

ArtSeen: Marcus Jahmal: *Double Down*
By Charles Schultz
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BROOKLYN RAIL



Marcus Jahmal, *Chocolate Genius*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech. Photo: Matthew Kroening.

Marcus Jahmal's new show of paintings takes you into a world of spiritual healers and reverends who traffic in good luck bags for gamblers. The emotional tone ranges from anxiety to anguish with the exception of two or perhaps three of the thirteen works on view. Interestingly, it's the accoutrements of the show—wallpaper, and a flattened smattering of exhibition announcements—that structure the experience of Jahmal's unfussy efforts on canvas.

In the smaller room of the gallery three paintings hang on walls neatly papered with repeating copies of gambling sheets featuring info on various numbers games, race track stats, and zodiac charts, as well as good luck advertisements from the Reverend, and Sister Victoria, who offers lifetime spiritual protection. These pages create a feeling of standing at the intersection of luck and crisis, hoping for a twist of good fortune. In a narrative sense, the trio of paintings fit right in. *Uncle Sambo*, *Chocolate Genius*, and *Big Mack* (all 2019), depict a tortured looking flag figure, a racehorse in mid stride, and a man with a precarious grin on a golden lottery ticket.

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Marcus Jahmal, *Lovers*, 2019. Acrylic on linen, 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech. Photo: Matthew Kroening.

Another effect of the wallpaper is the requisite attention paid to patterns. What does the combination of these three paintings add up to? What significance do they lend one another? Where does an arbitrary decision become weighted and fateful? When we think of luck as a form of chance that generates meaning and represents a disruption of order, then we are compelled to recognize whatever perceived order is structuring our experience in the first place. For gamblers the order of the game is always defined by the same objective: acquiring as much money as possible. One's success or failure depends entirely on one's willingness to take risks.

In the show's press release, Jahmal's friend and fellow painter Chris Martin writes that artists are gamblers. The title of the exhibition, *Double down*, references the gambler's act of re-committing to a particular course of action. The hand drawn exhibition announcements that are sandwiched on the floor between a flat wooden board and a large sheet of plexiglass advertise the opportunity to "double down on your investment."



Marcus Jahmal, *Thief in the Night*, 2019. Acrylic on linen, 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech. Photo: Matthew Kroening

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In the larger room, circumscribing the contained mess of flyers on the floor—like dollar bills tossed into the pot—are seven dynamite paintings. They are spooky and fierce, full of slashing lines and dark colors. The creatures that populate these paintings include an owl, a serpent, a canine, a card shark, a thief, and two lovers in the night. Of them all, *Lovers* (2019) is the one that really howls. In this work two figures hover above an empty bed, conjoined in a manner that conveys vivid distress. A smaller red figure clings to a larger blue and fuchsia figure, from whose toothy maw one senses a long, wailing cry. This same open mouth appears on the equally uncomfortable looking *Uncle Sambo* (2019), as well as on the little portrait of George Washington in *United Snakes* (2019). If these images tap into a political temperament it is one of great discomfort.

The visual motif of someone screaming is well countered by a quality of connoted silence—the hush of holding one's breath—in other paintings. Most notable on this count are the masked bandit in *Thief in the Night*; the creepy, peeping eyes in *Divide*; and the card player hiding his mouth in *High Roller* (all 2019). In all, there is a kind of violence of the eyes taking place, a quality of watching or being watched that feels intrusive, but also somehow obligatory. These paintings cultivate an uneasy sensibility, not unlike the willingness—or even the desire—to participate in something where one knows the potential for violation is high, because what's on the table is worth the risk.