

# SSENSE

CULTURE

## TROUBLED WATERS: MEET PAINTER CHASE HALL

### On Blackness Beyond White Imagination

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Images/Photos Courtesy Of: Chase Hall

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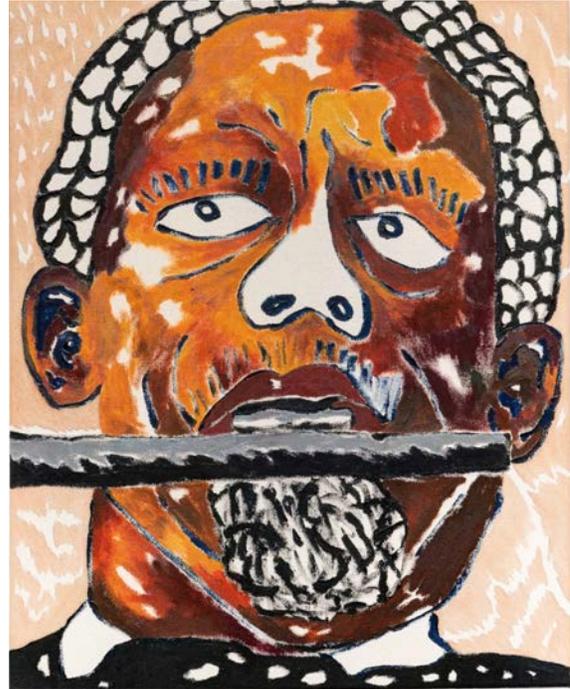
It is tempting to read every cultural gesture against the daily dramas of what's current: the pandemic, the protests, and the uprising. This is especially true when the subjects of that art are the same people who have been disproportionately affected. Yet it is equally true that good art can—and does—expand conceptually and culturally. It is capable of meeting any moment, no matter when the art was made. Earlier this year, in the *Before*, let's call it, the New York-based, emerging artist Chase Hall painted the portrait *The Black Birderers Association* (2020), for a solo exhibition, "Troubled Waters", in Los Angeles. The painting is a close-up of a coffee skin, middle-aged man gripping a pair of black binoculars. He is wide-eyed, searching the distance for some rare bird to identify. It's an image of repose: the Black figure is seen standing still in a moment of leisure, enjoying his pastime. Over the phone, Hall asks me: "Was it life imitating art or art imitating life?"

Sargent, Antwaun, "Troubled Waters: Meet Painter Chase Hall," *SSense.com*, October 6, 2020.

A few months after he made the work, a video surfaced of a white woman on the phone with the police, falsely accusing a Black male bird-watcher of harassment. The painting was a representation of what Hall calls "his most personal hobby," developed in the woodlands of Minnesota during his childhood. In an instant it became visual shorthand for the plight of Black people who wandered across the color line into territories of authority historically marked "white." Suddenly this painting was an artifact to point to when discussing white-woman racism, or "Karen," as the internet has personified it. "I'm guilty of resharing the image during that time, which I felt was pretty opportunistic," explains the 26-year-old self-taught artist. "But I also felt like, holy shit, what is going on. Seeing my work propagated for so many people's apathy or interest in Black Lives Matter really freaked me out."



Chase Hall, *Beneath the Underdog*, 2020, 48" x 36".



Chase Hall, *Eric Dolphy*, 2020, 20" x 16".

Lost in the discussion was the sense of memoir and sensitivity, in which Hall paints. His experimentation with mark-making, color, and tone on raw cotton canvas produces figures that are rendered with a partial vibrancy: you may see a face but not a torso, an arm but not a nose. It is a read on history, where Black life—the achievements and the small moments of joy—seemingly disappear into the abyss of memory. Hall paints with what he calls an "outsider" sensibility, alluding to how the label "outsider art" was once used to underrate great Black artists, like the assemblage creator Thornton Dial, the sculptor William Edmondson, and the figurative artists Bill Traylor and Horace Pippin, in whose lineage Hall freshly sits.

