

PERROTIN

Zach HARRIS

Metal Magazine,

Zach Harris: Portals to Another Space and Time

March 2021

Z A C H H A R R I S

P O R T A L S T O
A N O T H E R S P A C E
A N D T I M E



Artist Zach Harris' latest exhibition *Zero Hour*, which is now currently on view, is his third show at Galerie Perrotin, and this time it is in New York. The paintings hang on the walls, like invitations to enter other levels of space and time. They play with the logic of doing furniture, too. He carves on the panels where he paints and frames, and returns to frame another time. Some of the paintings are 10 years old, as he had begun painting them long before, they are sort of in an infinite recess of time. Duration is fundamental in his infinite processes.

With him, we are exposed to the wonders of time as a malleable element that confronts our concept of perception. Each painting is a particular universe. Harris shows us different kinds of perception, because of the transformative qualities of the paintings, they change when you approach them. You have to finally invest time into slow looking, and just experience this specific moment. The pieces are resisting time, never being really done, or finished. As he describes them, they are more like 'mindscape' rather than landscapes because, for him, everything is a mindscape, and an illusion, too. Welcome to another world, try to escape, you won't be able to.



Your paintings are obsessively detailed, and I read that this meticulous repetition acts as a mantra for you because meditation is essential in your life. Could you tell us more about this approach?

I approach making art as if it's an ongoing practice, somewhat like a legit musician who plays and practices every day or a monk who has a daily practice to keep themselves in tune with present circumstances. I like to improvise and become excited and deeply involved with my process in the studio.

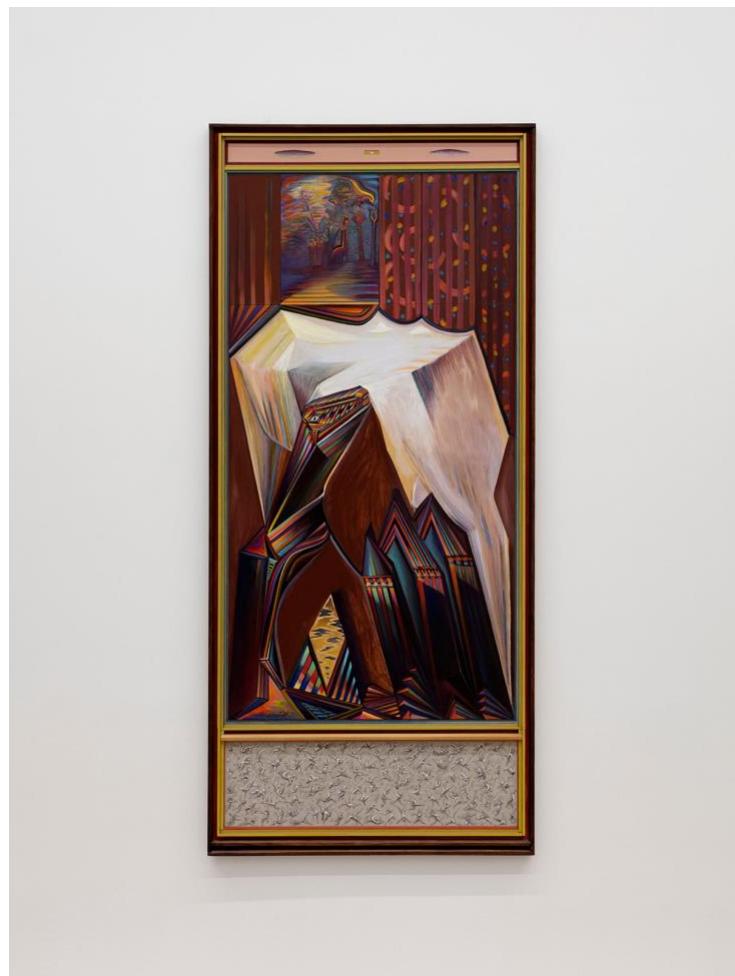
I try to start my days by drawing, which is direct and revealing. It's important to get in touch with your touch and how the materials and processes feel; to make internal adjustments if you are going too fast or your attention keeps going astray or you are having doubt, etc. As you get better and more lucid with drawing day after day, it makes everything else you do in your studio better. It's not a must in my life, but close to it. It's much easier to get into those states with a daily practice and rituals, but even then it always feels painfully slow and I freak out and get frustrated and mad every single day. I should probably be on medication, but instead, I'm on meditation.

