PRESSBOOK

Zach HARRIS

Art & Deal

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20/20 VISION

An interview with ZACH HARRIS

RAJESH PUNJ

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Zach Harris, Small Succulent, 2013-17 Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, 57.2 x 48.3 cm, © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

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Zach Harris, Detail of Double Helix (in 2020), 2015-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, 208.3 x 152.4 cm, Photo: Claire Dorn, Courtesy Perrotin

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Portrait of Zach Harris
Photo : Claire Dorn

There is something pleasurable whilst being intuitively irresponsible about spoiling a document; of rolling a pencil over it with the intention of applying free reason as free reign. But the action to introduce oneself, to imprint one's identity upon material matter is what is intrinsic to our being in and of a moment; of engaging by disengaging with one's circumstances. And for California born and based artist Zach Harris the intention of wanting to impress upon everything something of himself, has matured into a deeper language, that he explains as "regressive and progressive at the same time". Deciding "it is all based on a stream of consciousness. I never know what is going to come. And it is kind of regressive, kind of what I did when I was a child. I drew all day at school. So all of this is about me getting back to being a kid again. But then it is also art historical, referencing the highest art. Raphael, Michelangelo's Last Judgement, and all of those overtones, whilst still being childlike, very simple. And I like that, regressive and progressive at the same time."As the aesthetics of his 'alter' pieces are as sophisticated as they appear adolescent.

For Harris each of his works has its own identity, as though the subconscious trappings of many different minds. Never returning to a particular approach or palette, the artist sees each work as a universe that is as much autobiographical as it is a new adventure for the artist. "I draw, I meditate, and I sit in front of a work, and really think day-by-day, so I am conscious of what I can accomplish myself; and spend

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Zach Harris, Sunrise Sunset (in 2020), 2015-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, 219.7 x 158.8 cm, Photo: Claire Dorn Courtesy Perrotin

ten, twelve, fourteen hours, getting myself into that state. So you do it and you do it just by working, and it is easy after a few hours to find that intensity again. Saying that, I struggle everyday. I am impatient, I worry - I don't know what I am doing, I don't know where the work is going. It is not easy at all. And I have never done this before - each composition is a new proposition." Pressed about whether he draws as much from reality as he does from the advantages of abstraction, Harris explains his approach as about being able to immerse himself in a prolonged moment, that stretches as long as it takes one to feel differently. Where contemporary artappearsto be animated by a visual immediacy, Harris' works are determined by slow and serious time. Seeing our lives as open to much deeper dimensions. "I really want to create deep space and deep time. So you can go into space, and you go into time, and you spend time in this illusionistic world. I think illusion is something that is the basis of reality, and painting especially, because it is just on the surface where the distortion is happening."

And against any illusion that they are decorative, there is in Harris' work an incredible lexicon of lavish ideas, that sees snakes devouring money, contorted cats wrestling puppets,(Dutch graphic artist) Escher like hands drawings themselves, a crucifixion harbouring rats, and cupids flying over seascapes. As mythological symbols, science, and the solar system are all employed as sensitive scenery for each of his carefully crafted masterpieces. For which the ambition of Harris's work is positively spurred by the artists' inventive imagination, and intention to explain everything as though the illustrations for Aldous Huxley's 'A Brave New World'; a world not too distant from Harris' in which reproductive technology, sleep-learning, psychological manipulation, and classical conditioning alter everything irrevocably.

Recalling the Old Masters, for Harris' use of wooden panels and integrated frames, an individual work's almost biblical appearance is as a consequence of the hand craved detail and satisfying symbolism that nourishes the central depiction. And like the Old Masters the artist sees perspective as integral to the work, and the unfolding narrative.

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Zach Harris, Detail of Sunrise Sunset (in 2020), 2015-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, 219.7 x 158.8 cm, Photo: Claire Dorn, Courtesy Perrotin