He also uses the term because he never went to art school, and it belies the informal spirit of how he came to paint. He walked the streets of the city of New York searching the faces of those he encountered for likenesses he could put down on canvas in a moral, fervid, cartoon-like expression. What he has come to over the years is a conceptual approach that focuses on Blackness beyond what he calls "the white imagination." So, he paints the outsider: the traveler, the rebel, the jazz man, the horse jockey, the folk hero. "I don't necessarily believe my work needs to affirm anything that has already been said," he explains. "I'm more interested in creating these confusing, complex reads of what painting can be, that questions my views and the viewer."

### Antwaun Sargent

Chase Hall

**Before the *Black Birderers Association* (2020) painting, you made *Running from Yesterday's Acquittal* in 2019. The work also went viral, in the aftermath of Ahmaud Arbery's murder. It is rare that art can perfectly visualize the mood of a country. What's that feeling like?**

It definitely gave me this very deep connection to my work and listening to my gut, but in a way that felt like this bizarre manifestation of art work. And then there's the part of "Oh, God, [when] does it stop?" For every rose of expression, there is a thorn.

**Why did you make the picture?**

Because of this idea of running. Even running while I used to play sports, I would be like, "What am I running from?" Why does this feel like I'm being chased, watched, or surveilled? How deep and how generational are these concerns? Are these fears? Are these realities?

**But once a painting goes viral, there's a tension between what you intended and what the internet does with it.**

There was this naivety. I did believe that the work was my microphone. I was trying to force a conversation. I was using the work as a way to really get into some of these ideas and my deepest wounds. And then I played myself. Publications and other people started sharing my work, and I got



Chase Hall, *Like the Back of My Hands*, 2020, 12" x 12".

the hate comments and racist DMs. I was like, "Oh my god." I felt like I was some sort of influencer art buddy. In reality, I just wanted to get noticed by the people that I respect and admire. Now it's just me in my studio, focusing on the paint.

**What led you to painting?**

I started painting out of drawing. When I was little, my homework and my tests were filled up with little doodles, faces. Some people hear voices; for me, I see faces. I would walk five to fifteen miles a day making images around New York, or California, where I lived before. And when I'd come home, I just wanted to continue my thought process and keep questioning. Painting was this way for me to metaphorically continue making a mixtape, without having to sing a rap.

**Did moving to New York change your work?**

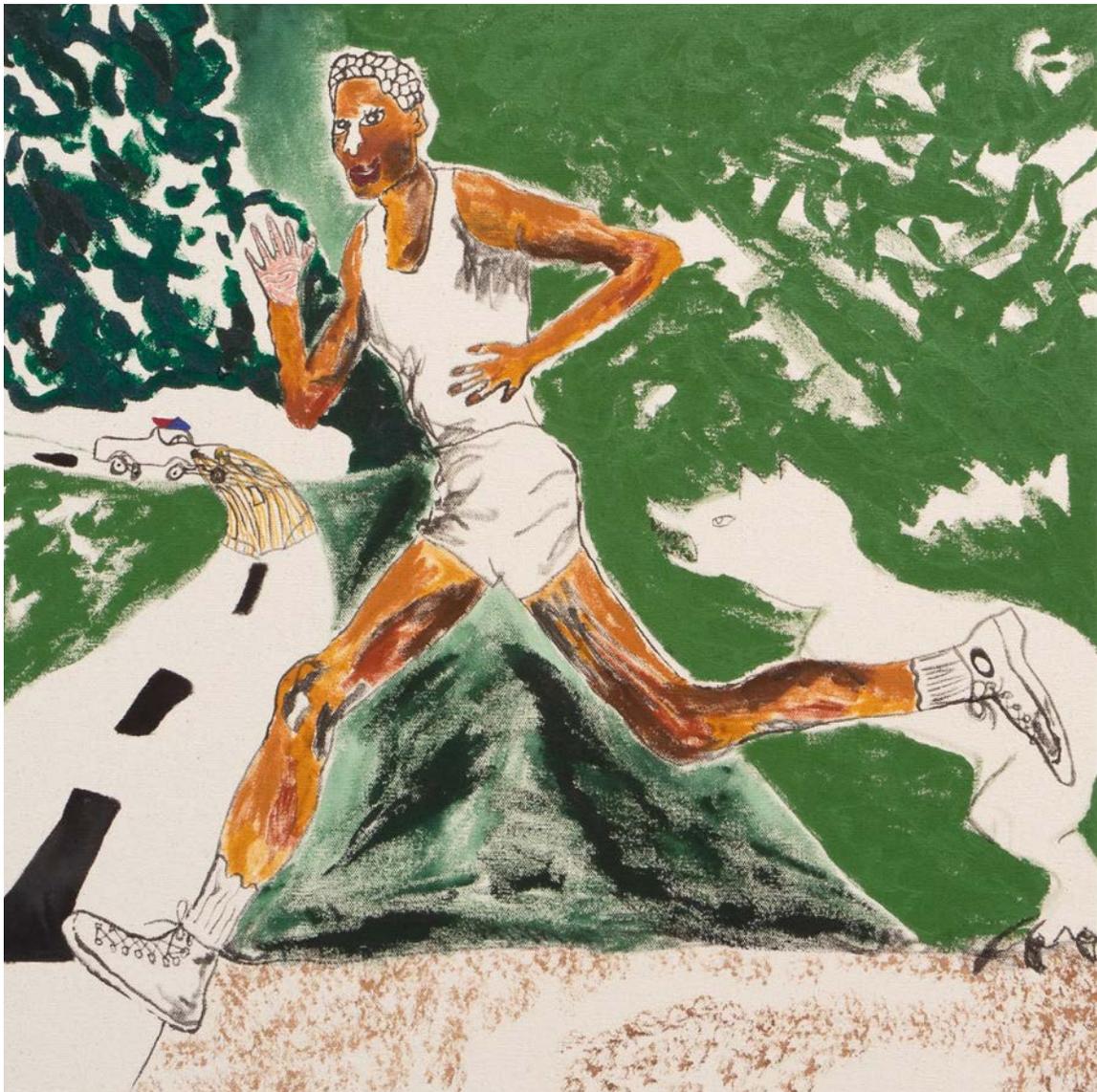
I set up road maps where I would go to essentially every gallery and museum and just take notes in my little notebook. I became obsessed to the point where I'd be up at five in the morning until midnight, every day, just trying to get some of these paintings out of my head. Painting became kind of cathartic, a direct response to deep trauma, the only therapeutic expression that I knew.

