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GQ

GRINDING

Artist Chase Hall paints his canvases with coffee, making large-scale works that examine mixed-race identity in America. Now, on the eve of the biggest show of his career, Hall is reconciling his fractured past with his blindingly bright future.

By **SAMUEL HINE**
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WHEN I ARRIVE at Chase Hall’s property in New York’s Hudson Valley, I ask if he has any coffee. This is sort of a silly question, considering he paints with the stuff. The mocha hues of coffee grounds are a signature element of his figurative canvases—Hall can pull up to a hundred espresso shots for one painting, brewing dozens of distinct tones based on the type of bean and the ratio between the grind and water volume. The Americano he pours me is excellent.

Cups in hand, we walk from his white clapboard house toward his studio across a field bathed in late-August light. Hall comes out here in the mornings before he picks up his brushes. Only 31 years old, Hall decided to divide his time between the libertine downtown NYC art scene and this bucolic upstate retreat at a younger age than most artists. Hall’s wife, Lauren Rodriguez Hall, gave birth to their daughter, Henrietta, two months before my visit, and fatherhood has tapped him into the rhythms of life in a new way. He’s been learning woodworking in order to build large, sturdy work tables for his studio, and has a newfound fascination with the flora and fauna that inhabit his 21 acres. “I have turkey families that live back here,” he says as he calmly lopes through the woods. “This whole year we’ve been watching them grow. That shit’s been a trip. Now I’m the guy out here with my coffee in a robe, like, *Where are my turkeys? Where they at?*”

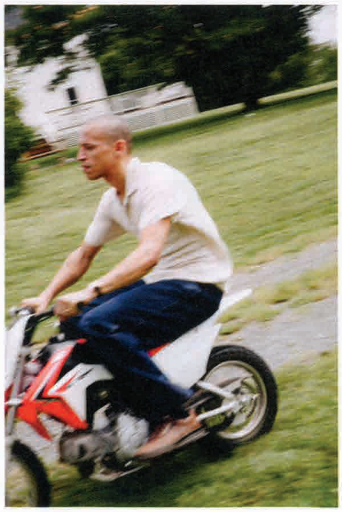
Though he landed in New York just over a decade ago with plans to become a photojournalist, Hall is now one of the buzziest young painters in the contemporary art world. His immediately recognizable paintings are coveted by collectors and institutions, and marked by his extraordinary autodidactic fervor. “I can’t draw a straight line to save my life,” jokes Hall, who began doodling with coffee at his Starbucks shifts during high school. Hall’s rise coincided with a wider surge in the art market for paintings by young Black artists. His work, often idiosyncratic depictions of Black life in American history, carries the perspective of someone carefully reckoning with his own layered identity as the son of a white mother and Black father. “I’m interested in how I can speak to hybridity and mixedness and clashing and genetic humility and not feeling like enough,” he tells me. Now, on the cusp of his biggest solo show yet, set to open in November at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, Hall can prove that he has true staying power. This event, says Kordansky, marks “a younger artist officiating and concretizing his position.”

Upstate, Hall’s practice has hit a new level of formal and conceptual depth. Hall and Rodriguez bought the place a few years ago, and when she became pregnant they decamped from the East Village with their comically large Great Dane, Paisley. As we enter into his spotless workshop, which had previously housed a Bible-binding factory and a whiskey distillery, I can tell he’s taking advantage of the airy digs to create the most ambitious pieces of his career; along one wall a length of raw canvas covered in rough charcoal outlines stretches 24 feet across. “When I came here, there was nothing—no electricity, no plumbing,” he says. Now, says Hall, he can access “elements of growth for my practice that I’ve only dreamed of.”

As a kid, art was not one of Hall’s main concerns. Instead, he loved clothes. He remembers spending hours walking around Ralph Lauren stores, imagining opening his own menswear boutique. Even then, Hall had a keen understanding of what clothing says about the person underneath—and how it can transform you into someone else.

