



FRESH PAINT: CHASE HALL

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PARRISH ART MUSEUM

The **FLAG** Art Foundation

FRESH PAINT | Chase Hall & Ekow Eshun in Conversation

Interview by Ekow Eshun

Ekow Eshun: I want to start with an early period in your life; by the time you were sixteen, you attended eight different schools in Minnesota, Chicago, Colorado, Las Vegas, Santa Monica. How did you—if you did—center yourself during those formative years?

Chase Hall: So much of my art practice is about building a language for that kid who didn't understand, "Why are we moving?" "Why is mom doing this or that?" or "Why are we going to a different state?" Looking back, it felt akin to Munchausen by proxy: "Mom said, we're good—so, we're good." Of course, when I went to someone's house, I noticed that their parents were more traditional. But all I understood was how our life operated. As rambunctious and unorthodox as my mom was, I didn't go to bed hungry; the lights were on, the TV was on. It may have been scrappy, but I still had enough to feel safe.

That said, being the light-skinned kid in South Side of Chicago or St. Paul, I was embarrassed when my mom would pick me up from school playing the Bee Gees. When I went to a private school in Las Vegas, I was one of the only Black kids. The other kids' parents were gamblers, or in the hotel business, or in the oil trade. When I went to West LA, a lot of the families were in Hollywood and media, and I was the token Black kid. Half the school loved me because I was different and the other half wanted me to go back to wherever I came from. I brought different subcultures to school, and my currency was introducing classmates to things outside their norms. In return, my assimilation tactic was learning to love things that read as stereotypical white hobbies: playing tennis, going to the beach, hiking, and bird watching. At the time, these were opportunities for me to make friends. Now, I recognize them as an education on everything life has to offer.

Ultimately, I centered myself around my love for my mom, my love for music, my love for culture. I found myself in old songs, movies, cartoons, or just in my imagination. I have memories of my mom blasting Elton John or The Fugees, smoking her cigarette in our old Toyota 4runner. I would look out the window, jumping buildings with my hand in the wind, and get visually excited by the signage on an old ice cream shop or this incredible car that passed by. I have such fond memories of being an explorer, excavating cultural material, whether it was visual, or sonic, or tactile. My mom and I saw so much—ours was an ongoing adventure and I was so porous, absorbing information like a sponge. All this is a long-winded way of saying I centered myself by visualizing what I wanted for myself.



EE: Irrespective of how we grew up, very often we retreat from or are resentful towards our past and childhood. Adult life is often lived, it feels like, in the shadow of childhood. I'm interested in how much of those ways of seeing life are in the work today.

CH: I'm still discovering why certain stories or images call to me. Why does the button on overalls fascinate me...the cotton denim on the cuff? Why do these landscapes and characters—the athlete, the miner, the surfer—keep me up at night? Why does a certain archetype interest me? These are all ways of seeing yourself. I just watched *The Odyssey* (2026) and thought about how a journey can traverse so much land but still

return, again and again, to certain tropes. I think about my family in Omaha versus my family in the boundary waters of North Minnesota and, in these places, archetypes like the fisherman or the gambling man exist. It's almost like my practice is this ongoing movie where I'm able to cast or set the scene with characters that interest me.

EE: Early on, you wanted to take photographs, much in the style of Gordon Parks, and I understand how that relates to your ways of seeing.

CH: I'm interested in how seeing something becomes the proof of concept. Even yesterday, I was driving to this park nearby, and there were two nuns roasting marshmallows on the public BBQ. I had to literally come to a halt to watch these two have a ball by the lake. In moments like this, you realize that life is beautiful and despite its hardships, there are still moments where two nuns making s'mores together can share a laugh. Photojournalism was a way to articulate that, but ultimately, I liked how painting, objecthood, and assemblage could be embedded with real life stories, but they don't have to take on the personal. Painting can be a personification of the personal.