Also, when I moved to New York, my girlfriend, Lauren, was studying painting and sculpture at Parsons, and would sneak me into her studio. I didn't even know what art school really was. I'd walk into this place and be like, "What do you mean, there are 70 kids all our age trying to express their deepest, darkest whatever?" I started bringing bagels to the security guard and he would let me cruise upstairs. There was an open studio right next to Lauren's, and she shared a lot of the technical ideas behind painting, from stretching canvas, creating pigments, and all of these things that I had no experience with. That was about 10 years ago.

**Looking through *Milk and Honey*, your two street photography zines, it seems that the camera played a compositional role in your paintings.**

Right. My eye has developed since my grandpa gave me a camera when I was about seven years old. That was the only tool that wouldn't question what I was thinking. I could walk around. I could see things. And then I would have this material proof. The camera was this kind of imaginary friend who I had conversations with about identity and life as a Black person in America.

**There is something also about the way you compose the eyes of your figures that seems to be rooted in a photographic gaze.**



Chase Hall, *Running from Yesterday's Acquittal*, 2020, 24" x 24".

You know, the eye line. It's like real recognizing real.

**Right. What bell hooks calls an oppositional gaze. In your portraits, like *Single Moms Boys Choir* (2020) and *A Great Day in Harlem* (2020), which riffs off that iconic group photo of the Uptown jazz musicians, there is just so much weight in the eyes.**

I was thinking of that 1958 Art Kane photo compositionally, but also this idea of community and humanity next to each other time and again as we exist in whatever space we're in. I wanted to also remind us of the legacy of jazz and this kind of continued improvisation of Black life, to quote Fred Moten. This idea, in jazz, that every day is a new opportunity to go for it, is getting me through this year.

**Who are some of your favorite jazz musicians to listen to in the studio?**

One of the paintings that I just recently made was of Eric Dolphy. He was more of a free jazz player, which is so abstract. So I love listening to him and anyone who pushes those boundaries. Mal Waldron has this song called "All Alone" and it's this very dramatic piano composition that is like one of the most chilling sounds that has always rocked me to my core. I've also been revisiting "Night Song" by Noel Pointer, and I've actually been doing some work with the Noel Pointer Foundation. They put together violin lessons for kids in the community. One other is "Tokyo Blue" by Najee. It's contemporary jazz, but it still has this kind of depth that remind me of what's possible.

