FRESH PAINT:
Reggie Burrows Hodges

FEBRUARY 13–JUNE 9, 2025

PARRISH ART MUSEUM

The FLAG Art Foundation

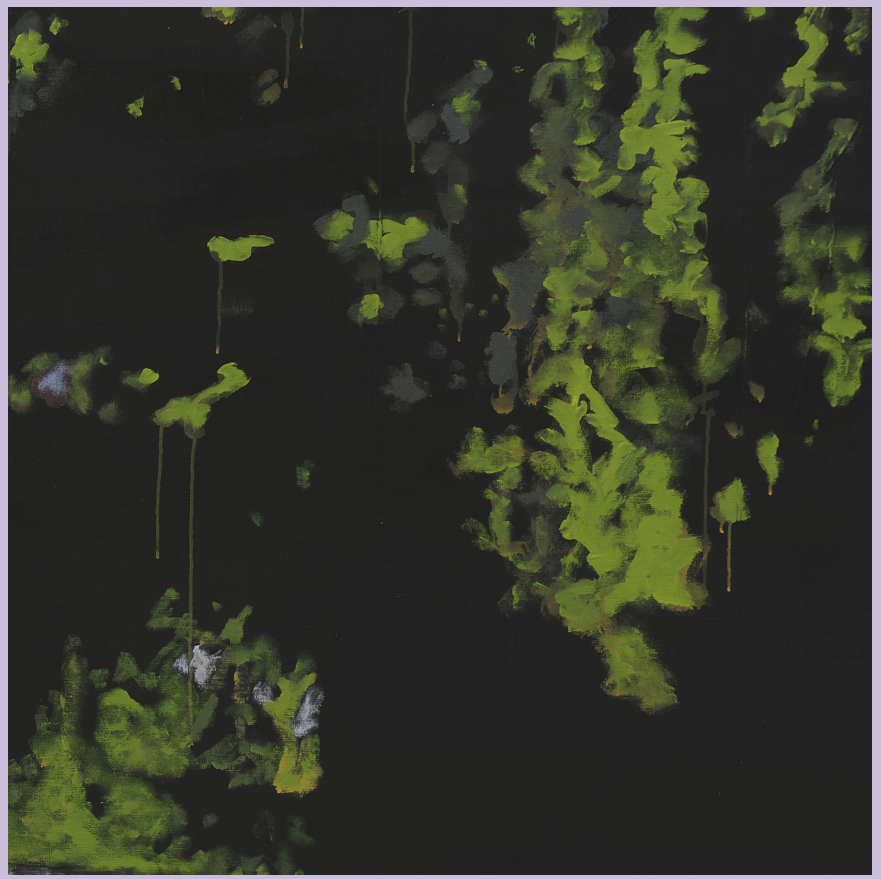
THAT LONG SHADOW ON THE LAWN

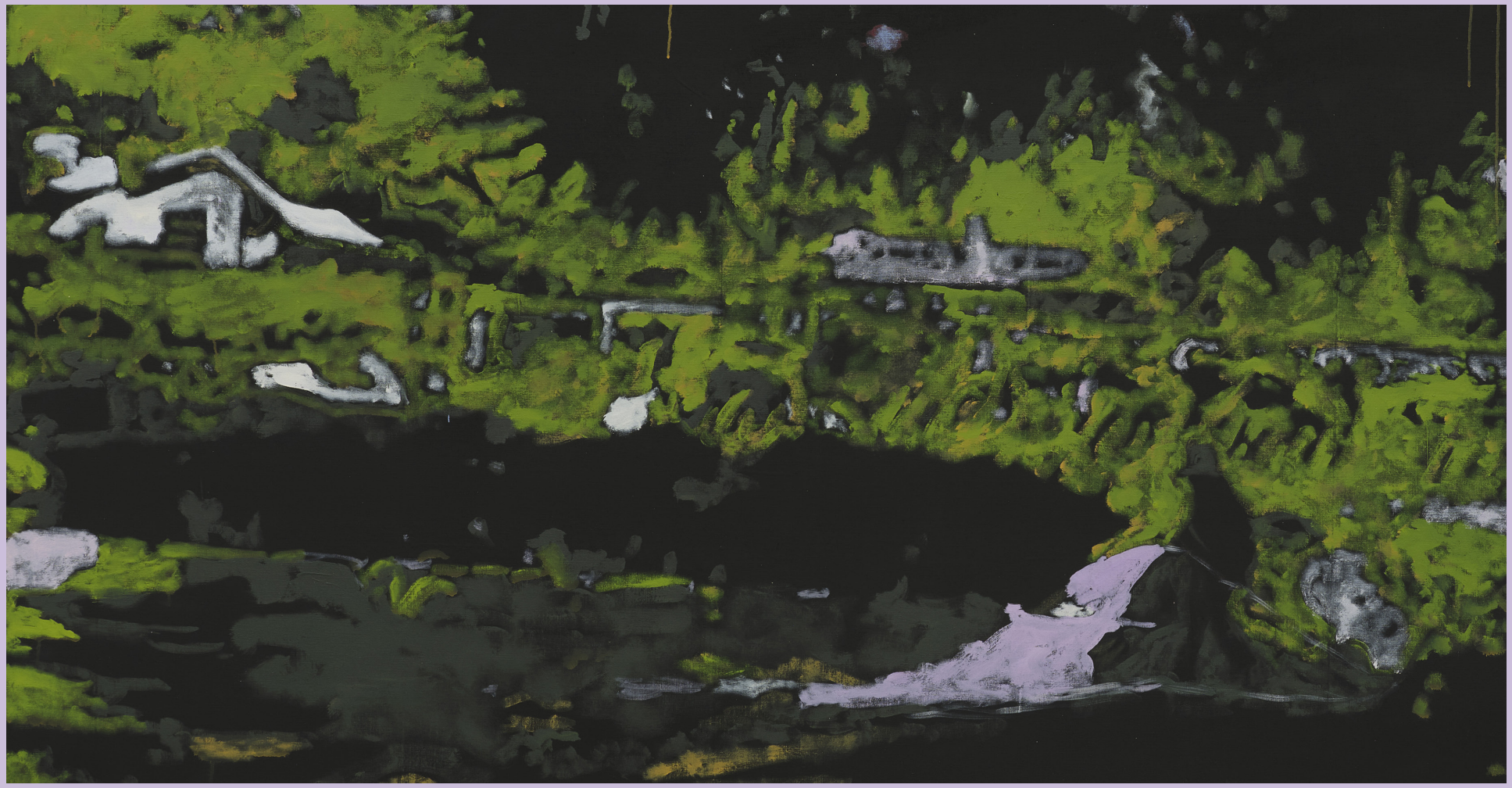
By Zack Hatfield

An ambitious artist wants to try his hand at an Impressionist painting set in the Central Valley of California. Tough: Some 150 years have elapsed since Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir set up their easels at La Grenouillère, a louche bathhouse and floating café on the Seine, to produce the alacritous, glittering auguries of the movement that would scandalize Paris in 1874. Plus, the light hits different in California. And because the artist is Reggie Burrows Hodges, he begins his picture by immediately committing a cardinal sin against Impressionism: not only *using* the color black—a shade not found in nature, the Impressionists maintained—but also first coating the entire canvas with a pitch, unreflective black, as he has done with every painting since 2019. Moreover, he is working not en plein air but from memories, which are already impressions of impressions. A product of remembering and thus misremembering over and over again, his painting is emphatically *not* a ballpark translation of something spontaneously glimpsed through the controlled hallucination of human sight, in keeping with Impressionism, but an image developed entirely in the slow, subterranean darkroom of remembrance.