EE: You once said that seeing a painting by Henry Taylor at The Museum of Modern Art in New York moved you away from photography to become a painter.

CH: It was a big moment, like listening to David Ruffin, Gladys Knight, or Sam Cooke, all musicians that make you realize, "Wow, they've felt that too." In these moments, you don't feel so alone. I never recognized myself in the art world until around the time that I saw that Taylor painting. It allowed me to see myself, my family members, and this longing for kinship. That painting felt like a mirroring of self in this context of beauty, history, and generational intellect. It elevated my self-worth, where now, I was in the same space as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. I realized, just as with music, that Black artists have always been doing it—it's only in more recent years that we have realized the genius and radiance that sits within Black expression.

Seeing that Taylor painting in MoMA was like watching a basketball player dunk and then going home to put up a poster of that player in your bedroom, tapping it before you left for school every day. It became a checkpoint, a call to action: grab your sword, grab your shield, and put on your helmet—you're walking straight towards this idea.

EE: What was the painting?

CH: It's *Untitled* (2011).¹ It shows a man in a white shirt and blue shorts, sitting on a wooden chair, looking straight out. When I wonder why it impacted me so much, I think about how at the time, my dad was incarcerated. I would only visit every few years between his ups and downs. Being a young Black man and having a white mom, I was always looking for a certain sense of self...and at that time, I started to see it. Without his day-to-day presence, I was still becoming who I wanted to be. Looking into this painting helped me see him eye to eye—no pun intended—in a way that allowed me to be empowered by my creative and cultural interests. Painting was always a sort of therapy or catharsis; a void I could yell into to get things off my chest. It became this method of taking the cartoons, the music, my life story, and all the feelings and "rubber-band-ball-ing" it into something.

Other painters helped me further understand that, particularly Benny Andrews and Kerry James Marshall; seeing their work allowed me to realize art wasn't just for a specific or elite group of people. I could like the ice cream parlor sign or the line work on an old car—I could see their importance instead of shooing them off.

EE: You didn't go to art school but were educating yourself in the art world. There are already dialogues you're having in your own head and creatively—you're thinking about photography and Gordon Parks, but also Henry Taylor, which opens other doors to your practice. What are the steps between looking at this universe of artists and realizing painting is your medium?

CH: I literally would take a photo of every artist I liked and then would read every single article, watch every YouTube video, look at every CV of theirs...I'd buy old books on eBay or go to the library to research the names, exhibitions, and residencies. The Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop—what is that? What's Skowhegan? Thelma Golden's *Black Male* at the Whitney Museum of American Art—what's that show? Augusta Savage—where did she go to school? It became this family tree. I was reverse engineering the whole process.

I was twenty-years old when I moved to New York City. I was working as a line cook and trying to figure out how to get my photography off the ground and why I was falling in love with art. Growing up, I saw my mom hustle to provide for me and I understood I needed to do the same; I needed to put myself in every room to advocate for what I really cared about. The amount of people I introduced myself to...it was like *Death of a Salesman*, but it was the squeaky wheel getting the oil. And so, I went out every single night, to every opening, every talk, and I'd stay for the questions. I applied to every residency and open call I could, which then



helped me experience the more academic, critical side of the art world. It was like a new color had entered my spectrum! Intellect, information, theory, critique, etc., these were the vernacular and the lexicon I'd been looking for to dissect my own experiences.

EE: Your paintings often explore the relationship between an individual and a community, between the personal and the generational, between the self and other. Whether you're depicting a single person or a group, often they [your figures] are addressing the viewer. There's a dynamic between an individual and a broader whole, which seems to be an ongoing facet of your work.

CH: A portrait is so much about trust, between the maker and the subject; it's about storytelling and getting to know one another. It's about the maker articulating what you really love about someone and encapsulating that in an object. There's this hope to capture someone as they are, how they were raised, how they dress themselves, how they posture for certain reasons...it all starts to articulate the nuance in how we represent ourselves. When you see the way someone's clothes

drape, it says a lot about how they care for themselves, or what they do for work. My work explores this experience of "seeing-one-another-while-being-seen."

