

ETHAN COHEN

Ethan Cohen Gallery is proud to present ***Afro-Matisse***, a solo exhibition of Jeffrey Hargrave. The show features 21 paintings and drawings by Hargrave that insert black characters into art history.

Jeffrey Hargrave substitutes marginalized figures into pastiches of classic paintings from the Western canon. The show is entitled *Afro-Matisse* and the canon is embodied chiefly by the work of Henri Matisse. In recreations, notably, of Matisse's renowned quasi-odalisque nude series, Hargrave expands his playful dance with convention via one of art history's most revered modern masters. By insinuating curvaceous, flamboyant figures of ample black women into the formula, he simultaneously subverts and corrects our expectations. He restitutes a sin of omission from history – the absence of the vision or sensibility of the gay black male, his own, from the pictorial landscape.

At the same time, Hargrave's works reimagine Matisse's colorization to reflect a joyous gay loudening of the palette. In correcting the historical record, Hargrave refuses to mute his own exuberant exploration of color, choosing instead to shout out the presence of his sensibility. The show synthesizes two of Hargrave's deepest visual-cultural influences, Matisse and the 'Blackface' tradition, to illustrate the principle of cultural 'reclaiming'. It's a controversial stance: He has received criticism for playing with this highly sensitive issue. Pointing to early photos of African-Americans presenting themselves in black-face, thereby reclaiming their own expropriated images, the artist argues that he is reclaiming the Western art-historical canon in his own work by including black faces and figures.

This show presents a selection of Hargrave's body of work made between 2020-2022 that reimagines Henri Matisse's oeuvre freed from enslavement to convention in color, line and representation, achieving a kind of expressionist figuration. At times the nudes are reduced to abstract outlines bursting with form. At other times, they seem to sway to emergent brushwork rhythms and whorls suggesting hitherto unrealized Afrobeats. The exhibition includes works from Hargrave's iconic *Matisse-Negro* series, one of which is in the permanent collection of the Bronx Museum.

The artist seems, thereby, to question not just the Western traditions of art and the male gaze but fundamental assumptions of what constitutes beauty. The principle is palpably realized in his drawing studies, often playing on the Japonoiserie genres from fin-de-siecle Europe. Hargrave inverts Western appropriations of another culture's erotic nudes by imposing African features on Japanese faces as seen by white artists.

This exhibition opens for viewing by appointment today, February 17th.
Opening Reception Thursday, March 3rd. 5-8pm.

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