And what about your slow processes?

My artwork is obsessively worked over and definitely oriented towards small subtle shifts in perception, but 'meticulous repetition' is actually not something I do or believe in much. I'll program a machine or laser to do the real meticulous and repetitive stuff. Being a robot is not good for the mind.

I read that you understand the detail in your pieces as 'visual dynamite,' could you explain that?

I hope I didn't use the term 'visual dynamite,' but if I did, I meant dynamite in terms of dynamics, like contrast dynamics and the dynamics of abstract elements which are always present in our experience.



Curtain Call / Camel Sky, 2014 – 2021

You take around 2 or 3 years to create an artwork, can you tell us more about that?

Honestly, I've never been able to complete or finish a painting but 2-3 years is the average time I'll work on something. Some pieces in this Perrotin show took longer, and certain sections are 10 years old. I'll often take something old and attach it or do something new to it, then rework everything together. Each piece is made in its own peculiar way though. We didn't know how to date them exactly either, which I liked. They have no clear beginning or ending, which is one reason for the show's title *Zero Hour*.

How do you know when it's time to stop?

There is never really a time to stop, and I don't appreciate it when art has obvious 'finishing' moves. I sort of think a lot of 'abstract' painting or non-objective-ish paintings that really struggle with finishing, in my mind. I guess I am restless and I like to do different processes, like woodworking or tiny figure drawing, as well as designing graphic files, or doing spontaneous painting.

When is it time to stop a meditation session? Everyone says it's better to set a timer, which I agree with, so I guess the gallery deadlines have their purpose, but honestly, I think the deadlines are the death of much art in the art world. I would like to be an antidote to that.

Can you tell us more about your hybrid object-painting? Sometimes it's similar to furniture.

I've always felt that making a nice painting is not enough, so I keep going and build parts out and frame things and then frame that again. I end up creating this sort of hybrid object-painting thing that slips through the cracks a bit, where the viewer can't exactly tell if it's new or old or even what exactly they are looking at. The time/space should be puzzling. I like the paintings to emanate a volumetric sense of time that resonates with history but also has a sci-fi vision. In this regard, it's also important that the viewer senses the artwork must have taken a long time and that this artist is placing value on tripping out and pursuing a personal vision.

“Being a robot is not good for the mind.”

Your vision is art-history driven, revisiting late-nineteenth-century symbolism and Persian art, Tibetan mandalas, too. How did all these interests arise?

Through osmosis. Through all the museums I haunted and buildings I stared at and temples I sat in, mostly while travelling to Europe/Japan/India or doing meditation retreats. I basically lived at the Metropolitan Museum in NYC for 12 years, just looking at everything in the collection, which actually contains just as many 'decorative' and architectural-oriented objects as it does paintings. While I'm working though I'm definitely not thinking about historical styles or anything much other than just trying to respond and do what I think would be best for the artwork. That's why I say osmosis because I've sort of digested a lot of visual history and synthesized it, perhaps. It comes out without trying.

People see many influences in my work but also people seem to say it appears very unique or original and there is not any clear influence. I take that as a compliment since I think it's a problem if you see someone's artwork and immediately think of one or a few obvious influences. It glitches the viewer's experience, makes them compare and despair, and stops the wonder.

Could you tell us more about your work with optical illusions? It is so pleasant in a way but can seem like a hallucination at the same time. And what about the tactile materiality of your surfaces?

Illusionism is the only thing that's 'real' in an image, and painting is absurdly illusionistic. Everything is basically an illusion with two eyes involved, even the material itself. You don't touch a painting, although doing so is a treat and very informative, just don't get caught or they will throw you out of the museum, I know. The 2-D is 3-D in 4-D. Anyone who makes images gets involved in how that illusionism works.

Objectively, we can all agree about the material but we can also all agree when something appears to recede into illusionistic pictorial space. It's profound in its own dumb way. It's like the truth of having two eyes, and then showing how incredible it can be, although I

have to say most painters don't see or compose pictorial space that clearly. (I struggle with this myself). The paint itself becomes a lot to deal with, so conscious spatial illusion gets deprioritized. But with paint, there are so many qualities and aspects you have to get right. Touch is crucial! Sadly, a lot of that is lost virtually. My work especially can't be seen well virtually because of all the very shallow surface changes and materials and little paint marks and tiny drawing. The different materials each reflect light in their own way and all the bits of information, add up to make an epic scale. We are hardwired to notice all this subtle stuff. The in real life distortion and peripheral experience is a huge part of what captivates us, and there is also just the sheer thrill of seeing an object hanging on a wall that simultaneously represents a vast deep space. Many of my decisions are made in response to how the artwork resolves from very closeup to far away, and everywhere in between.