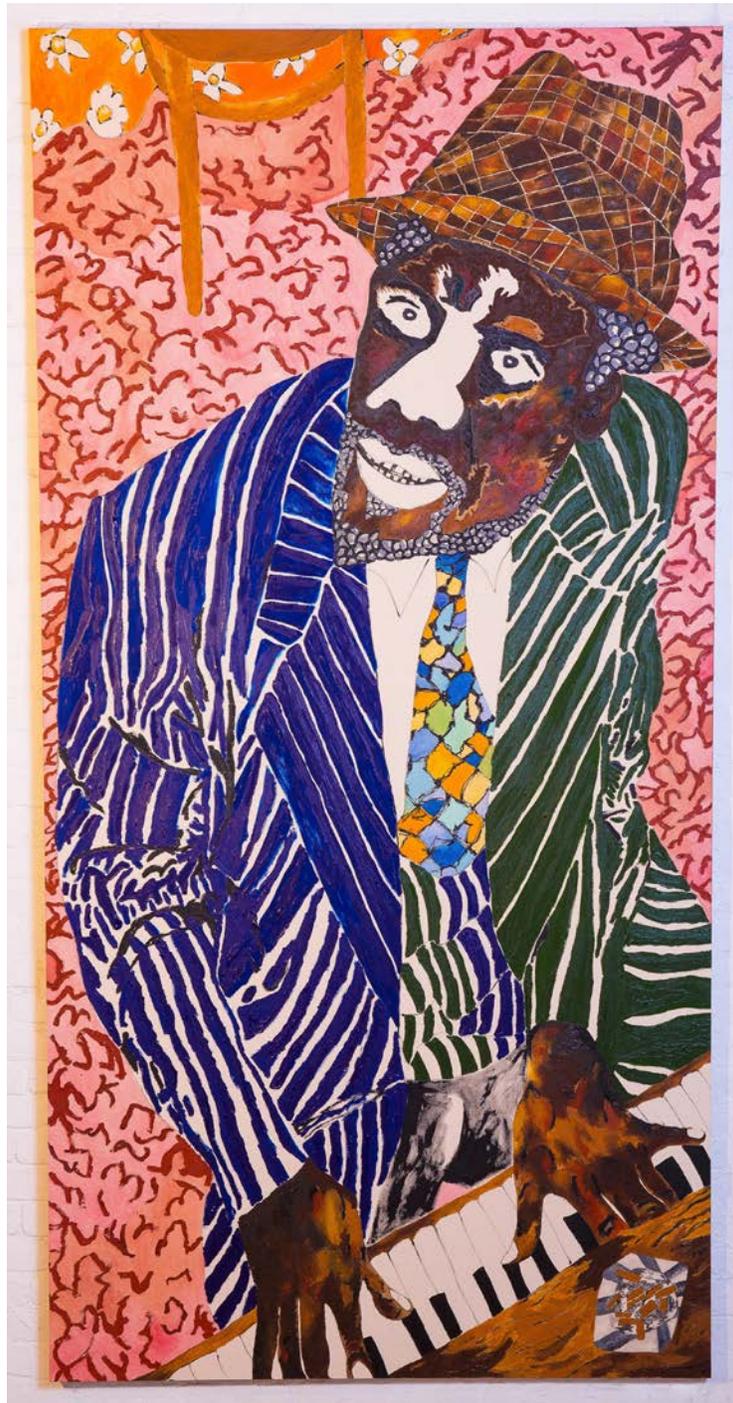
**What's the "Thelonius Number" painting about?**

I wanted to talk about this version of a signature, where you're playing with negative space on a canvas that is also filled with color. The negative space seems like abstract marks, but it's making this figurative gesture. The white stands out.

**Can you talk about how you use the raw cotton canvas in your paintings?**

A big part of the mark-making in the composition is really informed by bi-raciality, and this truth that the conflict of existing between these two fixed identities is my lived experience. In my art the use of the literal canvas is critique. I leave parts of the raw cotton canvas unpainted, exposed, as a way to talk about audacity in governance, origin, and the materiality of painting. There is cotton behind all of these paintings that are in the canon of our visual history.