Hall was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, and had a peripatetic childhood. His father was in and out, and his mother, whom Hall warmly describes as a “hustler gangster lady,” was always on the move. For the first 16 years of his life, the two of them lived in Minnesota, Chicago, Colorado, Las Vegas, Santa Monica, and Malibu, and even did six months in Dubai. Hall attended eight different schools, and calls this period an “oscillation through class structures.” In other words: Sometimes their luck was up, sometimes it was down. Hall learned how to take care of himself, living in what he calls a “survival delusion” that carried into adulthood. “I’m very much like, if you can’t do it yourself, you got to figure out how to do it,” he says.

Previous pages: Hall in his studio with his most recent work. Opposite: Hall with his wife, Lauren Rodriguez Hall, their daughter, Henrietta, and dog Paisley.



By his late teenage years, Hall was living a head-spinning double life. He was a popular and handsome varsity lacrosse player at Malibu High School who took his classmate Gigi Hadid to prom. But in the 11th grade, as Hall’s mother faced legal troubles, he tells me, they lost their home and a storage unit filled with most of his possessions. Hall remembers it as a time when “everything kind of came crashing down.” When he wasn’t bouncing between friends’ houses, he was living out of his car. Surrounded by wealth and privilege, a rare Black surfer in a predominantly white beach town, Hall was negotiating the complexities of race and class, of leisure and belonging, as he now deftly depicts in his paintings.

Functionally on his own, Hall tried his hand at drawing and began taking portraits using an old point-and-shoot. Making art, he says, was the language he needed to “find reason and meaning” in the aspects of his life that once startled him.

After high school, Hall spent a couple of years surf-bumming while working at a real estate company, interning at Vans, and taking as many photos as he could on the side. In 2013, he sold the RV he lived in and moved to New York City with his cameras, where he got a job as a line cook and immediately hit the streets, going on regular 15-some-mile walks up and down the city, shooting portraits of characters he met along the way. When the sun went down, he returned home to paint all night using materials salvaged from dumpsters behind the NYU art studios. As a barista in high school, he used coffee grounds to paint portraits on the back of receipts; in NYC his leftover coffee was a bountiful, cheap source of pigment. “Chase’s experience and his story, it’s kind of like a hero’s tale in a way,” says Kordansky. “What he comes from, what he’s achieved, and what he’s found—there’s a monumental meaning in all of it.”

The closest thing Hall got to a formal art education came when he met Rodriguez not long after landing in NYC. She was studying painting and sculpture at Parsons, and soon began sneaking her new boyfriend into her lectures. “As soon as I met Chase and we started painting in the same space together and teaching each other things, it immediately became obvious. I was like, I’m not a painter. *This* is a painter,” she tells me.

Hall obsessively reverse engineered an education in the city’s museums and galleries, and fearlessly told any art world grandee he’d meet about his nascent practice. The art critic and Gagosian director Antwaun Sargent fondly remembers Hall coming up to him while he was speaking with pioneering conceptual artist Lorna Simpson at a gallery fundraiser in 2018. As Sargent remembers it,

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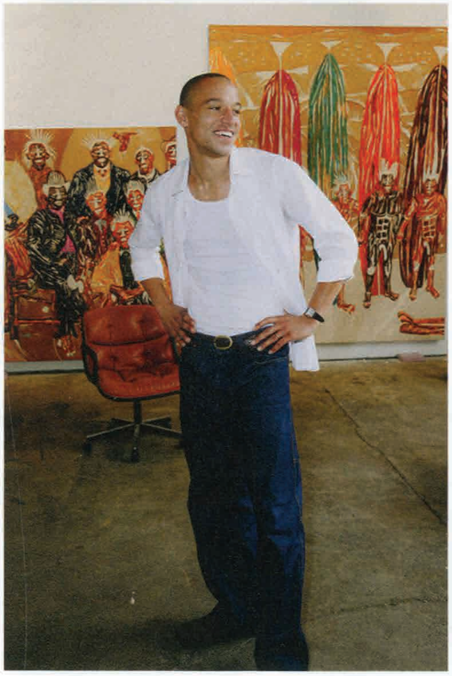
Hall interrupted their conversation “and then somehow convinced me to come to the studio five days later,” he says.