How is the idea of utopia reflected in your work?

Perhaps the word 'art' in any culture has a utopic quality? I think of art as a special realm where there is no bad or good and where freedom is always there, within the limits of the abstraction. Abstraction is the freedom. Maybe the sense of time which I clearly designate for practicing art sends a utopic message — or a privileged, ivory-tower escapist message. Also, I suppose the idea is reflected through deeper order, like math/geometry and color. All the work in *Zero Hour* has the golden section ratio snuck in and I often use measured, harmonically differentiated proportions of shape and color. There is a rightness and stillness and infinity that it gives to an artwork, but there has to be the right amount of order. It's got to have materiality and weirdness; be surprising and flicker like an image. That way you feel it.

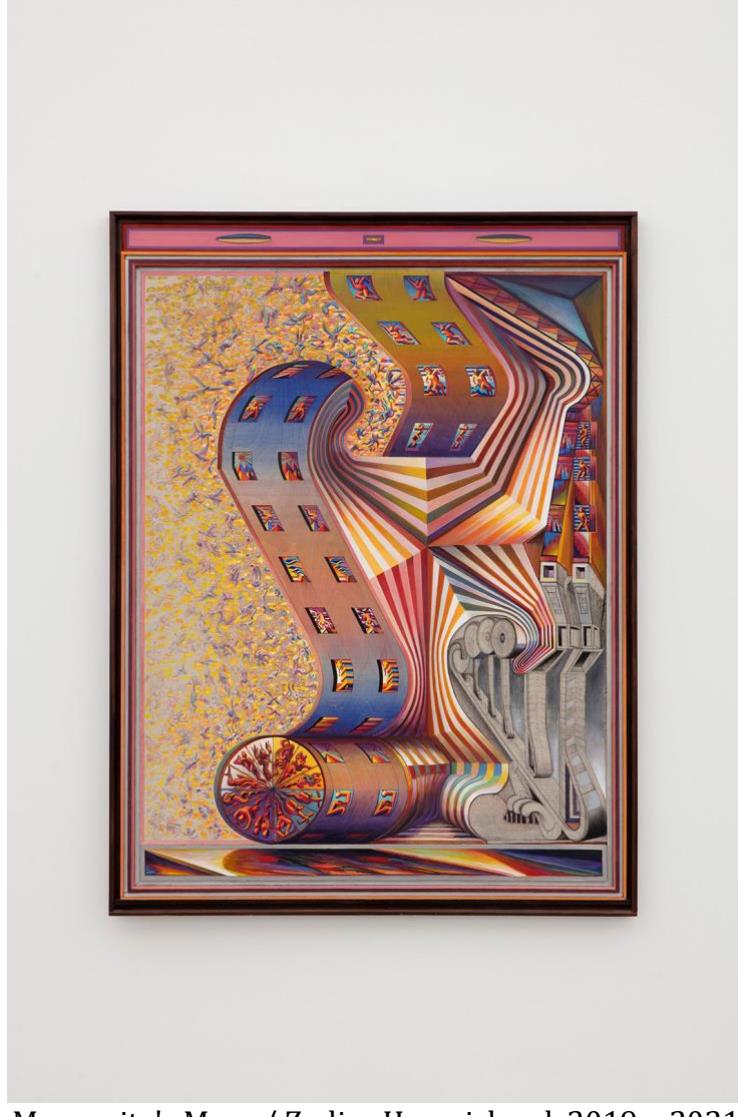
Could you expand on that?

Perhaps my work projects utopia as a possible future state where technology lives well with the hand-made and third eye? Synthesizing the aesthetic overtones of the machine and laser with hand-carved wood and expressionistically painted areas could be utopic? The machine aesthetic has a certain look that you recognize immediately and which has a pervasive influence in our daily lives. So there's a message in that.

We can see in works like *Zodiac Calendar*, *Zodiac Wave*, or *Zodiac Bench (6 Days / 7 Nights)*, that the Zodiac signs inspire you. I am curious about how you practice your own spirituality. Do you have any rituals in your day-to-day?

