

ART REVIEW

For Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Hair Is Rooted in Pride

The Philadelphia artist's show at Artists Space considers how hair cutting, grooming and caregiving help create a Black queer community.

By Martha Schwendener

Nov. 16, 2023



Installation view of "Jonathan Lyndon Chase: his beard is soft, my hands are empty" at Artists Space. Filip Wolak/Artists Space

Black hair has been a rousing topic for politicians, comedians and artists for decades. Malcolm X argued that straightening Black hair to conform to white beauty standards was a form of racist brainwashing. Regina Kimbell made a documentary with the brilliant title "My Nappy Roots: A Journey Through Black Hairitage" (2010) and the comedian Chris Rock made a similar documentary, "Good Hair" (2009), about the Black hair industry (and, of course, got in trouble at the Oscars for mentioning a Black actress's lack of hair). Now a Broadway play, "Jaja's African Hair Braiding," written by Jocelyn Bioh, celebrates the "masterpieces" created by West African immigrants on women's heads in a Harlem braiding shop.

What's often missing from the Black hair narrative is the experience of Black nonbinary people. The Philadelphia artist Jonathan Lyndon Chase's sprawling show at Artists Space helps fill the gap with dozens of bold figurative paintings and sculptures, clearly inspired by Cubism, Surrealism and Pop Art, that consider how hair cutting, grooming and caregiving help create a Black queer community.



Jonathan Lyndon Chase's "The Shape Up," 2023, captures two Black queer individuals, one shaving the other's head. Filip Wolak/Artists Space

Paintings take up the most real estate here. Big, generous figures highlight different viewpoints, spatial perspectives, moods and genders. "The Shape Up" (2023) captures two Black queer individuals, one shaving the other's head. The colors are electric, like a Matisse red, and the figures shift and turn, suggesting an erotic undercurrent. Nipples double as eyes — very similar to Picasso's Cubism, as well as to Francis Picabia's wonderfully distorted figures.

Actual hair products are embedded in several paintings: snippets of Black curls, a grooming mirror, a brush, or the packaging from a durag, with the photograph of a beautiful Black model wearing the protective cap. These, too, play a classic Cubist game of representation: Found objects are pitted against painted ones in a game of real versus replica.

In what Chase calls the "Liminal Space," set between the "Living Room" and the "Barbershop," are paintings of advertisements for goods and services that look very much like Andy Warhol's hand-painted Pop works — only the Black hair version. The "Barbershop" has three big sculptures of hair products that are reminiscent of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's giant sculptures of everyday objects. Chase's sculpture of an Ultra Sheen Hair Grease jar is among the best, playing off the question of just whose "everyday" Pop Art sculptures historically addressed — but also adding to a Black vernacular that includes Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to the People," a towering sculpture of an Afro pick with a power salute for a handle.



This show of bold figurative paintings and sculptures features a checkerboard floor with sculptures of two figures, a hairbrush, and an oversized jar of hair gel. Filip Wolak/Artists Space

Despite the humor and occasional puerility and crudeness — penises scrawled on the wall and a coffee table with an exposed rear end that remakes the Pop-era Allen Jones's "Chair" (1969) with its base of a woman in bondage — there is pathos here. A zine accompanying the show finds the writer and curator Maleke Glee musing that "Black Queer folk grow up navigating a multiplicity of worlds, often with caretakers unfamiliar at best and uninterested at worse." Asking someone to shave your head helps you to miss "the parts I cannot see."

Elsewhere in the zine, Chase's poetic handwritten texts slide between different meanings: There are "natural wave" products, and being natural. The pleasant buzzing of shavers makes you want to doze off but, Chase writes, "don't get too comfortable, you might get cut."

Despite all these trenchant thoughts and bold artworks, though, I'll admit to being disappointed. The reason is simple. Chase's 2020 exhibition, "Wind Rider," at Company (technically Baby Company, an auxiliary of the excellent Company Gallery) was such a knockout, it set the bar extraordinarily high. In that show, Chase explored the idea of the cowboy, but with a wonderful disregard for the niceties of gallery installation. Canvases were propped on old telephones or mounted perpendicular to the wall. More important, the paintings themselves were an explosion of color, figure, race, gender — everything seemed possible and served as proof that real experimentation could exist in the sterile gallery space. The show at Artists Space is thoughtful, but includes too much Picasso, Picabia, Warhol, Basquiat, Jones, Oldenburg — and not enough of Chase's singular gonzo vision.

Nonetheless, the show offers lessons on Black L.G.B.T.Q. grooming and beyond. Everyone has a hair story, from a bad hair day to encroaching baldness. Good hair becomes a metaphor for life, rife with historical, cultural and political implications. What Chase's show contributes, with bracing honesty, vulnerability and humor, is a model of acceptance, community and mutual care.

Schwendener, Martha. "For Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Hair is Rooted in Pride" The New York Times. November 16, 2023. Online.