PERROTIN

Zach HARRIS

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A World Within Worlds

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A WORLD WITHIN WORLDS

ARTIST ZACH HARRIS' PSYCHEDELIC, MULTIDIMENSIONAL DREAMSCAPES BLUR THE LINE BETWEEN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, REALITY AND FICTION.

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A few years ago, the artist Zach Harris was feeling creatively stifled. His paintings—many depicting alternative realities on stretched linen with sculptural frames—were selling well. But he never set out to work solely in a single medium. Harris turned to what he's been working with since he was an undergraduate at Bard College in the 1990s: his notebook. "It's the best thing in the world, as far as creativity," he says, from his studio in Los Angeles' Highland Park. "I had all this time. I didn't have deadlines. I had so many images in my head." He began a daily ritual creating drawings that offered a window into his mind—a visual diary of sorts.

Harris' varied output is a challenge to categorize, but it's bound by deep and manifold layers, at once rife with art history, mantra-like patterning that reflects a long-held interest in meditation, and a complexity of aesthetics. His art draws in part from his time spent in Italian churches, in front of 19th-century French paintings, and through unexpected findings in otherwise well-known art, like the spatial resonance of a Cezanne still life.

In a forthcoming solo exhibition at Perrotin New York, opening on February 28, 2025, Harris will show a series of new psychedelic and trompe l'oeil works. A self-taught woodworker, he's known in part for his massive hand-built frames that add a literal framework to—and suggest a way of seeing—his sophisticated, Boschian paintings. "There's this elaborate richness of the materials and all these layerings—this architecturally rich space," he says. "A world within worlds."

Harris is a fourth-generation Angeleno. He attended college back East—at Bard in upstate New York for his BA and Hunter College in Manhattan for his MFA—but by 2009 had settled back in Los Angeles, where he now lives with his wife, the writer and *Los Angeles Review of Books* editor-at-large Kate Wolf, and their seven-year-old son. Here, he speaks to *The Panafold* about the tragedies that affected him during his college years, the dimensionality of his art, and what it might mean to be a "Californian artist."

WHAT WAS IT LIKE COMING OF AGE AS AN ARTIST AT BARD IN THE '90S?

Bard was an amazing place. It was the real deal. It was extreme, wild. A lot of really crazy stuff happened during the two years I was there.

OH REALLY? LIKE WHAT?

Well, there's actually this book that came out recently that my wife read, *Carrie Carolyn Coco* by Sarah Gerard, about all these murders that happened at Bard.

IN '95, '96, WHEN YOU WERE THERE?

