Zach HARRIS

Autre,

Zach Harris: Zero Hour

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Part 1: Time

A *zero hour*, at least in science fiction and religion, is a punctuating moment: one where not just the clock, but our paradigms, are reset. In the popular genre of disaster literature (and film), resetting the clock is a hallmark of world building.

Zero Hour here is a paced show of large paintings by Zach Harris, his third with Perrotin and his first with the gallery in New York. The paintings hang level, unevenly distributed across the walls of a former fabric wholesale building, like portals. From afar, their eclectic shapes catch the eye; they are eccentric windows. Made on panel, with occasional carvings and linen inserts, the pieces often play with light and depth perception. Each one is elaborately framed, though saying that would be separating the frame from the image, which is inaccurate; they are frames within frames, images within images, in infinite regress. Some of the works take the shape and scale of furniture—a large standing clock, a side table—but as you approach them, they convert into architecture and landscape: the clock becomes a tower teeming with figures, the image of a table becomes a mantel above which hangs a panting, itself a vista of a vibrant landscape. Where the frame ends and the painting begins is slippery terrain: each painting is essentially a universe in a marble. These stages of perception, the way in which the painting transforms as you approach, is the result of what Harris describes as "logic fields": each painting is comprised of multiple planes, layered. The various planes provide stages of legibility as you approach the painting, beginning with a larger, mathematically drawn, architectural view that tumbles down into microworlds and narratives as you close the physical gap between you and the painting and invest time into slow looking. The paintings encompass a mélange of visual experiences—a mix of great painterly skill and conscious de-skilling—from perfectly unsettling perceptual illusions to quick, crude sketches and scribbling.

A unifying principle of this particular show is the recurrence within each piece of clocks and levels. "A level is to space what a clock is to time," Zach said to me while standing in his studio one day late last year, by which I understood the two to be tools by which we measure our adherence to a common ground. But time, or at least time perception, is arguably not common ground. And this body of work, while building on Harris's oeuvre to date, is arguably about time. It encompasses, most obviously, the visual representation of time—filmstrips in which images are stacked to create the semblance of continuous time and astrological calendar-like geometries—but also a measure of time, since duration is a fundamental part of Harris's process. It takes time to make these incredibly detailed pieces, some of which are worked on for years or incorporate older works; the pieces also resist time by never really being done (in fact, according to Harris, they have no "finishing moves"). Their creation process is infinite, much like the experience of looking into their pictorial planes. These are metaphysical pictures in a sense; they are "of the mind." I've read them described (accurately, I think) as *mindscapes* more than landscapes. And they are a bit of a performance: Harris sometimes conflates the experience of the painter and the viewer; he imagines his viewer getting lost in the images, plunging into their various worlds and in turn imagining "the painter"[1] in a trancelike state, channeling these images, characters, and universes.

In late 2016, Harris started making work about 2020, some of which is on view here. His understanding of the year's potency was prescient. Time in 2020 felt elastic, whirling by in some moments and plodding along in others. Experts crowded the airwaves to articulate the way in which our modern timekeeping had been shaped in service to industrialization and productivity (both dramatically challenged this pandemic-year) as well as emphasize that time perception relies on differentiation. The ability to chart change was stalled in the throes of stay-at-home orders and the cyclical rhythms of systematic oppression. In contrast to the functional history of timekeeping, time here, for Harris, is treated as a spiritual experience akin to Walter Benjamin's non-linear epiphanic time, and connected to vision, as both the capacity to see and the power to imagine.

Part 2: The Apocalypse

The apocalypse is also a subject in this show, but equally a mood. Harris, in a published interview with his partner Kate Wolf, has described thinking about the end of days as "pure thought" because it is simply a speculative thought exercise: not only is it about visioning the unimaginable, but because what-

(1) This painter is not necessarily Zach in his eyes; it can be a more anonymous archetype of a painter. And while there is very little room here to add any biographical tidbits about our real painter, I appreciated Alexander Keefe's observation, from a 2016 essay, that Zach was the child of a music teacher and a history teacher—"two different ways of keeping time".

Zach Harris in his studio. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

THIS PAGE, from top: (1) Zach Harris, *Fall Foliage Puzzle / Clock Tower (detail)*, 2021. Water- based paint on carved and inlaid wood (46.6 x 37 x 1.2 in / 118.4 x 94 x 3.2 cm). Photographed by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. (2) Zach Harris, Manzanita's Maze / Zodiac Harpsichord (detail), 2019–2021. Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, graphite (72.7 x 52.2 in / 184.8 x 132.7 cm). Photographed by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

ever is imagined is likely to be wrong. One of the paintings in the show is from an ongoing sequence of paintings called (amusingly) *The Linen Last Judgement* series. This one is the ninth. In its pinky pastels, figures fall, body parts float; there are angels and devils, figures borrowed from history or modern times. Eyeballs turn into computers, protest banners carry calendars, famous pieces of architecture and the Statue of Liberty lay in shambles. The tiny, roiling doodles defy gravity and draw a monster manual of references. But these images of the apocalypse aren't clearly that—not because they look unlike anything we have imagined, but rather because they look like too many things we know: newsreels, historical paintings, blockbuster films. Through a sheer maximalism of qualifiers, the events depicted here muddle language. This painting, like Harris's others, flirts with technology and human history. It feels like it lives in the realm of science fiction which notably, has much in common with systems of belief and the organization of spiritual experiences. This representation of the Last Judgment evokes a pseudo-religiosity rooted in contemporary spirituality but is more visually akin to mythology through its characters and scale.

