

Press: "Painter Marcus Jahmal Doubles Down," by Scott Indrisek. Garage. September 15, 2019.

GARAGE

The artist, whose new show just opened at Almine Rech, counts Thom Browne, dice games, and his dog as inspirations.

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Marcus Jahmal, *Under Construction*, 2019, Acrylic on collage and wood panel. Photo: Matthew Kroening, Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Marcus Jahmal, 29, is proof that art world success doesn't have to come by the usual means. The young painter —a New York-native raised in and around Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, and now based in Bushwick —never went to art school, and hadn't even picked up a brush until his very late teens. Instead, he developed his chops as an assistant at the video game production company 4mm —creators of the karaoke-style DefJam Rapstar —where his boss and co-workers offered a sounding board for his earliest painterly efforts. Later, he'd pick up commercial gigs, like crafting enormous cityscape backdrops for a Cosmopolitan fashion shoot, all while pursuing his own practice at home. After early attempts to pitch his work to galleries, Jahmal relaxed, content to paint and post the efforts to Instagram. Playing harder to get paid off. CANADA got in touch, and Jahmal had his first solo show at the New York gallery in 2016, with interior scenes that all had a magical-realist bent: furniture flying, fire extinguishers spewing of their own accord.



"Mystical Forest Trooper," 2017, Acrylic on canvas. Photo: Matthew Kroening, Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Fast-forward a few years, and the self-taught artist just opened his latest solo show, "Double Down," at Almine Rech in New York. His style has morphed over that time, with vacant rooms traded for haunted-looking humans and evocative landscapes. Jahmal now counts David Hammons, Francis Bacon, Martin Kippenberger, Marsden Hartley, and Robert Colescott among his creative influences. The inspiration to bring the figure into the work came from a more unlikely source: Thom Browne's fall/winter 2012 runway show, in which the models strutted while wearing clunky sports gear ("I decided, let me steal that," Jahmal tells me, "and make these zombie football-player guys, walking through snow.") "Solid Ghosts," a 2018 exhibition at Almine Rech's outpost in Brussels, found the artist boldly borrowing multi-cultural imagery that he'd gleaned from sketching trips to museums in Rome, Paris, and New York. Every artifact was fair game

Throughout, a notion of community has been a constant. "A lot of the themes I'm interested in depicting are things that bring family together," Jahmal says. The interiors he favors are those that resemble the house he grew up in himself: "wood floors, very warm environments, very homey, moldings, and big iron radiators." The artist named a OM19 solo show in Brest, France "dumbo," after the communal meals that his great-grandmother used to cook in Brooklyn, having left her New Orleans Creole roots —and thirteen sisters —to start a new life in Brooklyn.



"Chocolate Genius," 2019, Acrylic on Canvas. Photo: Matthew Kroening, Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Now, he's continuing to sample from more personal places. Jahmal's dog, Ali, pops up in several of the works at Almine Rech. In one, Ali stands, proudly defiant, on the artist's bed. ("It's this fight for authority and masculinity," Jahmal says. "It's this push-pull between us. He does beat me a lot, but overall, I'll probably win the war.") "Double Down" is informed by Jahmal's own memories of being a kid growing up in Brooklyn. The popular phenomena of illegal dice games (and numerology sheets hawked at corner stores) became a metaphor for the artist to stretch and tease: notions of gambling and risk as they apply to the life of the artist. The goal? "To paint something familiar," he says, "and flip it on its head." Jahmal started by laying down depictions of recognizable objects in order to "have something to deface." In Uncle Sambo (2019), an anguished figure is built over the red and white stripes of the American flag. Elsewhere, dice are everywhere, being flung by angry men, or tumbling more discreetly across the canvas (as in Lovers, which features a couple, floating in an uncanny embrace over their bed). Chocolate Genius depicts a racehorse, running at full gallop, destined to make or break her bettors.

While Jahmal's recent subject matter is drawn from ideas of streetside gambling, as well as memories of family trips to Atlantic City, it's hard not to read a further subtext into these new paintings: a nod to how the art market itself gambles on fresh talent. Regardless, Jahmal seems to be floating above all that noise. "I want to paint things that haven't been painted before, in ways they haven't been painted," he says, simply. "I think there's still space for that."