“I mean, I have no shame in my game,” Hall says with a smile when I retell Sargent’s story. “I do really good with rejection in life. All of the not-being-enough and the shortcomings have always been catalytic—and I remember it all. I’m very scoreboard-tally.”

It was only after Hall’s career started gaining traction that he discovered the extent of his own painting lineage. By 2019 he was intentional about his aesthetic signature: the brown-and-white juxtaposition of coffee and untreated raw-cotton canvas against stylish swipes of eye-catching pigment. In 2020 he landed a residency at MASS MoCA, and a year later was named to Forbes 30 Under 30. “All of a sudden,” Hall recalls, people were asking him, “Aren’t you happy? You’re killing it!” He felt more conflicted: His parents were incarcerated during that period, and BLM protests were flooding cities across the nation. “I had to just mind my business,” he says.

It was around that time that he received a package in the mail from his father, with whom he previously had a sparse relationship. It was a plastic tub of rudimentary art utensils he had used to paint while he was in a correctional facility: blenders made from toilet paper, toothbrushes smeared with dried pigment. “He was always creative,” Hall says. “My grandma has drawings he did in school and he’s someone who has a *hand*.” Art, Hall says, brought them back together. “There were all these opportunities to get to know each other through creativity,” he says, remembering one exchange: “*What do you mean you know how to make a black from phthalo blue and raw umber?*” In 2023 Hall created an installation for a solo museum show at the SCAD Museum of Art, in Savannah, where he placed his father’s tools next to tools used by modernist painter Jacob Lawrence. He called it *Incarceration, Liberation, Perspiration*. “It was,” says the museum’s chief curator, Daniel S. Palmer, “such a powerful gesture.”

“I am very much still that kid who moved all around America and dealt with the things I had to deal with,” Hall says. “But my work isn’t necessarily reiterating when it hurt. I think about it more as, How do you get back up?”



INSIDE THE STUDIO, we stand before an eight-foot-tall painting of a football player in repose on a verdant gridiron, helmet in hand, a packed stadium rendered in a rainbow of coffee grounds—notes of cocoa, caramel, chestnut, and copper. It’s one of over a dozen new works Hall has been finishing for his upcoming show at the David Kordansky Gallery. Hall’s subjects often occupy scenes that were once—and often still are—racially divided: a Black equestrian mid-jump over an obstacle, a group of sinewy men posing in the nude with their longboards on a glittering Malibu beach. His compositions depict scenes of midcentury American recreation, reimagined as personal, almost magical, memories. “I see my family in Henry Taylor’s work. I see my future and visions of Blackness in Kerry James Marshall’s work,” he says. Hall’s contribution to the canon is turning the painful emblems of his otherness into paintings of unique sophistication.

In the past few years, Hall’s work has attracted the types of patrons who tend to take the long view of an artist’s career. “I really saw from the start, this is an artist who is deeply rooted and grounded in art-historical conversations,” says Palmer. “Chase understands what he’s doing is for art history.” LACMA, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the Brooklyn Museum, the Hammer, and the Whitney all acquired Hall’s work in recent years. His roster of collectors includes MoMA trustee AC Hudgins; arts patron Martin Eisenberg; and Bernard Lumpkin, a powerful booster of young contemporary artists of color.

Opposite page: Hall puts the finishing touches on an as-yet-untitled painting of a football player, set to be shown in an upcoming exhibition in LA.

A few signs of hype have spilled out of the art world too. At last year’s Frieze Los Angeles art fair, Tyler, the Creator hung out with Hall at the David Kordansky booth. Of Tyler, Hall is discreet. “He’s shown love,” he says of the art-obsessed rapper and designer, “and we have a creative dialogue, somewhat.”