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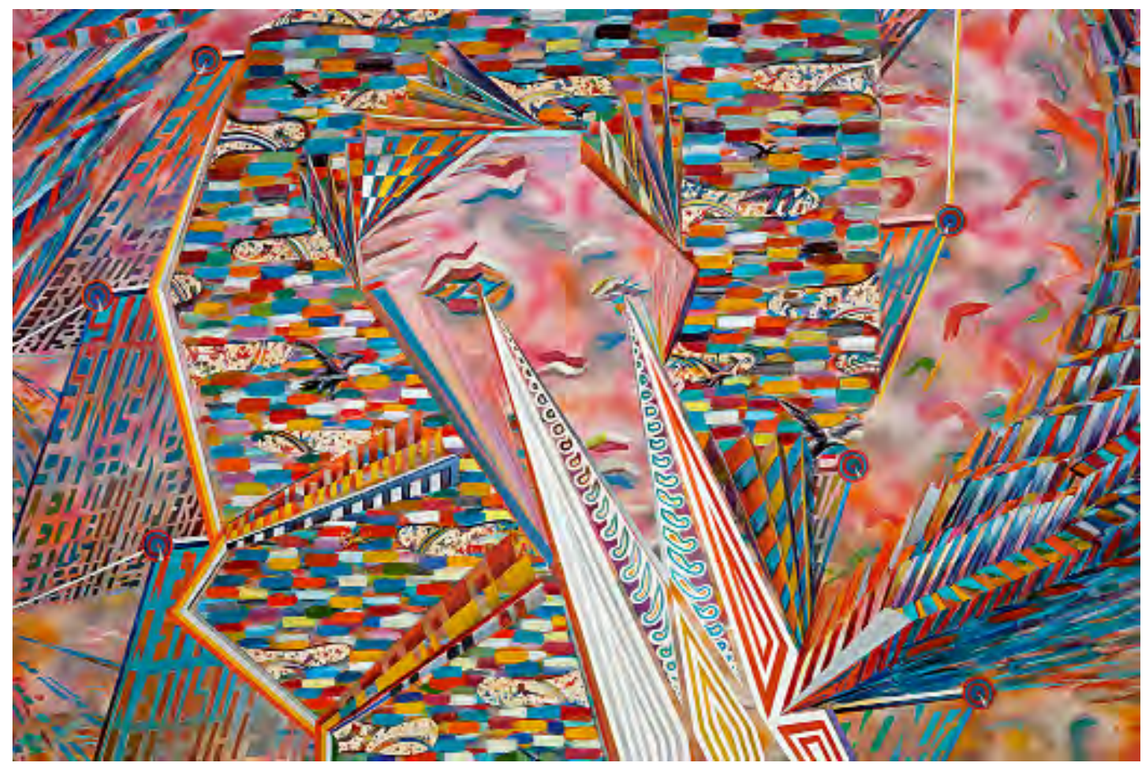
More easily unexplained, Harris' imagination borrows from two worlds, that which we are in when we speak, and then another more introspective universe, that has him scrutinise over the anatomy of an artwork, for a invariable amount of time. The detail as visual dynamite, as Harris explains, is born over a period of many weeks and months. As panels areindividually cut into, sprayed over, meticulously painted, and then mounted into an accompanying frame, that has all of the same technique applied to it, and for its appearance could be a work in itself; challenging the final image. Which serves to illustration the relationship of the inner and outer order of things. As the artist explains how each work "goes through so many phases, that the painting looks good but the frame is terrible. The frame really contradicts the painting, and then towards the end it becomes an entire entity, which then leads to my working on the whole thing at once." And at a moment when we are saturated with standard images and information, Harris purposefully applies himself to the task of creating something other; that serves as salvation for our imaginations.

Interview

Rajesh Punj: What interested me yesterday when looking over your exhibition catalogue was of the construct of your work, by which I mean the order of things - that the frame and the central panel become one and the same thing entirely? How did that come about? And is everything as much based in reality, as it is on the otherworldly?

Zach Harris: I trained mostly as a painter, that is my first love, and I have spent a long time looking at paintings, and drawings. Old Master paintings, contemporary



art, Abstract Expressionism, I can mention as an influence. So I got into painting, and then I spent alot of time in churches. Alot in Europe, and I spent time in India, and I did murals, and decorated meditation spaces that were for contemplation, and for focusing and going inward. In a church the whole programme of images, is about the painting and its frame, the alter, (glass) windows and architecture. It is about everything existing together within a spiritual space.

For me the distinction between what is art and what isn't, or what is fine art and what is craft (doesn't exist). So with my work I am playing with those dichotomies, where the frame, as you said, is no longer a frame; and then there is also the question of focus verses periphery. Of how I originally didn't want to make a painting or a sculpture, but an object (that was also a) painting; so I wanted to do both. I wanted to make the painting almost a meditate object, and the frame as a strategy to keep you looking; to keep you focused. So sometimes (there is one work here and another one back there), where the painting is ten by eight inches, by the frame is three feet by four, and it is all working to keep it as a container, which is really small.

RP: My immediate thought is that when you conceive of a work, are you deciding the frame in the same moment?