Aside from having a new family, my life revolves around making art. As I said, it's most like being a musician in terms of playing every day and doing warm-ups and being close to a practice and to materials.

I do have an interest in how plastic or malleable time can be. If you've ever designed a calendar or clock you realize immediately how many ways there are to graphically design 'time.' You also realize that no structure, no calendar, for instance, is perfect and always needs some adjustment. I've used such structures as the basis for compositions and content.



Manzanita's Maze / Zodiac Harpsichord, 2019 – 2021

How does Christianity impact your art? We can see the influence in pieces like *The Last Judgement* of 2014.

I have a series called *Linen Last Judgement* which is like a wood tapestry full of tiny Bosch-like interconnected scenes depicting a contemporary apocalyptic Last Judgement scene. I'll use figures from historic Last Judgement scenes, like Michelangelo's in the Sistine Chapel but I'll put them in a contemporary and sci-fi context. It's less about religion than it is a satire of and a guess at where we are headed as a world culture.

I'm religious in terms of liking to do things religiously, like making art or meditating or even stretching or reading. Ideally, I would have a strict routine every day. If anything I'm closest to being Buddhist (I took the refuge vow and have an outlandish Buddhist name) because it emphasizes maintaining a practice of being attentive to the moment and our perceptions.

I practice art more than I do a religion, but I don't think all the categorization or naming is helpful though. People can't help but constantly want to categorize everything, including art and themselves and even their most intimate personal experiences. It's a terrible habit.

"I think of art as a special realm where there is no bad or good and where freedom is always there, within the limits of the abstraction. Abstraction is the freedom."

In your new exhibition at Perrotin, your third at Perrotin and first with the gallery in New York, you refer to 'logic fields,' could you expand on the concept? Your paintings compress multiple logics, provoking different stages of legibility as you consume them. Could you explain this approach?

I'm not making a traditional painting with a 'single' dominant image if that's fair to say. I paint on wood panels, but there is lots of shallow relief carving and veneer and linen inlay, in addition to inserting things like a bubble level or found object. I try to make images that reconfigure into multiple scenes and multiple scales depending on what you focus on and how close or far you are from the artwork.

Logic fields are the structure of how the visual information is being presented within a given field or shape/area. It is the scale or ordering or logic to the parts. I find it's a helpful and effective way to compose and to feel how and why a shape is breathing and interacting the way it is.

I've read that you call your paintings 'mindscapes,' rather than landscapes. You want the viewer to be in a trance-like state, to let them become lost while looking at the images. I would love to know more about that.

Everything is a mindscape. What I mean though is that the compositions, images and color theory in my work leans towards abstract and mental invention, as compared with a traditional landscape that follows a more 'naturalistic' order. I often create a deep, landscape-like space, but I invent the entire thing out of my mind.

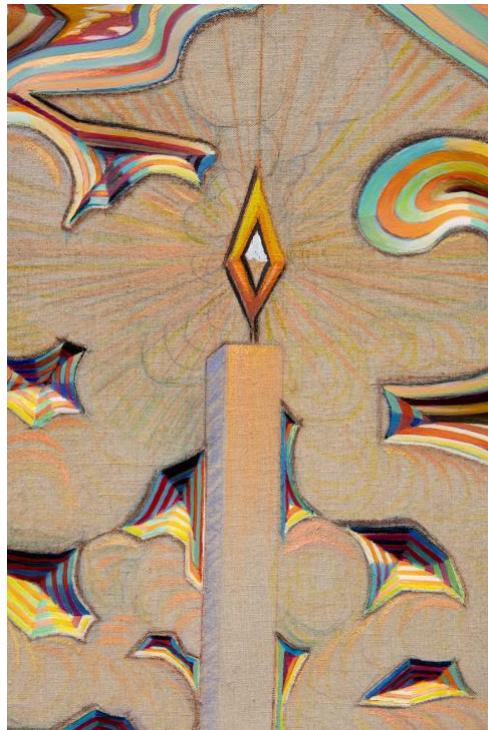
I started doing plein air landscape painting as a student and I've continued to make them and enjoy the process. A small one is actually embedded into the top of *Curtain Call/Camel Sky*. The plain air process is hallucinatory in its awareness, which is still what I'm essentially interested in. In a peculiar way, without my landscape painting experience, I don't think I could invent as much as I do.

In this show, you want to reference disaster, in a kind of apocalyptic way, and trauma, too. We are in a pandemic, and you have said you understand this particular time as 'slow violence,' an imperceptible change that moves us in an intangible way. Can you talk more about that?

