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HYPERALLERGIC

A World at the Edge of Decay and Other Artistic Imaginings

Aaron Gilbert’s sense of time draws us away from the now to a potential future that we are having trouble envisioning.



Hrag Vartanian
April 10, 2025



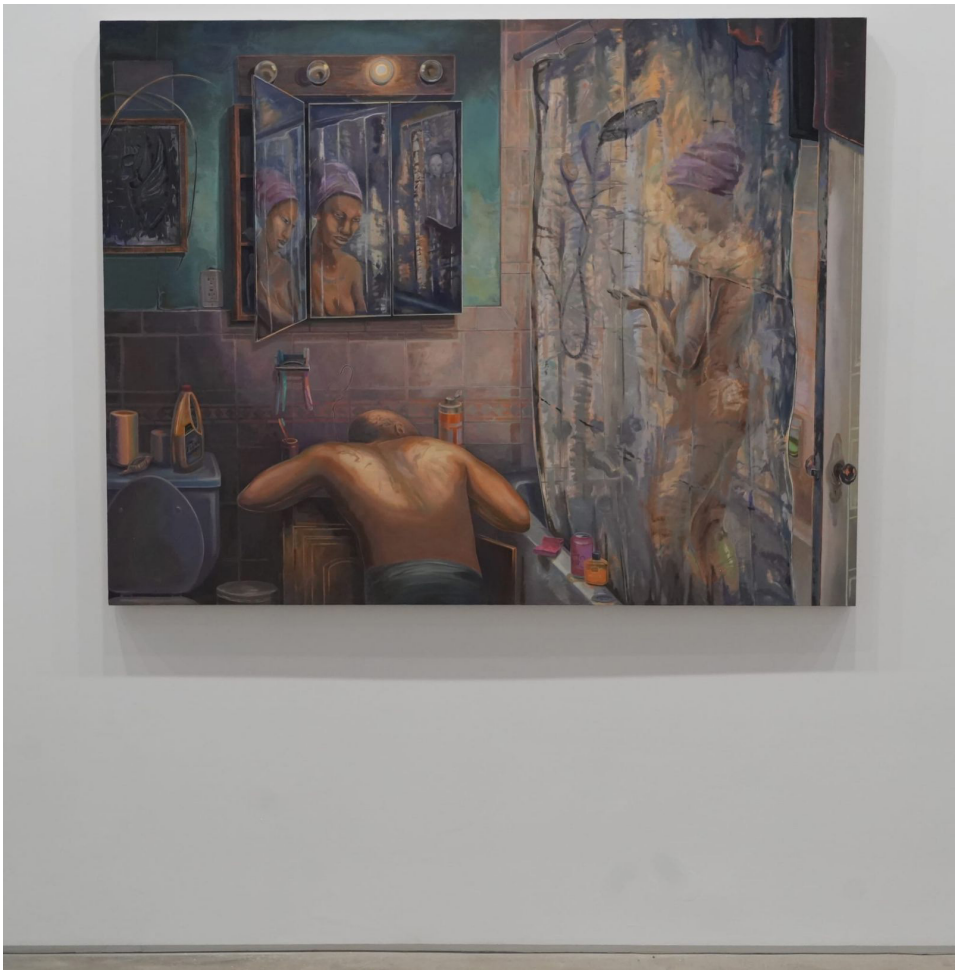
Installation view of Aaron Gilbert, “8 keys 9 seeds” (2019) (all photos Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic* unless otherwise noted)

At the core of Aaron Gilbert’s painted imagery are figures that appear to resign themselves to the branded hellscapes of lives in decay. Even when he shifts his view to interiors, figures rarely emote, and appear to be attempting to mentally escape from the confines of their allotted space.

One of the primary focuses of his art is time, whether to transcend it or break free of its grip. In particular, he is interested in the temporal organization of capitalism, with its perpetual obsession with growth. His recent paintings in *World Without End* at Gladstone Gallery probe how we organize our social worlds, particularly at home; his images are peppered with consumer products that both clutter our existence and help define our relationships with the world, while often melting into the background.

The primary figure in “The Dream Before” (2024) is shielded from the viewer by a shower curtain; her reflection appears more clearly in the panels of the mirrored bathroom medicine

cabinet, making us keenly aware of our status as outsiders looking into a private scene. The painting has shades of Édouard Manet’s “A Bar at the Folies-Bergère” (1882) — its love of reflections is both disorienting and deliciously modern. We, the viewer, find it difficult to situate ourselves here, while simultaneously feeling caught in the space between these figures who do little to acknowledge one another. Unlike Manet’s composition, Gilbert’s woman is not being offered to the viewer, but rather refracted into painterly marks that drag our eyes through the space. The male figure, who is crouching down towards the sink, is also obscured — we’re left to our own devices to parse relationships and connections. Eyes, like in so many of his paintings, are averted to avoid our gaze. When they do meet ours, they offer little comfort, appearing cold, as if either scrutinizing us with a clinical air or staring right through us.