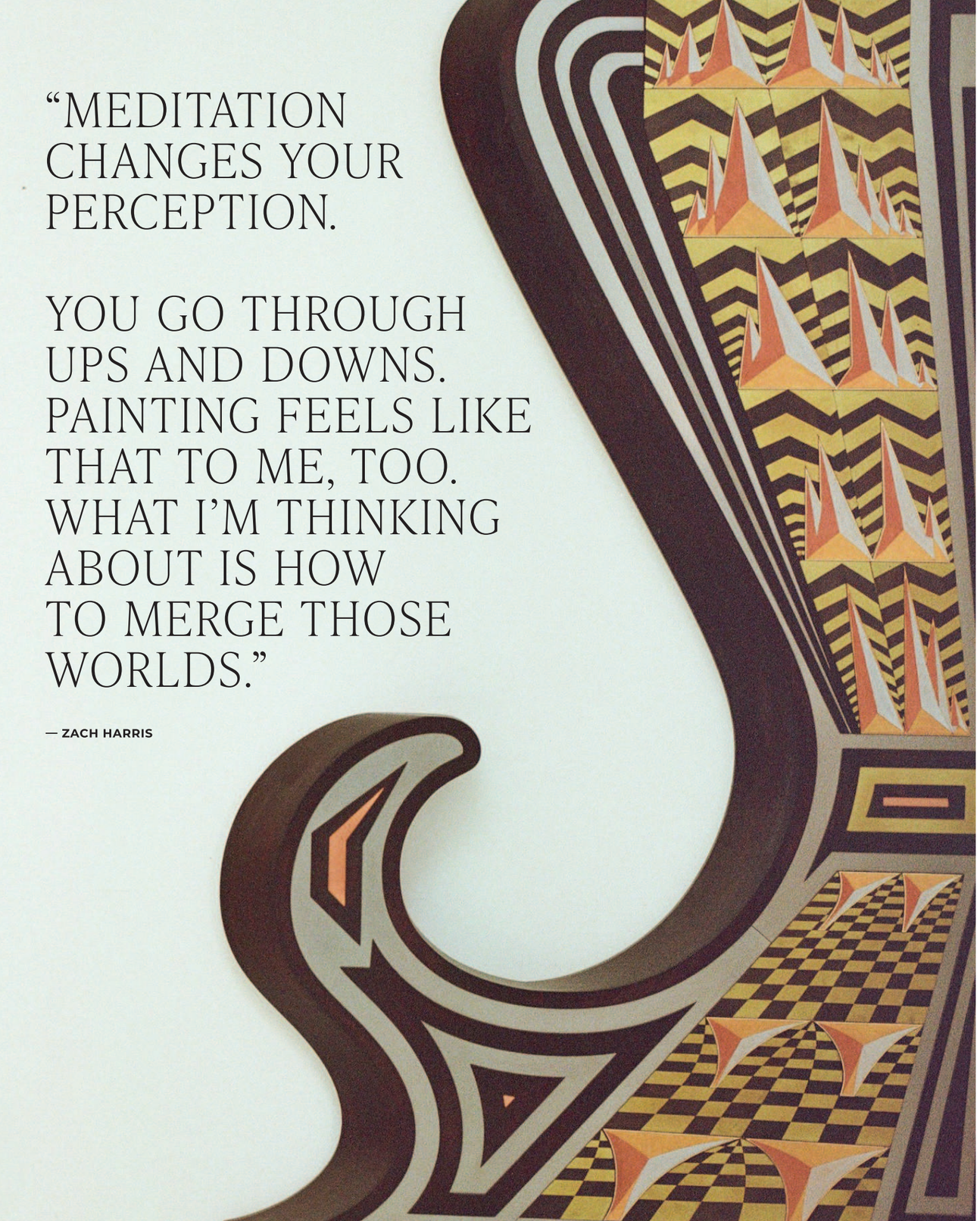
And more recently, too. This girl I was kind of in love with, Anna Jones, was killed. I was with her three hours before it happened. It was by her ex-boyfriend, who was visiting her, who had also gone to Bard. The night before, I had just seen them in my dorm room. It was really crazy. Like, *that happened to me*. Another friend died later that same year, from a drug overdose.

WHAT WAS GOING ON?
WHAT WAS IN THE WATER?

Everyone was trying to push it, you know. Be something. You do a senior project, and you don't have to go to class for at least a semester. Everyone wants to make it the best senior project ever, you know? It was just an ethos, or something.

above:
A series of new paintings set to appear in Zach Harris' forthcoming solo show at Perrotin New York

facing page:
The artist sketching in his Highland Park studio



“MEDITATION CHANGES YOUR PERCEPTION.

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— ZACH HARRIS

WHAT WAS YOUR PROJECT? WAS IT SIMILAR TO THE WORK YOU DO NOW?

It was painting, and I got into abstraction. At the time, I was just making non-objective paintings totally from my head and staying up late in the studio and working on big colorful abstractions and getting really into composition and formal things. That was super exciting, and it felt revolutionary to me—just discovering, staying up all night working. Then I lived for a year up near Bard, because I was just shell-shocked from the whole experience of the murder. I lived in a barn across the river and just painted sixteen hours a day for a whole year.

IN YOUR EARLY TWENTIES?

Yeah, I was twenty-two. I was so young. I did that for a year after graduating, but by then I’d already been living in New York when I was nineteen, and had been through some stuff. So I moved back down to New York again and lived there for a good eleven years, I think.

WHAT KIND OF STUFF WERE YOU GOING THROUGH?

