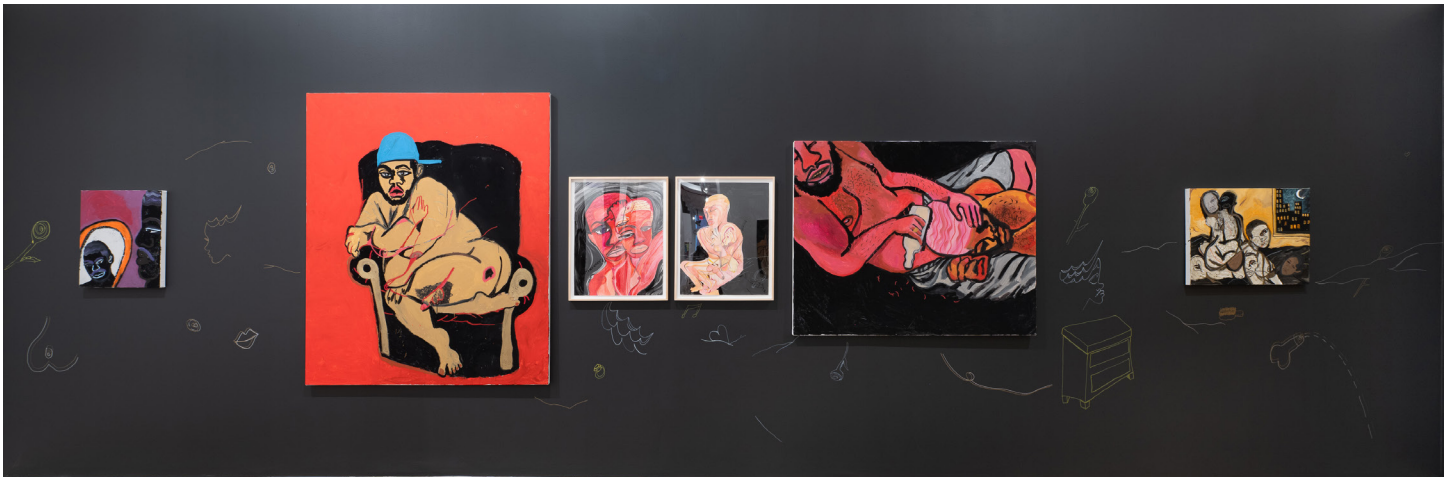


SPIKE

Jonathan Lyndon Chase
"his beard is soft, my hands are empty"
Artists Space
8 Sep - 2 Dec 2023
by Erin Leland



Views of "his beard is soft, my hands are empty." Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak.

Every flat, stuffed poly and bulbous foam surface in Jonathan Lyndon Chase's (*1989) "his beard is soft, my hands are empty" is emphatically painted. Floated with animated line drawings of haircare tools, genitalia, and the brick foundation of a barber-shop, the exhibition's sketchbook-page walls are cut into with windows, their sightlines affording glimpses of glitter, oil-stick sheen, and the reflective materiality of makeup, rhinestones, and spray paint. In Lyndon Chase's first institutional solo exhibition in New York, an imaginary neighborhood barbershop doubles as a radiant studio, its hairdressers decisively re-cast in the roles of artists working in aerosol, gel, and liquid finesse.

Artworks are not limited to the stretched paintings and framed drawings encircling the show space. Echoing throughout, the electric buzz emitted from *The Hair Cut* (2023), a video projected onto polyester durags of a razor gently tracing a customer's scalp, both lovingly antoganoizes and unifies the exhibition. Lulled into its rhythm, I was never abandoned by the clipper's persistent mechanistic hum, audible in two distinct galleries at opposite ends of the venue – a living room and a bar-ber-shop – linked by an intermediary passageway replete with a fold-open sign. Surrounding a couch and a pillow figure holding a Playstation 2 controller, the living room's wall-mounted paintings convey an easy male intimacy. In *reclining waves* (2023), one man nestles his head into another's lap while having his hair brushed; both men are in a state of half-dress, their eyes closed, at rest.

The barbershop, meanwhile, is fan-tastically grounded by the center-staging of giant, toy-like sculptures stuffed with muslin and poly-fill. A plush-soft and eminently huggable tub of Ultra Sheen hair grease plops onto a checkerboard floor, alongside a glistening, bristled hairbrush and a ghoulish elec-tric razor, this last looming 2.5 meters tall on an adjoining stairway landing. Ripe with humor and apparently grown up overnight, these totemic objects confront us with their sheer dimension, asserting that they are not pushed aside accessories in tool-crammed drawers, but playable instruments of creative invention.

Like familiars or one another's neighbors, the plump, softly sculpted men of the barbershop lean against a wall, waiting out the line for their turn in the swiveling chair, catching up close by or from afar, daydreaming, maybe even thinking out loud. An enticement to becoming a regular, all desire to receive the eyes of the barber. Two more sewn-cushion figures are conjoined at their hip and shoulder, legless customers in metal chairs; the men in Lyndon Chase's acrylic paintings are differently layered, at moments tightly squeezed together by chit-chat eye-to-eye. Gossip airs alongside intimate exchange and sidelong glances at iPhone messages. Compliments and uncertainties splay across paintings, written in phrases "looking good" or "he loves me he loves me not." This is a space of closeness and trust, acknowl-dged in titles like *soft-speaking*, *Barber I won't tell your secret*.

Figures on canvas expand beyond their own contours and merge into the accessories of their surroundings; combs, scissors, and barbershop signage layer underneath transparent limbs, flattening foreground and background into a single plane and equivocating the values of bodies, tools, and language. In *hair appointment*, the torso of a Black Figure in profile splits into the teeth of a hair pick, his



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turned face simultaneously becoming the abstract hands of a block. Bodily contortion brings to mind portraiture by Francis Bacon, as in Lyndon Chase's *pubes*, *stretched marks*, *blue fitted*, where a ballooning man in an armchair billows in nude folds of abstracted flesh and multiplied hands. Lyndon Chase paints barbers intently, his dexterous fingers laser-beaming straight-shaven lines along foreheads and behind ears in painting after painting

Mirrors are recurrent throughout the installation, glidingly drawn along the walls between paintings, filling the acrylic hands of hair-dressers and those having their hair dressed, resting on gestural tables, hovering in midair, sculpturally collaged into some paintings' surfaces. Sensuality cannot be left out of the self-analysis central to preparing to be seen; the barbershop is a place to be neatened, made beautiful, and transformed, among the many paintings where the mirror's dysphoric power refracts the figure into shards.

Written in pen and ink and placed in a vitrine, the Lyndon Chase poem that lent the exhibition its title also contains the reminiscent line "In my blue fitted hat he looks like someone I knew." Intimating the community's surrender to a singular figure, iconic in how the barber receives us, gathers us, and knows us, "his hands were soft" divulges divulges that any taking-into of confidences, of confessions, turns on creativity's well-oiled rotor – and that the barber is an artist after all.



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