ZH: Each one is different. Initially I would work on a painting for two years. I would spend a long time with a work.

RP: So you would concentrate on a work (like Silver Sky2014-17) without its frame initially?

ZH: Yes it could read as a panel. I may have many of them going on at once, and then I will choose one in particular I like more, that this is a good painting on its own. So it has to be good on its own without any help that encourages me to think I could exhibit that on the wall. But then I thought why stop? It is not that hard to make a good painting, it is hard but a lot of people do it, it is interesting, but also it wasn't really enough for me and I wanted to make an object. I wanted to get into geometry and carving, spatial reliefs and to extend the painting. So the painting would have bigger implications outside of itself.

RP: Thus by implication you are inviting the audience to focus more intently upon your work and its frame?

ZH: Oh yes, and I think the more I am focused while making it, the more the viewer focuses, or the viewer feels that intensity of concentration as a heightened awareness; as part of a visionaries' kind of tradition. It maybe I like to create part visionary, part religious, part meditative image; for which I am seeking to create an almost psychedelic experience in a painting. We all know when you like an artwork, 'you can't figure it out', 'you don't know what you are looking at', 'it is incredible', 'you don't know how it's done'; and you are just mesmerised for a long time. So that is what I feel like I wanted to experience as the artist and the viewer; because that was the most valuable thing to do for people, and for the world. It is not a political statement, but it is a value that is missing from our present world. (Because of the nature of everything) it seems more and more important now to spend time with something.

RP: And how important or possible is that, when we are encouraged to 'live in the moment'?

ZH: Right, as I mentioned I want to arrive at a more psychedelic spiritual experience, and I think also as a painter you have moments

I have a vision in my head of what will look good. I will draw a little with a woodworking tool that scrapes away from around the figures. And I will proceed to think 'oh this will look good with this', so I see the whole and sort of work towards that. Which proves meaningful because I have so many steps and stages along the way, so many things to do, that I am constantly getting more things done. Which leads me to the final thing.

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Zach Harris, Double Helix (in 2020), 2015-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, 208.3 x 152.4 cm, Photo: Claire Dorn, Courtesy Perrotin

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Zach Harris, Water on Fire Bird, 2014-17, Water-based paint, ink, graphite, carved, wood, 208.3 x 152.4 cm
© Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

Zach Harris, Detail of Water on Fire Bird, 2014-17, Water-based paint, ink, graphite, carved, wood, 208.3 x 152.4 cm
© Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin
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of inspiration, and moments when you are confused about what you are doing. I try to cultivate those heightened states, and it is almost like that drives the abstraction and the composition. So certain works are quite simple for me, I have others that have much more geometry, and planning go into them, in order to try and visualise the thing as a whole, and of what it will look like before it is made. Which is really hard to do but I find can be really rewarding.

RP: With this work (Small Succulent 2013-17) for example would you have constructed a frame and considered different versions of the final piece?

ZH: Yes I really work it out. In my head I have different ideas, and I create sketches with my eyes closed, and imagine what this thing will look like in real life. I will do lots of drawing and figure out general proportions and whatever, and then I might add a frame around the painting, or a big piece of wood that I carve.

RP: You referenced the Old Masters as an influence, and as someone who is incredibly interested in paintings of the 16th and 17th century, I am becoming more accustomed to panels or canvases with big heavy frames, that can on occasion compete with the religious or mythological image itself; is that something you are conscious of, of the balance of the 'feature' with the frame?

ZH: Oh yes. It is crazy, it goes through so many phases, that the painting looks good but the frame is terrible. The frame really contradicts the painting, and then towards the end it becomes one entity, which then leads to my working on the whole thing at once.

RP: So a completed work is supposed to be looked at in its entirety, and not as an image with a frame?

ZH: Yes it is meant to be looked at (as a whole). They should exist as an entity,as a painting does as an illusion and as an object.

RP: I am intrigued by the codes and creative languages you to apply to each work, in order they become their own universe. I want to understand the imagery within each of the works, and of how you come about determining that?

ZH: I mean it is based on elemental abstract symbols. So it has an abstract power, which is the fundamental and honest thing about it; and the works have a visionary landscape, within a deep space. I really want to create deep space and deep time. So you can go into space, and you go into time, and you spend time in this illusionistic world. I think illusion is something that is the basis of reality, and painting especially, because it is just on the surface where the distortion is happening.

