



Aleczander
An exhibition of new works by **Chase Hall**
April 29 - July 9, 2021

Text by Dr. Horace D. Ballard

Chase Hall has the right to be irate with America. Growing up mixed-race and too-grown in spaces no child should be, Hall became all-too-conversant all-too-early with the national psychosis of race and desire. But rather than drowning in lifelong phenomenologies of anger, Hall turned to making and reading and music. His autodidact studies were fluid and unbounded by categories of knowledge, allowing Hall to forge his own ethics of attention. In painting's visual typologies, Hall discovered gestural kinship with jazz prosody and critical theory, and he leveraged his fluency to reframe the structures of America's dream deferred into a viable, self-reliant future of beauty and purpose.

But an artistic life never goes uncontested. Especially when your skin is material memory and your very being amplifies the political stakes of your personal practice. For all the recent talk of decolonizing and disavowing "the canon," we rarely admit that American art for the past century has multiple canons: the canon of black figuration which proclaims baroque-era presence, and the Eurocentric modalities of modernism that connote aspiration, mastery, and power, being merely the most dialectically-opposed. From which tradition does the young artist draw inspiration when life evinces dual citizenship in both worlds? What material can hold the simultaneous sepia-like vignette of colonial trauma and light-skinned privilege that frames an artist's being and becoming? Half-and-half, with 20/20 vision, Hall is still no more than three-fifths a man in the eyes of the law. What materials are historic enough, durable enough, suffuse and itinerant enough, to visually-represent grace at, and beyond borders?

In Chase Hall's orchestral compositions of acrylic and coffee on unprimed cotton canvas, coffee and cotton foreclose the ease of reaching for binaries of white and black, good or bad, when we stand before them as viewers, and as heirs to art history's omissions and fixations around black and brown bodies; including the necessary commodities the labor of those bodies provide. Like silk, like sugar and indigo, like the saltlick of tears from human bodies, coffee unites the four corners and belly of the world. Whether we drink it is immaterial. Coffee, like the acerbic aftertaste of enslavement, is inseparable from modernity.

Coffee's deep painterly soak into the absorbent fibers both balances and counteracts the loose, intuitive brushwork of Hall's hand by adding a bit of chance and abstraction to deftly-modeled scenes. But raw cotton has fibrous teeth. And in syncopated breaks of whiteness, the canvas holds coffee's sweep at bay, pooling the brew in some zones, and not others. In these rhythmic uncolored passages of void and lacuna, the white fibers trick the eye into thinking absence is a presence. In these instances where raw cotton asserts its white vacuity, Hall activates the liminal correspondence between whiteness and everything else. By enticing the viewer to look closer and to understand, Hall is challenging the viewer's assumptions about material capacity and by extension, binary racial constructions. The globular dimensionality of the acrylic pigments rests on the surface of the mosaic ground like a marble, serving as a opaque resist to the gouache effect of the coffee and symbolizing the knuckled muck of the present and the ambivalent, if dogged hope black and brown peoples have in a future of their own imagining.

Citations from the history of American art remix and refine like recitatives on the eye, marking Hall's gesture as a kind of Charlie Parker-esque dive past the melodic line into one's own mythology. Hall has managed to do what the impressionists are revered for 180 years later: he's found a way to make history and material molten, airy, and poetic. He has found a way to turn the dark shadow of shame in hyper/invisibility toward the light. And he did not have to dilute coffee's power with sugar or cream to do so.

When an artist makes the choice to work at scale, they are making the choice to make history. Chase is working at this magnitude because he's re-calibrating the modern liminalities of landscape, portraiture, and genre by condensing them in coffee's flow. For most young artists, the choice to take up space can feel brash, flippant, juvenile. But for Chase, these diachronic and fluid resonances feel downright homey. I suppose the images feel good and right because we trust the vibe and the earth-toned palette and we are curious to see what a caffeinated mind in full control of their capabilities can achieve. In bringing the familiar and familial in living color to the false-neutral of the gallery wall, Chase is actively "untying the knot" of respectability politics that have kept folk from seeing themselves as full participants, no scratch that, as muses, in the histories they helped to build. In these new history-paintings, in these restless and resilient portraits of love and wounding, where decided zones of raw cotton read as gestural sprezzatura, the entire world becomes a living room of lounging, grazing, joking, reminiscing, retelling, and then, poignantly, mercifully, blackfully, of giving it up to the air, and moving the fuck on to love, to question, to make it another day.

Dr. Horace D. Ballard is Curator of American Art at the Williams College Museum of Art. He is a lecturer on eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century portraiture, the visual cultures of race and gender, and the material cultures of religion in the joint graduate program for the History of Art at The Clark Art Institute and Williams College. He has held positions in the curatorial, education, and interpretation departments of the Yale University Art Gallery, the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design, Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, and the Birmingham Museum of Art.

Chase Hall (b. 1993, St. Paul, Minnesota) lives and works in New York and Los Angeles, and was raised across Minnesota, Chicago, Las Vegas, Colorado, Dubai, Los Angeles and New York. Recently, Hall has been included in exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Kunsthalle KAdE, Amersfoort; and with the Public Art Fund, New York. In 2019, Hall attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and last year he was a resident at MASS MoCA. Hall's work is included in the collections of The Studio Museum in Harlem, ICA Miami, and The Rubell Museum.