

PRESS RELEASE

Chase Hall
Clouds in My Coffee

March 5 – April 9, 2022

Opening on Friday, March 4, 6 – 8 pm

Waldmannstrasse, Waldmannstr. 6, CH-8001 Zurich

Zurich Art March! March 4, 11 am – 8 pm; March 5, 11 am – 7 pm; March 6, 11 am – 7 pm

Text by Dr. Daniel S. Palmer

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present *Clouds in My Coffee*, the gallery's first solo exhibition by the American artist Chase Hall.

When Chase Hall started painting about a decade ago, he made his first works in a resourceful, even furtive way. Rather than pursue a formal arts education, he used a nearby art school's trash. As the departing students left their materials behind after each semester, he appropriated the discarded stretcher bars and partially-used tubes of paint. With these supplies, new cotton canvas, and the inventive use of brewed coffee grounds as a pigment, Hall has produced a powerful, art historically significant body of work that addresses a wide range of socio-cultural issues, from the complexities of race, the weighty histories of coffee and cotton and the ways they are interwoven with the transatlantic trade, a myriad of other specific cultural references and personages as subject matter, and personal meditations on his own place in society.

Functionally, Hall uses coffee grounds in a way that is similar to how pigments are made but with almost alchemical results that create a range of tonal values. He is able to achieve different shades of brown in the backgrounds of his paintings because of the varying levels of coarseness and fineness in the grounds of the bean. A very roughly ground bean will produce a light patina, whereas a fine bean will result in a deep brown. He uses this spectrum to celebrate the subtle beauty of every possible shade and to highlight outmoded systems of racial categorization and their invented artificial binaries.

The paintings also contain white sections of exposed raw canvas amid the coffee and color, achieving a stark contrast that adds more dynamism than could be achieved by applying white paint. These unpainted areas are typically concentrated around his figures' noses, mouths, on the folds or pleats of their clothing, and around their heads in ways that evoke "wooly" hair or dreadlocks. Additionally, Hall embeds hidden allusions in the forms of canvas left raw, especially letters that evoke personal meaning—C's and H's for his initials, L's and P's for his wife Lauren and his adorable Great Dane Paisley. He even creates figures within figures in raw canvas from time to time. Such "personal hieroglyphics" allow Hall to hint at some of his deepest concerns. These concealed gestures may be missed by viewers, but they can also take on different meanings from those he intended, like clouds of cotton, coffee Rorschach patterns, or pareidolic perceptions.

The use of cotton in Hall's work is laden with meaning and weight, evoking its role as the agrarian material at the center of modern racial trauma and speaking to the perpetuation of systems of power it helped establish, many of which are still present even today. Some portions of exposed canvas may appear to be entirely white, but upon closer inspection, specks of black become visible. Hall has poetically suggested how these slight "imperfections" in the white field evoke a relationship to the cotton plant and its seed or vanilla bean ice cream, almost like "a black seed in a sea of whiteness. What does it mean to stain it with something so black?" These voids are simultaneously about surface, material, and deeper matters all at once. The raw canvas surrounded by a dark painted field of color implicates the viewer and encourages us to question our position in relation to the Black figure we see in front of us as representation and form. It also invites us to scrutinize our place in the history of how whiteness has been defined over the centuries and must be reconsidered today.

Hall explains how his paintings allow him to question what it means to be Black yet have a genetic relationship to whiteness. The hybrid nature of his own experience as a Black child with a white mother and "as being the whitewashed kid within my Black family and community" presents a less common reality than is usually addressed in mainstream culture. This allows his work to address a space between racial absolutes of "Black" and "white" with a nuanced voice. His paintings are the site of a thoughtful, bi-racial individual considering and navigating his place in the larger racial mosaic while wrestling with complex histories on both sides of his family tree.

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Likewise, his artworks consider concepts of transformation, passing, hybridity, and concealment, through a particularly intriguing concept he has been developing of “whiteness as acne.” In his paintings, this manifests in the marks around the noses and mouths of many of the figures’ faces—form and physiognomy come together to address matters bigger than the individual body that has been depicted. Blemishes of the skin articulate how Hall sees that “whiteness will always question my Blackness, and it sticks out like a scar or acne seeming to carry a sense of shame that can’t ever truly be hidden.” What does a lingering scar say about one’s “authentic self,” and how is the past reflected in how someone looks now? Also always mindful of clothing, Hall’s figures wear uniforms, dapper suits, or other iconic dress in ways that highlight self-fashioning, playing a role, or sharing a sense of camaraderie as a collective or team. This combination of skin and attire speaks volumes about his subjects and their identities, as do the activities they perform or how they pose, but we are also always cognizant of their distance from our own moment.

And, of course, we must ask: how does America, “land of the free and home of the brave,” factor into all of this? Both of Hall’s grandfathers were veterans, and the armed forces played a significant part in his family life, coloring his relationship with his native country. The American narrative posits inclusion, possibility, and freedoms of which we can be proud, but there are also embarrassing or shameful parts, with enough inequities and injustices to make many citizens feel demoralized by our role or place in society. Chase Hall works to try to see both of these things simultaneously. He has pride in his grandfathers, the vibrant Black culture, and social advancements that America has fostered, but also sees the history and current situation with an honest frankness. He sees the void of the cotton as a positive element and the stain of the coffee grounds as a positive element. He sees Black and white and everything in between.

Chase Hall was born in 1993 in Saint Paul, MN, US, and lives and works in New York, NY, US. Hall’s paintings have been exhibited in two solo exhibitions to date: *Aleczauder*, C L E A R I N G, New York, NY, US (2021); and *Half Note*, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago, IL, US (2020). Current and recent group exhibitions include *Black American Portraits*, LACMA, Los Angeles, CA, US (2021–2022); *Rested*, Nicola Vassell Gallery, New York, NY, US (2021–2022); *Élan Vital*, MOCA Westport, Westport, CT, US (2021); *This Is America / Art USA Today*, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort, NL (2020); *Show Me The Signs*, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, CA, US (2020); *Art On The Grid*, Public Art Fund, New York, NY, US (2020); *Next of Kin*, Various Small Fires, Seoul, KR (2020); and *Then & Now*, curated by Antwaun Sargent, Jenkins Johnson Projects, Brooklyn, US (2019).

Hall’s work is represented in the permanent collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD, US; the Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY, US; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, US; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, US; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, US; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, US; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US, among others. Hall has participated in residencies at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA, US; Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Madison, ME, US; and The Mountain School of Arts, Los Angeles, CA, US, among others.

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