I am playing with ordinary illusion, so in a work like Water on Fire Bird 2015-17, there are two birds, a water bird and a fire bird, as an elemental underpinning to the flowers in the

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Zach Harris, Study for 20/20", 2016-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, ink 172.7 x 120.7 cm, Photo: Claire Dorn Courtesy Perrotin

Zach Harris, Detail of Study for 20/20", 2016-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, 172.7 x 120.7 cm, Photo: Claire Dorn Courtesy Perrotin

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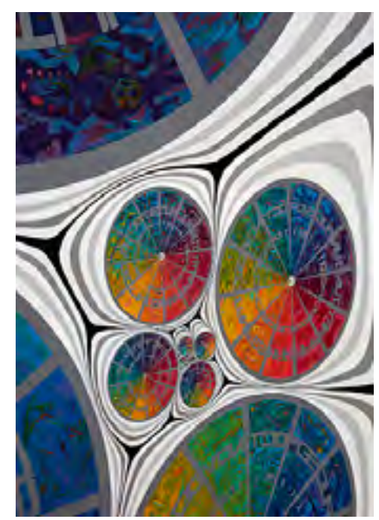

bottom right hand corner, and also there are these mountains, with a hill on fire, and there could be a plain of water there with a mountain in the middle, and there are bigger mountains going further back into the distance. And then there isa mountain made-up of heads - Do you see the heads? Do you see the city? It is about playing with scale, shifting and suddenly you are within worlds, within worlds, within worlds. Macro focused - of how it looks from up here, resolving one element here and up there, and everything in-between. Like there is something happening. And then there are these big heads, alluding to a big exodus of people. For which I was thinking of mount Rushmore in the States where the Presidents are carved out of the rocks.

So in this detail they could be carved into a mountain, and then you shift back here it is another mountain, but it is actually much further back, of skulls and Pegasus; and there are these hands everywhere drawing. Just like my hand as the hand of god creating, which becomes a motif. There are a lot of symbols that run throughout the whole show. Then there is a lot of colour theory, juxtaposing these different shapes that have various marks and languages. And it is not just a single image that can be read, there is a landscape, there are birds, there are mountains, there are people. All these different elements, and with anything anthropomorphic, you can't tell (what you are looking at). What is this? How was it made? Carved, and then there is a lot of text, which is random poetic writing, in which I am saying something, or I might describe what someone is doing, or imply the meaning of the story. So there are very different ways to engage with the works.

RP: Therefore with any of these works, the viewer is encourages to come back again and again, as though returning to the altar.

ZH: Definitely, that is the point that you keep looking and to live with it, see more in it, keep discovering. I have spent three years on any one of these paintings, which is a long development.

RP: And by that do you mean you will begin a work, and then return to it? Of slowly building upon what you have until you arrive at an end image.

ZH: Slowly as I start to perceive it, again if I am feeling a greater clarity I can perceive what the next thing to do is. A lot of times I will sit and mediate for a little bit, for an hour or half an hour, just to live with it, and also because each work had a very different pictorial language. Pointillist or impressionistic, another work has hardly any paint marks at all - so they are created in many different ways, and that is part of what I like doing.

RP: So you won't necessarily repeat a pattern or approach?

ZH: I have had comments like 'oh, is this the same artist who did all these different things', which implies a greater vision and a greater sense of history, art history, time and style. I think every piece should be different.

RP: So you wouldn't necessarily be inclined to take an existing idea into a new work?

ZH: Not really, sometimes there will be two or three variations as works, but more or less, especially with a painting, I won't repeat something.

RP: It must be mentally and emotionally exhausting to conceive of a whole set of ideas, only to then have to start again - to begin again.Do you always see yourself arriving at a conclusion, which allows you to move on?

ZH: No, I could keep going on this show (at Galerie Perrotin, Paris) for another year if I wanted to, because there is no such thing as finished.

Nothing is ever quite right.

RP: It must be difficult then to know when to come away from a work, to let go. And by implication is there ever a sense that you have overworked something?

ZH: Oh yes. It happens a lot. I think it happened more to me when I was younger. I think I am more patient now, and say 'okay do the wise thing', wave the day and wait; but definitely you can overload the viewer. So that is something I bear in mind. But I tend to have this, not schizophrenic way of thinking, but of applying many thoughts to a work; so my work becomes especially dense. Pictorially, of content, there is so much to think about. And that is the way I like it. It is almost like being an outsider, of filling the page with lots of content.

RP: Visually what is intriguing about your works, is of how you apply reality, or representational elements to the overall abstraction that permeates your work; why is that? Why are your works not entirely other-worldly?