Scale is a key vector in these works. Harris utilizes the Golden Ratio and other mathematical measures, such as the soft curves of a single arabesque [2] form, to scale an image's frames proportionally. The result is vertiginous, evoking movement; losing oneself in the paintings feels like being in the cabin of a spacecraft landing in foreign (or past) worlds or perhaps the climactic scene of a Hollywoodian disaster epic. In fact, some of the paintings presented here depict circular calendars that could be read as film canisters, their contents spilling out. The filmstrips are a swirl of humanoid shapes—deities, figures of the zodiac, common mortals—dancing in a sequence of images whose ultimate purpose is to stack and mimic continuous time.

The disaster film, while not always science fiction, is a salient Hollywood genre that reaches deep into a viewer's sub and conscious fears, often hinging on aspects of contemporary life that are in fact precarious and could easily unravel, therefore rendering the fiction more terrifying as a reality within reach. Scale is a key tactic of the genre, from the personal to the universal, the micro-experience to the macro-fallout; and because narrative necessitates a catalyst, the disaster genre hinges on a cataclysmic event.

Part 3: The Avent (Vs. Ongoing-ness)

In narrative, events construct sense; they are a revelatory moment that, in one clean swoop, delineates an end and a beginning. They encapsulate. Yet our time, the pandemic in particular, is unpunctuated: it is large-scale trauma in slow motion, resulting from the long-standing social, biological, and ecological forces that have been moving us. As writer Elvia Wilk recently articulated in a powerful article [3], "What will 'after' the pandemic look like? In some ways it is the wrong question to ask, because event-izing the pandemic and giving it an after implies that there was a true before. Yet as writers of dystopian novels know, there was no before, there was only a time when "it" wasn't quite so unavoidably visible." The declaration of the pandemic was just the outward manifestation of a momentum already so meteoric that it is, by the time we endeavor to pinpoint it, unstoppable, we are already changed. It's an event insofar as it is one frame amid a filmstrip of events, but it defies event-ness by its nature.

Harris has said that, "Painting doesn't progress and doesn't really improve or advance." By which he means a painted image can hold chronological contradictions, appearing both instantaneous and perpetual at once. In this sense, what Harris earlier described as logic fields allow for a feeling of ongoing-ness to fill the work. Since the paintings are not done—they are never done—the shape of their story is constantly still being drawn. His stream-of-consciousness doodling process illustrates a cause-and-effect still in motion, a seesaw of wins and injuries. Also from Elvia Wilk: "this pandemic may be hell for most but turn out to be a jackpot for some." The interconnectedness of the objects, figures, architectures, and histories portrayed within Harris's work contain the painful realism of dystopic scenes in which one person's loss may be another person's gain. This is not one story, but stories ad infinitum.

In our conversations these past few months, 9/11 came up quite frequently and it prompted me to think that trauma, following a similar non-linear relationship to time, is also a subject of the show. Looking at the work through the lens of a painter who watched the Twin Towers fall two decades ago allows for another, albeit not so different, read of the images: in them, towers are unreliable, candles embody an architecture that "burns at the top," bodies are falling. Alongside a pandemic, 2020 hinged on an open call-out of institutions and deepened a general skepticism of the existing structures, one of which is art history. Zach wondered one day in his studio whether he needed to make more work or should, like Giacometti, continue molding the same material, or canvases, going deeper, building bigger around them, defying the economy of their consumption. The premise is salient, regenerative, and crucial to me in thinking about culture in relationship to ecology: we should be regenerating our resources rather than constantly creating anew—perhaps even in words and ideas. In thinking about Harris's work, writers who came before me had a tendency to embrace a wide swath of references: Italian Renaissance painters, American modernists, Tibetan mandalas, Persian miniatures, Chinese lacquered boxes, to name just a few. But I find myself so swarmed by names and points of reference that it seems like a joke he is playing on us: they all become a general fabric, a kind of fodder, an illustration of what came "before," whatever that means. Their sheer quantity nullifies their relevance; it becomes more about the horrifying mass of undigested content, the flood of images, half-drawn, undulating, emerging, and receding on the plane of the canvas. A recurring, recognizable illustration of apocalypse ravenously consuming current events. Historical references from a wide range of cultures converging in a monstrous amalgam of horrors. An inheritance that seems less relevant now, as the clocks reset.

Zach Harris Zero Hour, *is on view until April 17 at Perrotin Gallery in New York.*

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(2) The arabesques are interesting: They are less functional and contain more of a decorative quality, but maybe in that sense they're related more to language, more to the shape of letters, like script—and meaning-building through a visual language.
(3) Elvia Wilk "What's Happening? Or: How to name a disaster" Bookforum, Summer 2020.