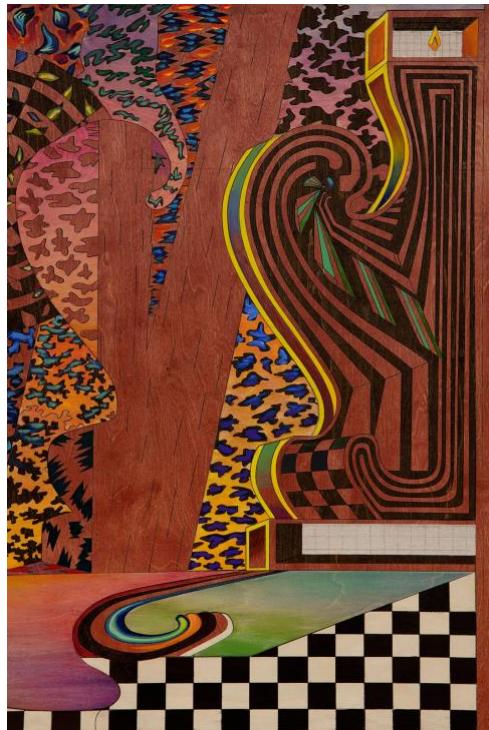
Well, I sort of shut down and became even more introverted and inward-looking since Covid. You can sense the implosion in the show. Each piece convolutes in on itself and slowly reveals itself through time. I'd say they are ruminative, compressed, hermetic, mythic. Because deadlines were all pushed back and I was fortunate enough to be healthy and work, I had more time to pursue the vision of each piece and to go into places I hadn't been before.

In 2016, I had started making work that was set in 2020, like a sci-fi novel is set in the future. The idea inspired me. I got into 2020 as a symbolic calendar year which I knew would also be hyper-charged because of the U.S. presidential election. In 2019 I did a show at David Kordansky Gallery Studies for 20/20. Hindsight is perfect in 20/20 as they say, but

who would have guessed the year would be as destructive, halting and historic?! My work was already dealing with these themes and the possibility of such an event, so when it occurred I felt like my work was ready for it.



Mushroom Cloud Vanity (detail)



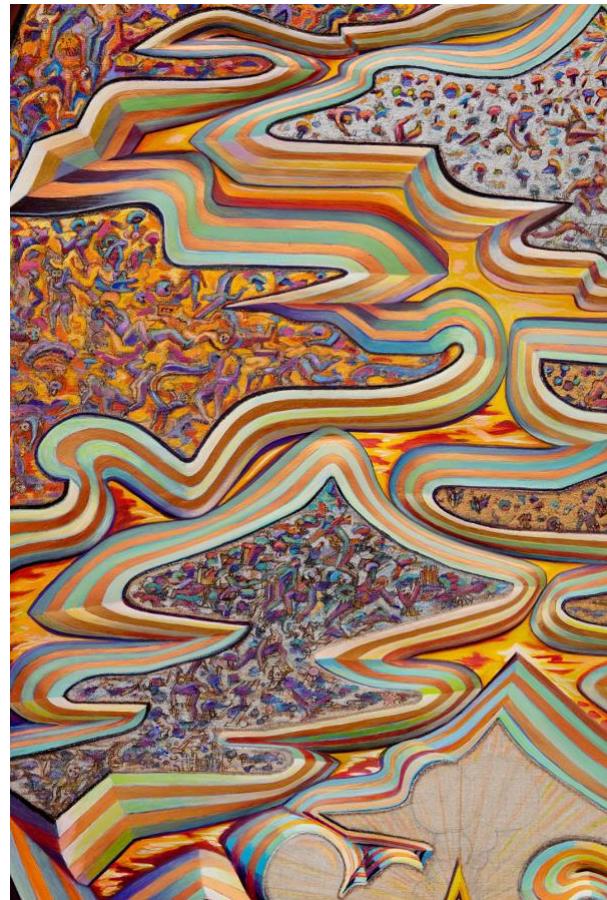
Fall Foliage Puzzle / Clock Tower (detail)



Mushroom Cloud Vanity, 2021



Fall Foliage Puzzle / Clock Tower, 2021



Manzanita's Maze / Zodiac Harpsichord(detail) Mushroom Cloud Vanity (detail)



Manzanita's Maze / Zodiac Harpsichord(detail)