“Chase has had really great relationships that have helped push the work in a lot of different ways, helped him strengthen his practice as an artist,” says Sargent. Put another way: “*Tons* of really important collectors own the work.”

Hall and I stop in front of the football player in his painting. Like Hall, the subject is built sturdily, with long limbs and broad shoulders, and exudes the same distinct sense of born-in-it natural style. Athletics are a consistent theme in his oeuvre. Among other sports, Hall grew up playing football and baseball, and Rodriguez Hall comes from a sports family; her maternal grandmother, Georgia Frontiere, was the pioneering owner of the NFL’s St. Louis Rams. You can also sense Hall’s close relationship to and fascination with clothing. After Parsons, Rodriguez Hall cofounded the fashion brand Lorod, and Hall’s daily uniform consists of raw carpenter jeans that she designed for him and well-worn Bode shirts. To my eye, Hall is one of the best painters of clothing since David Hockney. One nearby canvas, a group of men dripping in their Sunday best, is a masterful celebration of boastful sartorialism—clothing as both armor and sword. On another, an equestrian in a black jacket poses with his winning chestnut horse, the whole composition reconciled by the rider’s pale pink necktie. “I love the way people look,” Hall says when I note his clear fascination with expressive personal style. “I stare. I make eye contact.”

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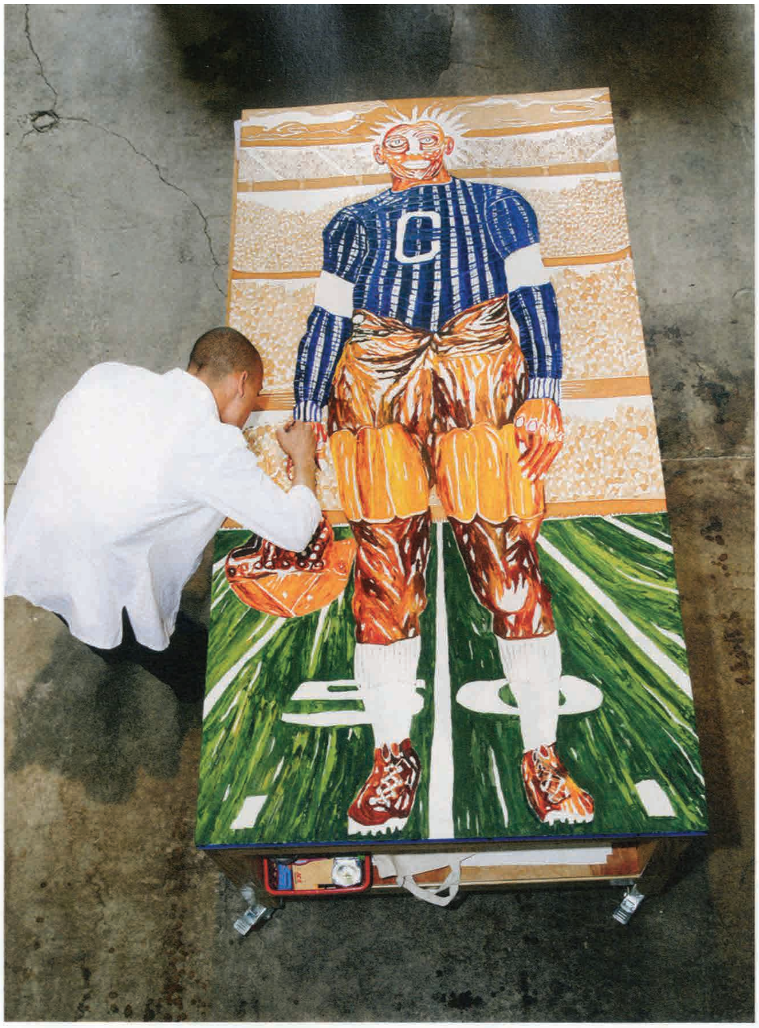