ZH: Again it is very intuitive, for that it is just what I sense the painting needs. Whilst composing it, of where the energy needs to become a vortex, or tighten. Of where things need to come up and breathe more, and of how all of that works spatially. Creating a contrast of going from one place to another in a work; that comes from a shift in mark making as points of focus. So it is an entirely intuitive experience. That is what I am doing, and that's why I take so long, because all of that has to come naturally. Again I am not repeating myself a great deal, so I haven't figured anything out. I am creating a new painting all the time, which I think is the best way to go, especially when I see so much art, with artists doing the same basic thing for an entire show. I understand that because you get better each time, so I know I can do one work over and over again and it be more magnificent; but I am not interested in that idea of perfection. So I never quite master anything.

RP: Because of the intensity with which you apply yourself to your work, do you see each work as almost becoming autobiographical, for the 'blood', 'sweat' and 'tears' that go into them- as a reflection of you at any particular moment?

ZH: Right, they do (reflect me) its true. I think in terms of bodies of work aswell, because I didn't have this show by itself; there are other things around. The works for this show represents the last two years, so in that sense it is. But also I got married, I am having a child (there are babies, and two birds). There are things that are almost Freudian in certain works, and then the drawings of hands in a work like Rainy Daze Window 2015-16, holding strings, and drawing, holding cell phones. So it is about letting my mind go, and of my interest in automatic writing. And alot of the time my warm up in the studio is to draw, because that is what I feel like is the most immediate (thing), and it is like a warm-up for a musician doing scales or something. It calms me down; it makes me perceive space more. It makes everything I do better if I draw for one or two hours at a time.

RP: And do you exhibit any of your drawings?

ZH: Well with the works on linen, a lot of times it is the case that I exhibit drawings as part of larger works.

RP: I am interested in the immediacy of drawing that you have already touched upon, in relationship to your more methodical practice and approach.

There are a lot of symbols that run throughout the whole show. Then there is a lot of colour theory, juxtaposing these different shapes that have various marks and languages. And it is not just a single image that can be read, there is a landscape, there are birds, there are mountains, there are people. All these different elements, and with anything anthropomorphic, you can't tell (what you are looking at). What is this? How was it made? Carved, and then there is a lot of text, which is random poetic writing, in which I am saying something, or I might describe what someone is doing, or imply the meaning of the story. So there are very different ways to engage with the works.

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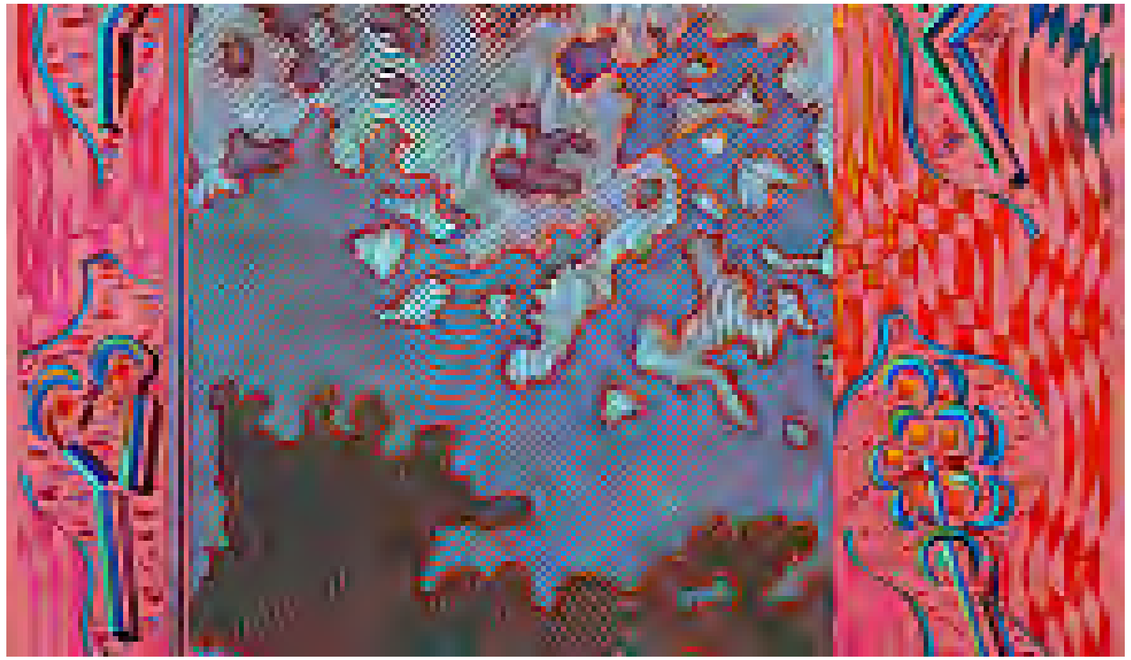
Zach Harris, Philosopher Stone, 2015-17
Water-based paint, ink, graphite, carved wood, 208 x 152 cm
© Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin



ZH: Within these works the brush marks are more spontaneous, and the method is pretty loose and not that tight. I like painting and the responsiveness of painting. I really appreciate that.