The painting that came to be, the enveloping, roughly ten-by-ten-foot acrylic-on-linen *Labor: Sound Bath* (2022), pits bright, sun-dappled verdure against the black abyss of a tree's shadow. Where does this work begin? Acid green tears across the picture plane like wildfire, starting with the anchoring repoussoir at bottom right, seeping in, dribbling down in glittering jewels relieved against the dark. A scumbled block of powder-blue sky—not quite solid, not quite diaphanous; almost Rothkoesque—hovers at the upper left, proposing a brief horizon line interrupted by the boughs of the tree with full tenebrous foliage. In the center of the canvas, a black silhouette hoses down the crop. These things may be discernible, but we are at the brink of visibility; the gestalt of this painting is that of a big, heaving abstraction (so unlike the tidy checkerboard of greens, browns, and beiges that the Central Valley appears to be from overhead). Like the Impressionists, Hodges channels the simultaneity of presence and absence, being and appearing. But unlike an Impressionist painting, *Sound Bath* reveals itself in no great haste, its reductive palette (black, green, white, blue), gargantuan scale, and tangled contiguities of light and shadow all keeping immediate recognition at bay. Hodges's picture is literally hard to look at. But in trying to see it, we begin to understand the obvious yet often unstated fact that painting, as a way to visualize the world, is nothing at all like sight. Hodges's vision of nature is, in a way, deeply unnatural.