The football player’s dark blue “C”-emblazoned jersey clings to his muscles; the knee pads are patinated from heroic use. The outfit initiates a subtle temporal shift: He’s wearing a uniform from football’s segregated era, but standing in an enormous modern stadium, the site of numerous overlapping debates about entertainment and exploitation. It’s uncanny, an in-between moment left ambiguous—is the player being praised or booed? Is he triumphant or weary? His hair, nose, and lips are unpainted, exposing untreated cotton canvas. White cotton, dark coffee—Hall layers these complicated commodities in every one of his paintings, a literal depiction of what he calls “Black-white hybridity,” weighted by the past.

“In any one painting,” says Sargent, “Chase is able to talk about his own personal identity and the racial history of America, but then he can also talk about the way that biracial people exist in this liminal space. And the fact that he’s in some ways not willing to just say, *I’m this* or *I’m that*, his willingness to plumb the in-between, is important. He’s thinking through who he is as a person on the canvas.”

Upstairs, Hall shows me a large archive room. On one side there’s a long table covered with countless mementos and tchotchkes, including a striking collection of lawn jockeys and other racist figurines. Just a few weeks before, Donald Trump had claimed that Kamala Harris “happened to turn Black,” a harsh allusion to what Hall describes as “startling and triggering reminders of your isolation and who you are,” a familiar experience of mixedness that he says is “only becoming more common.” Hall pulls out a tea towel emblazoned with a caricature of a Black man playing banjo. “I grew up in a family where my white grandma would have this, *and* my Black grandma would have this shit,” he says, carefully unfolding it on the table. “And it’s like, Okay, what does it mean to clean up my coffee with it? Is it now mine?”

I ♥ BEING
AFRICAN
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THERE’S ONE PAINTING hanging in the studio that’s different from the rest. It depicts Rodriguez Hall standing in front of a lush junglescape. Wearing a bikini, she holds her pregnant belly as life teems all around her. It’s one of Hall’s most dreamlike new pieces, his Venus de Milo. His first painting of his new family.

Hall says he used to paint from 5:30 a.m. to midnight practically every day when preparing a show. Not so much now that he’s a dad. As we sit down outside the studio, I realize that my visit has burned a valuable workday one month before he needs to ship his work to Los Angeles. Earlier, when I asked if he wanted to start painting, he demurred—Hall isn’t the kind of artist who can do 10 minutes here and there. His method is physical and grueling. “Painting is something I do alone on ladders, laying on scaffolding, bent over, sweating, nervous,” he says. *Nervous?* “When you care so much,” Hall adds, “there’s so much to lose.”

But the afternoon is growing long, so we decide to chalk it up as a day of rest. The crickets whir as Hall sparks an American Spirit, takes a drag, and closes his eyes. “Dad paintings are different from young, ambitious kid paintings,” he says. “My heart lives outside of myself now. It lives in between Lauren, Henrietta, and the studio.” Hall’s practice helped him heal his relationship with his parents—both were present at his wedding in 2022. Now, he’s authoring his own story.

Hall tells me he doesn’t have a name for his show yet. But he predicts it will be “a big moment in my growth.” It seems likely to take his career to a new level, but Hall appears most concerned with his grandest autodidactical project: the life he’s building for himself and his family. His role as a father, however self-taught. His daughter is napping on his wife’s lap in the house, and Paisley is bounding around in the distance. Hall takes a drag of his cigarette. “If you have the safety of a home and your parents are doing better and you have all of your wildest dreams and imaginations in front of you, what do you do with it?” He doesn’t need to answer his own question. Behind us in the studio are what he refers to as the “receipts of that growth”: the most unforgettable works of his life. Hall looks out at his field. “I could be traveling and going to see art around the world and it’s like, I’m learning how to cut wood in upstate New York.” ✖

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