RP: Do you have an incredible patience about you? Do you want a work complete the soonest?

ZH: No it's hard. It's hard for me.

RP: To allow for that are you working on several works at a time, in order you can feel a sense of perpetual progress?

ZH: I have a vision in my head of what will look good. I will draw a little with a woodworking tool that scrapes away from around the figures. And I will proceed to think 'oh this will look good with this', so I see the whole and sort of work towards that. Which proves meaningful because I have so many steps and stages along the way, so many things to do, that I am constantly getting more things done. Which leads me to the final thing.

RP: And do you feel with your individual works that you need to explain them to an audience?

ZH: I don't think I can 'explain' a work.

RP: I naturally think of an audience, and how they will reach for an explanation with your works, because there is no obvious route into your reality. And for that are they not likely to want some means of how to manage your works visually?

ZH: And I am playing with that, as another way of entering into the works - of being more curious. And as a device it keeps them looking too. Literally going back and forth, 'What are these hands?' 'What are they doing?' Music notes, a hand pointing to a cell phone, a mushroom cloud. So there is not a clear story going on, it is about getting people to be

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Zach Harris, Detail of Glass Guillotine, 2016-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, 157.5 x 108 cm,
© Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

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Zach Harris, Glass Guillotine, 2016-17 Carved wood, water-based paint, 157.5 x 108 cm,
© Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

ZH: That particular work was made in a different way. I worked the painting as a panel for a while. I developed it and then I conceived of the accompanying frame. There are these rhythms around it, and in terms of detail there is what appears to be a UFO going into the clouds, with a peacock or an animal drinking.

RP: By the nature of your approach, of your physically carving out from the panel, are these works are much sculptural as they are two-dimensional?

ZH: That is the misconception. We have this idea 'this' is painting, but what is painting? Paint can be used in many different ways.

RP: So do you see them as more sculptural?

ZH: I see them as hybrid works, they act as paintings, as you say, but they are for sure sculptural in a way aswell. I want them to be neither one nor the other. I want them to occupy their own space, to be indefinable, and for us not to think about labeling them but experiencing them. It is supposed to be entirely experiential. Tricky, confusing even, and then you go to each one and you become more confused. To realise oh this one (Sky Writing Wall 2016-17) is done with laser etching and is therefore composed entirely on the computer. I mean I did a drawing for this work, had it copied onto a computer and then etched with a laser. So this one has a lot more technology, which has its own aesthetic. This work is almost like looking through a building or a gate, or some such structure – as an architectural facade. With a sky, that opens up to show what could almost appear as 'the last judgment'.

RP: The work has me thinking of Dutch 15th century artist Hieronymus Bosch.

ZH: It is sort of like a 'Boschian' dystopian, apocalyptic vision of the future. It is also commenting on contemporary politics. It is like a projection, which is supposed to create an interesting contrast.

RP: Do you feel an intention with your approach and practice to become more focused with each new work, and for your panel paintings to take on a greater complexity; in order they elevate the audience to a higher plain?

ZH: As you look at them, that's for sure what I have tried to do in order to keep you going.

RP: You have already talked about depth, and of drawing the audience into the work; is that something to strive for with everything you do?

ZH: Yes,I am thinking about it all the time; which is something I learnt from Old Master paintings. They were so good at where you enter the painting –of where it takes you, where it brings you out, and our point of reentry, or where it brings you back in again; leading to a cyclical view of the painting. So I am always trying to think about those perspectival notions when making the works.

RP: So you are suggesting there is a sense of duration to seeing a work that requires the audience to look and to look again - something more meditative than immediate.

ZH: Right, because that is where you see more, and where you learn more. Precisely where you have more experiences. Which is where you remember great and more powerful art experiences.

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Zach Harris, Calendar Cloud (in 2020), 2016-17, Carved wood, water-based paint, ink, 190.5 x 134.6 cm, Photo: Claire Dorn Courtesy Perrotin