EE: How conscious do you think the figures in your paintings are of being both seen and looked at?

CH: I used to care a lot more about who was looking at my work. The subjects of my paintings are conscious of who they are, while also recognizing that, if the viewer cares, they will tell them the story. If a viewer doesn't care, keep it moving. The paintings are parts of my soul and spirit doing this work for me, and I don't need to stand there and tell viewers about it. The paintings are the truth tellers.

I know who I am now; I know what I care about and what I put into my work. Imagining the worst about other people's interests is a losing game. If I give something all of me, truthfully...once it's not with me, I can't pretend to imagine what it's doing, other than what I hoped it could do. We're so quick to pose questions about why people want

certain objects on their wall. I think it's the same reason one would listen to Marvin Gaye or Tupac. People recognize truth from these different storytellers.

EE: [W. E. B.] Du Bois famously talked about double consciousness, which he describes initially as a burden, as a weight to be carried by people of color.² Upon further reflection, Du Bois described double consciousness as a gift because it originates from this capacity to read the self and others with a nuance that comes from reflecting on one's place in the world—understanding that one can be othered or made alien, but that in that process you get more insight into yourself and into the currents of the world around you. Despite the heaviness of being looked at, it's also a root way into reflection, a root way into interiority, into nuance, and into depth. For me, this is the richness of what your paintings say: it's that capacity to hold more than one position at the same time, to acknowledge the pain—or however we want to describe it—of being othered while holding on to the beauty that comes with reflecting from your own position. Sociologist and political activist Stuart Hall always said that to understand becoming as well as being is to understand that identity is constructed and not fixed.³ One is still free to imagine, to create, to describe, to articulate all these things.

CH: When I read Stuart Hall's essays, it was similar to the fireworks of seeing art for the first time, where I recognized, "I'm becoming who I'm being, but I'm also present in who I am." Some of our hardest moments can turn us into someone who has empathy, or can feel, or see, or experience something similarly to someone else.

EE: You have an unusual medium in coffee, but your visual language evolved very fast and very fluently. You have an approach, a style, and a vision for the work that seemed very clearly articulated from an early stage. Is that the case, or was it a struggle to get here?

CH: I never thought about finding a style—it really developed from making a commitment to my practice. In 2018, I studied at The Mountain School of Arts in LA under Piero Golia, who introduced our class to artist and choreographer Simone Forti, and her advice was: "Just keep practicing your practice." It really struck me; it made me think about athletes like Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan, who practice their practice obsessively. I knew that if I practiced my practice every day, I would continue to learn and continue to get better. I believe the world can be so much, and I run at it.

Cotton and coffee were always calling to me. Being an untrained artist, I built a language around my bad habits. Coffee as a painting material



relates to my own experience as a barista and my experience enjoying coffee. I understood that artists like David Hammons and Edward Kienholz used unconventional media and turned the art world inside out; I recognized that coffee was an unorthodox material that allowed the work to be visually different.⁴ But I have so much more to figure out: what happens if I use a bigger cleaver to scrape? What happens if I use more coffee? What happens if I overburn the grounds? How can I take what I'm doing with printmaking, and use that in the painting? How can I incorporate assemblage into the painting? Of course, there are no rules, but there are opportunities to be inventive, and when you become inventive, you can make the art world more robust. I am much more interested in audacity and showing up for yourself and your work than perfection, technique, and realism.

EE: In the past, you summarized some of what's in play in the work: enslavement, coffee, cotton, trade, commerce, Blackness, whiteness, and hybridity as the meat and potatoes of your project. Let's sit with those topics for a moment—talk about the coffee, talk about the cotton, and the larger socio-economic, political, and psychological aspects of that as a project.