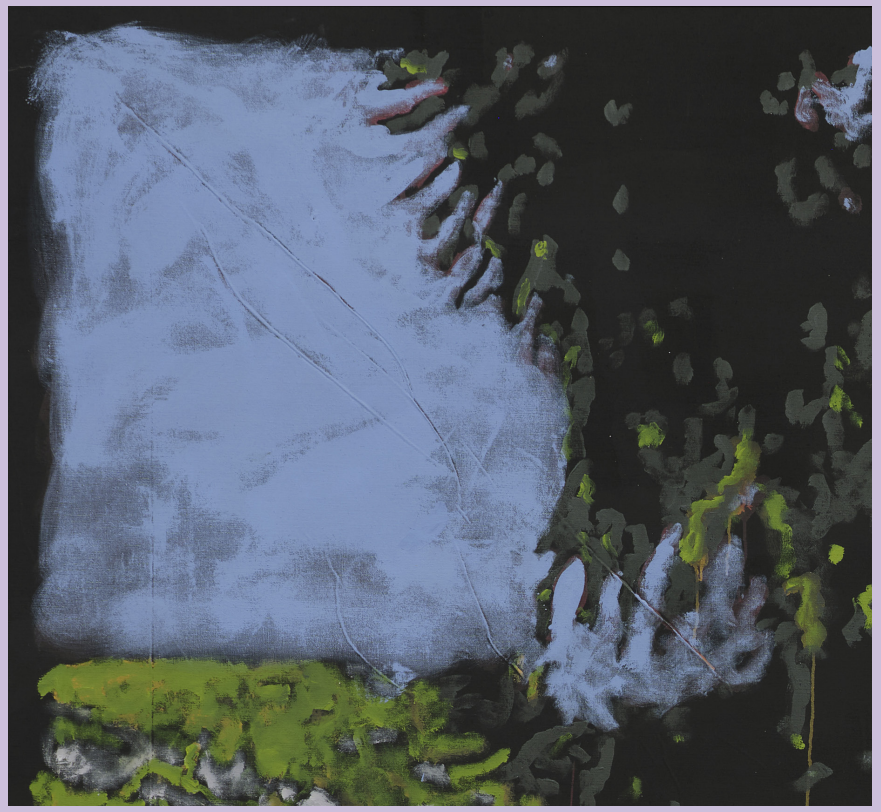
His title, in fact, encourages us to briefly deprivilege the sense of sight. What does *Sound Bath* sound like? The whirring of machines and insects, perhaps, maybe the exhalation of "hot breath" that lavished itself upon the Joads as they careened into the valley for the first time in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. A former bassist, the Compton-born Hodges has spoken of music's hold on his work, specifically the heavy spaciousness of dub, a subgenre of reggae premised on the deconstruction and remixing of samples from preexisting tracks. The profound achievement of dub, which emerged in the late 1960s, was to show the world that a finished song wasn't necessarily finished—that through subtraction and in-studio fuckery, a song could be, through what's known as "versioning" or "reversioning," transformed into something completely else. Hodges reversions blackness but does so additively, making it so that black is not the absence of light but a luminous depth that brings everything under its spell, painting a dublike music of ghostly echoes and chasms, muddled feedback and uncanny, stripped-down reanimations.





Look again at the laborer. If he seems to belong to the background of the painting, it's because he does. Having begun with a black matte ground, Hodges shadows forth his bodies by depicting everything that's not them, each work following a via negativa that helps him come to terms with what he calls "blackness's totality." In doing so, he "decouples Blackness as racial identity from black as a color, one that absorbs all of the light around it," as Hilton Als has written. The artist dispenses with identifying facial features, instead elaborating his subjects—angels, athletes, dancers, people at leisure—through pose and gesture. Hodges's characters, writes Zoë Hopkins, "refuse our gaze, shirking the demands for access and legibility that the world presses onto Black people."

Ghostly echoes. The indistinct, behatted farmhand in *Sound Bath* recalls a detail of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's Parisian streetscape *Boulevard du Temple* (1838), widely accepted as the first photograph to depict people. Because of the seven-minute exposure time, the boulevard is mostly empty, the camera unable to freeze the passersby in motion. The exception is a dandy, getting his shoes shined, who has held his pose long enough to be registered on the plate, though the bootblack sitting next to him is obscure, almost invisible. The late critic Allan Sekula once argued that this primal encounter was a metaphor for the historical erasure of the working body, here reduced to an "energetic blur" alongside the more clearly rendered silhouette of the bourgeois consumer. The figure in Hodges's painting—on the clock, out of focus—



takes up the lineage of Daguerre's shoeshine, but his opacity, rather than casting him as an avatar of dispossession, allows him to inhabit a universal consciousness, though perhaps the two are more intertwined than we care to recognize.