Installation view of Aaron Gilbert, “The Dream Before” (2024)

Gilbert openly talks about being fascinated by Byzantine icons and their metaphysical worldviews. You can see how he transforms the lessons he’s learned from those sacred objects to convey another type of temporal space, one that floats in timelessness, unmoored from consumerism even if still tethered to it, consumed instead by the glowing promise of enlightenment. He creates composite images of city life in the domestic spaces of familiarity, and the scenes themselves act as doorways or portals that focus cosmic or divine energy into the object in front of us.

Though he was formerly an engineer, Gilbert’s faith in industrial production has fizzled. Yet he retains his love of building things. Here, he’s constructed cryptic, glowing tales of people who appear to float through decaying urbanscapes almost emotionlessly, seemingly burdened by something that we never quite see, and haunted by the corporatism that stalks their lives. These are nuanced and conflicted figures, familiar but alien. In “• g • o • p • u • f • f •” (2025), we seem to look through a punched-through particleboard wall at someone on the other side of a glass storefront staring at a smartphone. A range of human to alien forms inscribed into the barrier in the foreground suggests something mysterious being shed or penetrated.

From the Byzantine masters, he’s learned to tell the arcs of human stories without the drama we’ve come to expect from many forms of spirituality. He’s replaced the expected miracles of saints and symbols of faith in the European tradition with the logos of cell phone providers and delivery apps that crowd the streets. If you ponder Gilbert’s paintings long enough, you might clock the fact that he is encasing each scene in a type of artistic chrysalis, perhaps so that each of the figures can emerge transformed from their perceived purgatory.

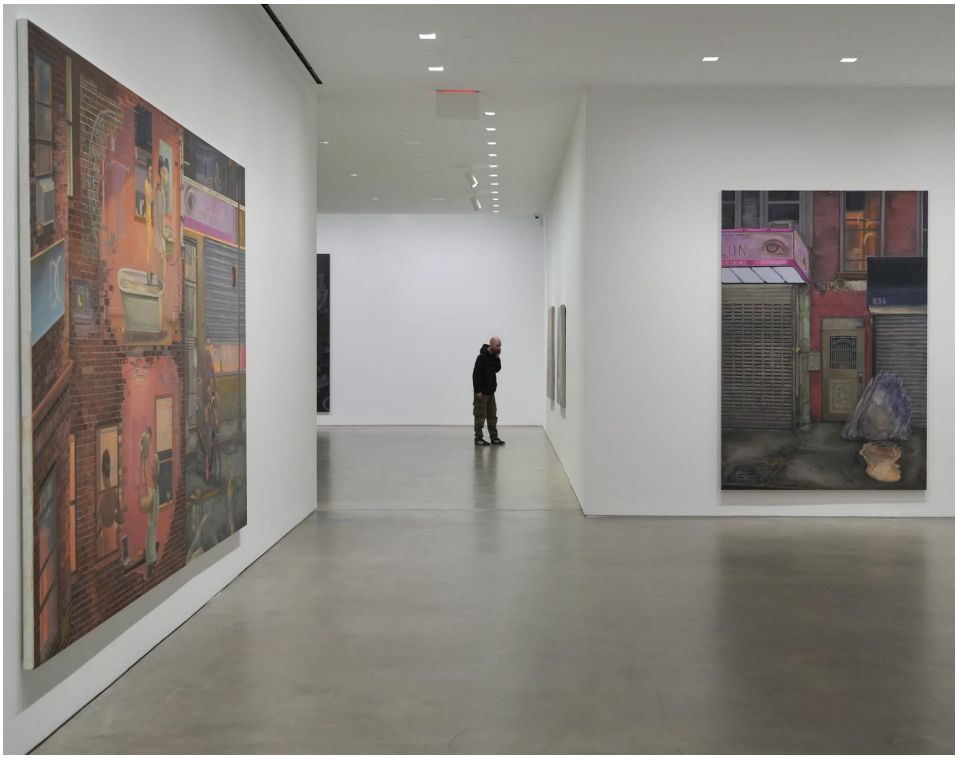
In *The Order of Time* (2017), a favorite book of the artist, physicist Carlo Rovelli discusses how time is a construct, and not a fundamental feature of the universe. Gilbert appears to be playing with our perceptions for that same purpose of questioning the fictions that constitute our communal foundations. It reminds me of the now-famous saying jointly attributed to Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher, “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” Here, if you look close enough, you can almost sense the silent figures dreaming up a new version of society after the inevitable catastrophe on the horizon, but they also look unsure if the world or capitalism will be the first to fall.



Aaron Gilbert, “Deana Bathing” (2024)



Aaron Gilbert, “• g • o • p • u • f • f •” (2025) (photo courtesy Gladstone Gallery)



A view of Gladstone Gallery exhibition with the artist in the background, and “The Fourth Way” (2024) at the right

Aaron Gilbert: World Without End *continues at Gladstone Gallery (515 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 19. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*