**So to expose the cotton is to expose racism in America but also the history of Western painting?**



Chase Hall, *Thelonious Number*, 2019, 96" x 48".

As a Black portrait artist, I couldn't start making these figures on cotton canvas without acknowledging literally why we are here. The cotton canvas has an irony to it, a complexity we are still living with. I want the parts of the paintings that remain exposed to be a symbol for our history, but also, a symbol for these spaces in which art circulates like museums and galleries where you go in and you see that cotton canvas. You're like, "Oh, wow; there is a Black lived experience in a way, and a history on top of this very commodified material." It also allows for a sculptural, conceptual stroke within the painting that can really define the subject next to these coffee washes or tonal washes that create depth.

**I see faces in the whiteness you leave unpainted. Is that intentional?**

I've been thinking a lot about the theory of pareidolia, which is where your brain starts seeing faces in things subconsciously, like Jesus on a piece of toast or a monster in the darkness of the woods. It all relates to this idea of fight-or-flight: this very primal instinct of seeing danger too early to prepare yourself or remain resilient in an instance of attack.

**The white space in works like *Fourth of July*, *Florida Man*, *In Red Playing Blues*, and even in *Porch Sounds*—there is this sort of casual erasing of the Black imprint on culture.**

And it also allows the viewer to see themselves and fill in their history. I want there to be a confrontation, or to go back to bell hooks, an operational gaze of material. In these vacuous spaces, I want there to be the representation of whiteness in the origin of Blackness. How it constrains our experience.



Left: Chase Hall, *Fourth of July*, 2020, 20" x 16". Middle: Chase Hall, *Porch Sounds*, 2019, 48" x 36". Right: Chase Hall, *In Red Playing Blues*, 2020, 40" x 40".

To talk specifically about *In Red Playing Blues*, those kinds of circular white moments of devoid paint, devoid color, those are about the kind of mosaics of identity that become faulted once you realize how complex it is existing outside of a fixed, dominant identity of one race.

**So the whiteness of the canvas becomes about what?**

It's representing that you're missing pieces of who you are, and how you fill that history in with other expressions or other ideas that you evolve into a self-identity. It's a reminder that there is still a need for a lot of love, nurturing, and listening. I want it to be not only a reminder of our past, but also, an homage to our resilience.

**It does all of that, but then it also still puts a weight on the viewer, right? You are asking them to finish the painting in some ways.**

Totally. A lot of the whiteness I leave out will be in the nose, in the lips, and in the crotch of my figures because I want to engage the viewer and question stereotypes. Why is it that we need to be damn near killing ourselves to be appreciated?

**The raw cotton canvas next to your vibrant use of color reminds me of that Zora Neale Hurston quote, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," which also makes me think about Glen Ligon's etchings from the early 90s.**

I think of my use of color almost like a mood ring. I play with these reds and these blues and these yellow ochres, to get at a deeper expression. There are only so many colors, so how can I break away from them? I'm trying to create a new function for color. I always joke to myself when I'm painting, and say, "Oh, go harder. Break the printer!" How can I get color and no color on the canvas riled up, but still sit in this idea of elegance? I'm thinking about color, stroke, form, and composition in a way that's more about space and ideas, and not just about me reiterating imagery in a way that it meant something to me. I'm trying to challenge what the canvas can even be.

**Describe the feeling you have when you are painting?**

There's a Stuart Hall essay called, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," where he breaks down cultural identity as this idea of being and becoming at the same time. With painting, I'm allowed to exist in between the past and future and just be in the moment and let that out. When I paint, I am being and becoming.

*Antwaun Sargent is a writer and curator living in New York. He is the author of The New Black Vanguard: Photography between Art and Fashion (Aperture) and the editor of Young, Gifted and Black: A New Generation of Artists (D.A.P). His latest exhibition is "Just Pictures."*

Sargent, Antwaun, "Troubled Waters: Meet Painter Chase Hall," *SSense.com*, October 6, 2020.



Chase Hall, *The Open Door*, September 13th 1953, date unknown, 48" x 36".