It was 2000, and I don’t know, it was just *artists*. It was all about Chelsea, all the galleries, that was a big focus, just going to so many shows for so long. That was really awesome. I don’t see shows like I used to. It was an exciting time. A lot of loft parties. You can imagine what it was like.

HOW DID THESE MURDERS AFFECT YOU AND YOUR ART?

It really got me into Buddhism. I would sit and just stare at my bedsheets. I would just zone out, and my work was kind of about just tripping out. I’d take a sheet and crumple it in the corner and paint it. It was really hard to paint. Drawing it all perfect, it was just an intense exercise, like an academic exercise. I was already in the space of where your mind can go through intense processing. That’s what I think is by far the most important thing in art: the quality of the artist’s process, the studio practice. I was into that. After Anna died, there’s this teacher we both had in common, and he sort of became my mentor. Then he got kicked out of the school the next year because of his reaction to this whole thing.

HOW DID HE REACT?

He just was emotional, you know, like we were just crying in class. Anna was in one of his classes, and I was a TA. There were lots of issues. He was an emotional teacher, and he wasn’t professional. He was really into super mystical, esoteric, weird stuff, and he got me into that. After Anna was killed, something just changed, and I got really into this other *realm*. Just thinking, *is she still around?* And this teacher had thought she was still around and visiting us. I don’t really believe in that per se, but it was all these new ideas that I had never been exposed to.

THIS KIND OF THINKING—PORTALS, DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS, COMING UP AGAINST DEATH—SEEMS VISUALLY EXPRESSED IN A LOT OF YOUR CURRENT ART.

Yeah, I guess so. Meditation changes your perception. You go through ups and downs, and painting feels like that to me, too. So what I’m thinking about is how to merge those worlds. I got into painting miniature paintings and making frames for them. Those were handheld, devotional, meditative objects.

ICONOGRAPHY, ALMOST.

Yeah, like altarpieces. I went to Italy probably nine times. I was just hanging out in the churches. There are paintings and there’s architecture and sculptures and the light is coming through and it’s colored. The whole thing is like a big, total zeitgeist art form. I was really into that immersive world.

WHAT’S YOUR MEDITATION PRACTICE?

It’s really straightforward, traditional. It’s not quite Zen; it’s not just facing the wall. I’ll do the vipassana, which is body scanning... I’m not doing Vajrayana visualizations of the softness, the pure compassion of being. I’m trying to become interested in those practices, but it’s a little beyond me. I’m pretty scattered, and I have a child now. I’m just trying to get calm and be focused. I keep it pretty straightforward, but I try to do an hour a day. I did it for an hour all through my twenties. My friend died, and it was the next ten, twelve years after that.

WHEN YOU MEDITATE VERSUS WHEN YOU DON'T, DO YOU SEE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR ART?

If you can just sit in front of a painting for a long time, that's the basis of my whole thing. Just stare at it. You start seeing things, you start seeing the space and the light. That's what I'm really interested in. You also start seeing all these little details, noticing things that aren't resolved and transitions that could be better. Like, *oh, I've got to fix this and this over here, it doesn't feel right.* You just start seeing all of that, and you can plan in your head, *okay, there are like twenty things I want to do.* A lot of times I'll work like that. It's not like I just walk in and grab my paintbrushes and start working. I wish I could do that. I mean, sometimes, but usually not.

IS THERE A THEME OR A TONE YOU'RE TRYING TO STRIKE WITH THIS FORTHCOMING SHOW?

There are definitely strong formal themes. There's this elaborate richness of the materials and all these layerings, this architecturally rich space. Again, a world within worlds. There's the theme of gold and silver. Some metallic paint that goes throughout it. The palette is similar, the reference to actual palettes and paintings of paintings, those sort of project-matter themes. It's more mystical. Big pieces that are epic that you can look at for a super long time—big stories that are very complex and formal and rigid and architectural. It's really in the cohesion. I don't want to tie it down so much, saying *this is what it's about.*

IN PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS LIKE ZERO HOUR, YOUR ART HAS THOSE LAYERS, THOSE PORTALS, A LOT OF TROMPE L'OEIL. ARE YOU PREDOMINATELY THINKING ABOUT THE VIEWER'S EXPERIENCE?