CH: These topics affected me deeply before I even knew what it meant to make art. When I was fourteen, working at Starbucks after school, people would ask for their coffee black and then look at me and apologize and trip over their words. When I went to a mostly all-white high school, every time the N-word was said in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,

the whole class looked at me. At the same time, I was learning about The Civil Rights movement; I was learning about how the majority of enslaved Black people were taken to Brazil. I noticed the bags of coffee beans I poured at work were labeled Sumatra, Ethiopia, or Brazil. When we learned about the disproportionate statistics of Black males and premature death and incarceration, my relatives were dying and my dad was in jail. When we learned about the cotton trade, the cotton gin, and Black people's hands in the history of America, I noticed the denim I wore. I'd look at the white t-shirt and immediately think about it being made from cotton. I noticed rappers who wore jewelry and chains with diamonds, and then the film *Blood Diamond* (2006) came out. I learned that there are African kings with jewels and kingdoms and land we can't even see the end of...All of this is like a big Jenga puzzle; if I push out a block to examine it, it would be enough information to fascinate me for the rest of my life.

As a young artist, I made work that helped me articulate what I was going through, and that was it. A lot of kids grow up with incarcerated parents. A lot of people are mixed. It was a story of understanding yourself as an individual and recognizing so much of your experience is really common. When I really break it down, I trust what I'm doing in my studio, and what I want to say; my practice is about making space for my younger self, but also making space for a more open, critical, and nuanced world. This is just my place. I can yell back at the world, and hopefully it's enacting something that makes it better than I found it.

Notes

¹ Henry Taylor. *Untitled*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 62 in. (198.1 x 157.5 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York, Fund for the Twenty-First Century, 531.2012.

² In his 1903 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois "described the predicament of Black Americans as one of 'double consciousness': 'One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.' The term 'double consciousness' has come to be widely used as a theoretical framework to apply to other dynamics of inequality." (NAACP)

³ This concept originates from Jamaican-born British cultural theorist Stuart Hall's 1990 essay titled "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in which Hall explores the complexities of postcolonial and diasporic identities. He posits that cultural identity is not a static fact or a simple recovery of an unchanging past. Instead, it is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being"—an ongoing, historically grounded process shaped continuously by culture, representation, and power.

⁴ The conceptual art of David Hammons (b. 1943, Springfield, IL) incorporates everyday, discarded, and often culturally charged materials such as human hair, chicken bones, fur coats, snowballs, and liquor bottles; Edward Kienholz (b. 1927, Fairfield, WA; d. 1994, Hope, ID) used junk-store finds and unconventional organic or industrial debris to build life-sized, immersive tableaux.



AUTHOR BIO

Ekow Eshun OBE is an award-winning author and curator, renowned for his multifaceted contributions to contemporary culture. Described by *Vogue* as “the most inspired—and inspiring—curator in Britain,” he has staged acclaimed exhibitions internationally and was awarded the Association for Art History’s Curatorial Prize 2023. The former director of the ICA in London, he is Chairman of the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, leading one of the world’s most significant public art projects. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the author of several books including, most recently, *The Strangers*, winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in biography. He is the curator of the 13th Site Santa Fe International Biennial in 2027.

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 spotlight 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 an interpretative text written by an invited author, critic, poet, or scholar.

FRESH PAINT: Chase Hall is curated by Scout Hutchinson, The FLAG Art Foundation Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Parrish Art Museum, and Jonathan Rider, FLAG’s Director, with Caroline Cassidy, FLAG’s Deputy Director.

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Cover and interior images: Full and detail views of *Chase Hall* (American, b. 1993), *The Affrilachian Mountains*, 2026. Acrylic and coffee on cotton canvas, pitchfork, shovel, can, coffee canisters, tobacco pouch, and wire. Overall: 96 x 110 x 8 1/2 in. (243.8 x 279.4 x 21.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photography: Christopher Stach