyle alone, naked, crouching as a shower of water cascades over his body. He looks aside and down, the movement caught by the camera in an almost transcendental baptism. It is a self-baptism, a rite of passage caught at the moment of transition from a young, searching person into the mature artist that would define his life.

IT IS SIGNIFICANT that right now, from the vantage point of

2022, Lyle is taking a deep look back in this exhibition at the early days that formed his development and growth as an artist. He told us that he is thinking about the meaning in these photographs against the backdrop of today’s image bombardment via social media. Within the context of the emergence of “social awareness,” Black Lives Matter, the ongoing fight for LGBTQ+ rights, Zoom meetings, Grindr, performances at a fingertip via the internet, and all the other demands and intrusions on our psyche, these seem to exist as an oasis for regenerating the spirit. Here, I am struck by a simple but significant thing: the effort and resources it took to take a photograph at the time that Lyle was creating his early work. In today’s world, with its prevalence of cell phones and digital cameras, everyone is a 24/7 photographer, and social media platforms are freely available on which to publicize any and every click of the shutter. The actual process of taking a photo—acquiring a camera, choosing and buying film, getting it developed and printed, and then making choices—stands in such contrast to today’s point-and-click world. At that time, there was real intentionality in taking a photo—the kind of intentionality that is not particularly prevalent today. In our online world, images don’t stop. Editing is rare. And on many platforms, they are made to disappear in a short amount of time. There is a constant need to feed the beast, and to what end? Just as the *Ektachrome Archive* was born of Lyle’s imperative to document his world, Lyle created these photographs as a form of personal documentary evidence, in much the same way that James Van Der Zee, Gordon Parks, Nan Goldin, and, of course, Lyle’s own grandfather Albert have done.

The full list of Lyle’s accomplishments as an artist is too lengthy to include here. Some of the significant exhibitions and collections in which his work has been or is included have been mentioned here. Others include the Busan Biennial (2008), the Bienal de São Paulo (2016), and *Once (Now) Again* presented by Cinéma Du Réel at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2018). He received the David C. Driskell Prize from the High Museum of Art in 2014 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2016. Other prominent collections not already mentioned that have acquired Lyle’s work include the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He joined the Board of Trustees of the American Academy in Rome in 2014, and was appointed a trustee of the Tiffany Foundation in 2016.

The photographs in *Hours and Days* serve as connecting threads to all the rest of Lyle’s work. He entered this chapter as he always does, fully open and vulnerable, questioning, demanding, and striving to be the hero, which, in many ways, he already is. It seems appropriate to end this article with another quote from *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin. It is one that feels, to me, completely fitting in the consideration of Lyle’s life and work:

It takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare. ❏

Hours and Days (A Suite of Ten Photographs) will be on view at the *Albert Merola Gallery in Provincetown from July 29 to August 17, 2022.*

JAMES BALLA is a painter who has lived year-round in Provincetown since 1985. Along with his husband, Albert Merola, he owns and operates the Albert Merola Gallery.