In a way, yes. It's creating this experience for the viewer. I'll think about the distances that someone walks toward it. That's really important. But I am a viewer, too. I'm totally expressing *myself*. I have these manic moments that really fuel me and that's as expressive as anything I've ever experienced. I don't think of it like a whole progression of sequences of a painting for someone.

DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A "CALIFORNIAN ARTIST"?

Maybe slowly, but I definitely didn't. I lived in New York for so long. I lived at the Met, sketching, wandering around, looking at Indian miniatures and carvings and rugs and sculpture. I love medieval stuff. Just putting it all together. I would religiously go there, so I feel really steeped in that kind of Western European art, but it's also the art of the world, going back thousands of years... Now that I've been here in LA longer, I feel like I'm becoming more Californian. When I did a show in Paris for Perrotin, I was like, *oh, it's so colorful and creepy, psychedelic*. That side of it, the psychedelic side, I grew up with that stuff in Santa Cruz. I'm Californian like that, but it's a deeper, bigger thing in my mind.

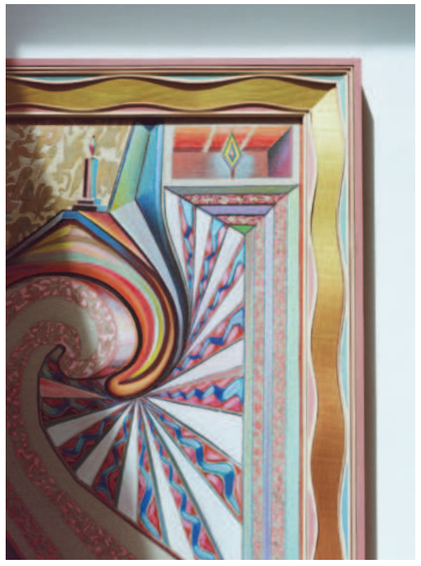
YOU'RE WORKING MORE BROADLY ART HISTORICALLY, IT SOUNDS LIKE.

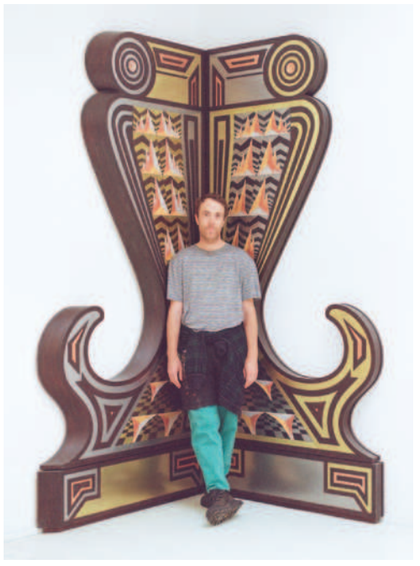
Yeah. My visual language is complex. A lot of *little of this, little of that.*

IS THERE AN ARTWORK THAT PROVIDED AN EPIPHANY, THAT UNLOCKED SOMETHING FOR YOU ABOUT YOUR STYLE OR INTEREST?

Staring at a Cezanne painting, and how, as you keep looking at it, it becomes really volumetric and spatial and you start seeing so much that you did not see at the beginning at all. I would say Fra Angelico. Delacroix paintings. I don't know what the revelation is, maybe the touch and the rhythm. Looking at church interiors was a big revelation, because it got me thinking beyond the painting and to the frame. I taught myself woodworking, and making these kinds of funky things—the frame became way bigger than the painting. Meditation retreats and altarpieces and sacred spaces, all the geometry and how things are put together. Just thinking about all the complexities of where the light is coming from and how it's spinning this thing and this color echoes this. I'm doing that in my work, but it's a miniaturized version. ¤

Zach Harris' forthcoming solo exhibition, untitled as of the printing of this article, will be on view from February 28 - April 9, 2025 at Perrotin New York, 130 Orchard St, New York, 10002.





Clockwise from top: New works set to appear in Harris' solo show at Perrotin New York; older works in his studio; the artist poses with one of his large-scale sculptural paintings; detail of painting and frame