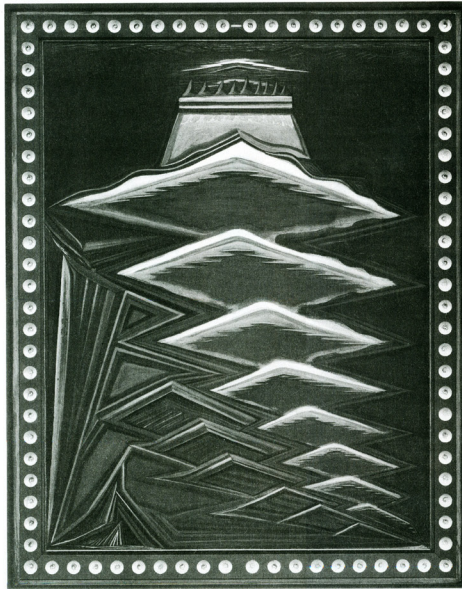


THE LONG LOOK



Left: ZACH HARRIS, *Whee in Picture Light*, 2011–2012, water based paint, wood, masquite, 27½ × 21½ in.; courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Right: *Sky Wig on Painting Table*, 2011–2012, water based paint, wood, spray paint, masquite, 50 × 37 in.; courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



## THE LONG LOOK

Zach Harris meditates on the coming apocalypse

Text by Kate Wolf

ZACH HARRIS IS AN ARTIST OFTEN RECOGNIZED FOR the intricacy and intensity of his work. Together, his paintings and carved, wooden relief frames present a swarm of prismatic forms, combining vivid color, patterning, and handwritten text with landscapes that edge into abstraction. In his latest work, his process has also expanded to include plein-air tree paintings, spectral, spray-painted geometries, and large tapestry-like constructions, teeming with drawn figures engaged in eschatological, stream-of-consciousness scenes that snake around and inside the delicately etched shapes of the canvas.

Zach Harris also happens to be my partner, so I have an especially intimate relationship to both him and his work. I asked him a couple of questions about his most recent paintings by email and over the phone, which gave us requisite amount of space to assume some level of formality.

**KATE WOLF:** It seems like ever since we spent time in upstate New York two Augusts ago, your painting has been going in a new direction. Do you think that's true?

**ZACH HARRIS:** PREVIOUS TO OUR stay in the woods, I had just finished two back-to-back, East Coast, West Coast shows. It was maybe like making a double album; I used every song I had. So by the time we rented the house upstate after those shows, I felt whittled down to a generative core.

I went back to the things I love most about the creative process and creative attention: plein air landscape painting, which I did a lot of as an undergrad at Bard College in the Hudson Valley, provided one way to practice this. The first thing I did was tree meditations. The object of meditation can be anything, but I find that trees very readily lose their initial unthinking/unlooking, superficial form and start to become much more than you'd expect, which is the experience I try to base my studio practice on.

The other thing I resurrected upstate was pure drawing. I read that whenever Picasso was kind of through with a body of work or a particular style he was investigating, he would always go back to drawing. I'm pretty sure artists and schools, as far back in the past as there is record of, taught their students to do this, actually. Drawing is like the skeleton, or the bones of the painting. But as a painter, you don't have to isolate drawing; it's actually very difficult to do that if you're using or were brought up with a typical 20<sup>th</sup>- or 21<sup>st</sup>-century modernist, Western art education, which basically every one you ever see at a gallery was.

Painting is with paint, which can easily be a painter's focus. But drawing is always there and is in everything you do. If you don't really focus on it exclusively, or refine your sense of it, you kind of lose your sharpness, and the next thing you know you're making paintings that don't have much awareness

of illusionistic space, which is the majority of most contemporary painting because people just don't use isolated drawing much as a part of their practice anymore. (Isn't it kind of a fact—doesn't everyone say “people don't know how to draw anymore?”) I felt that I needed to sharpen up, which was my old motto at UC Santa Cruz because painting is a ninja's art. But the surprising thing was that when I started back into isolated drawing, it was so regressive! I channeled my demented inner high school student who just draws in the margins and writes letters all day in class. It was fascinating and too fun. I felt, and still feel, guilty. It's a moral thing, which I realize is what most people's aesthetic judgments and tastes are based on. I had to accept it and then the process started getting more vivid as I got a better feel for what was going on. For me, drawing has to be an elemental, truly abstract principle element because every single time I spent at least two hours drawing in the beginning of the day, I had a great day painting after. You become so sensitive to space that your responses to it are stronger and clearer than normal. What ended up happening was that I started creating these elaborate, insane scenes that were all about—down to every single dream-like detail—apocalypse! My fear of the doom of the world was tapped, and it's actually still flowing.

**Has the change in your work been mostly one of process, then? Or is more that resurrecting old,**

**familiar ways of working led you to new subject matter? And, do you think these visions of the dissolution of the world relate back to your sitting and looking at something until it dissolves or breaks down?**

It's probably the opposite actually: the more experiences of dissolution one has, the more flexible your ideas about the future become and the more you stop believing in your ideas, which are always either about the past or future. So in a way, maybe apocalyptic thought is purified thought, or originator of thought, since it is so clearly about the future and time. It's like going into a “hardcore” world. You sort of just watch your mind come up with all these ridiculous images, until after a while they let down their guard a bit and your real fears come through. This is a stage one always goes through when you are staring at something for a long time. But it leads to the long-look liberation. That relaxing dissolution of a tree, for instance, makes you feel so much better and less fearful. Maybe having apocalyptic thoughts is healthy and not a negative. We will all die, and it will be better for the earth, but it's an earth we only think we know. It would be a shame to lose human evolution and get wiped out, but does it matter to the universe? Maybe.