As with Hodges's 2023 *See Captain* series—which honors the forgotten roles that enslaved and free African Americans played in shipbuilding, navigation, and fishing along the Chesapeake coastline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—his *Labor* series depicts workers marginalized within the American landscape tradition while folding the rigid conventions of that tradition into a pictorial subduction zone, collapsing together various influences from Camille Pissarro, to Winslow Homer, to Jackson Pollock, to Kerry James Marshall. Hodges's painting is not "about" painting, but it is about how the formal strategies of painting might bring forth a memory of ecology and an ecology of memory, and it is about where we, the beholders, choose to find ourselves in this place. We don't need the press release to inform us that Hodges's shady Arcadia is "based on his memories" of visiting the valley; the fuzzy black vignette surrounding the image tells us as much. Because they are not *our* memories, we must impose our own narratives, fictionalize the painting to better understand its truth.

Millions of years ago, which was only yesterday, cosmically speaking, tectonic mischief sealed off a large, low-lying area of what is now California from the Pacific Ocean, leading to the creation of an inland sea that came to be called Tulare Lake, a wonder so vast that in some years you could sail from its tip in Bakersfield all the way to San Francisco. For thousands of years, the Yokuts and other tribes made their homes along the lakeshore and rivers until the gold rush drew settlers who would manually remake California's biome throughout the nineteenth century, eventually draining the lake and deflecting its tributaries. Such human intervention, combined with a hot climate and the nourishing runoff seeping into the soil from the Sierra Nevada, conspired to forge the more than four-hundred-mile-long agricultural jackpot that today goes by the name Central Valley.

Although the valley is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world, responsible for about twenty-five percent of the U.S. food supply, it ranks among the country's poorest places, ravaged by unemployment, poverty, pollution, and exploitation. This inequity disproportionately harms the valley's communities of color, without whom its status as the nation's most lucrative agricultural hub would not exist. For generations, Black Californians have tended the land, built homesteads, and organized for labor justice—a history crushed by California's frontier myths and discriminatory policies, which have led to enormous racial land loss. Today, ninety-eight percent of American farmland is owned by white people; the irony that the U.S. Department of Agriculture was founded by Abraham Lincoln is not lost on those who, understandably, call it "the last plantation."

The violence of the Central Valley is here, and it's not here. Hodges doesn't burden his composition with the weight of history, nor is he interested in the momentary consolations of nostalgia. At times he seems to shake the very tense of memory, and of painting, out of the past. Indeed, *Labor: Sound Bath* was lent a certain prescience last year, when, after a record rainfall, Tulare Lake reemerged, drowning 94,000 acres of farmland in the Central Valley. Matters of figure and ground that had long been settled through the systematic destruction of rich riparian wilderness were suddenly thrown into question, and a body that had existed only in memory reappeared with a vengeance, as if to remind us that history is not an orderly chronology of stagnant facts or lies, but a breathing presence that lives closer to the surface than we might imagine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Zack Hatfield is a writer and editor based in New York.

ABOUT FRESH PAINT
An ongoing partnership between the Parrish Art Museum and The FLAG Art Foundation in New York, *FRESH PAINT* is a rotating series of single-artwork exhibitions at the Parrish that spotlights new or never-before-exhibited works by both emerging and established artists. By circumventing traditional exhibition planning timelines—which can extend years into the future—*FRESH PAINT* provides a platform for artists to promptly showcase freshly created artworks and ideas, allowing for a more direct response to current issues and cultural movements. Each *FRESH PAINT* installation is accompanied by two sets of interpretative texts: one is a commissioned piece of writing by an invited author, critic, poet, or scholar; the other is a collaboration between members of the Parrish Teen Council ARTscope.

FRESH PAINT: Reggie Burrows Hodges is organized by Scout Hutchinson, Associate Curator of Exhibitions at the Parrish, in collaboration with Jon Rider, Director, and Caroline Cassidy, Director of Exhibitions, at FLAG.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT
FRESH PAINT: Reggie Burrows Hodges is made possible, in part, thanks to the generous support of The FLAG Art Foundation.

The Parrish Art Museum's programs are made possible, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, and by the property taxpayers from the Southampton School District and the Tuckahoe Common School District.

PARRISH ART MUSEUM
279 MONTAUK HIGHWAY
WATER MILL, NY 11976
631.283.2118 | parrishart.org

Cover image and interior details: Reggie Burrows Hodges (American, b. 1965). *Labor: Sound Bath*, 2022, acrylic on linen, 114 ¾ x 120 ¾ in. © Reggie Burrows Hodges, Courtesy the artist and Karma.