

## How to 'self-divide' with precision and restraint?

Article by Li Xinyang

February 17, 2024

*Translated version*



Installation view of Marcus Jahmal's *Fragments*, Almine Rech Shanghai, February 2 — March 9, 2024 / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

The conversation with Marcus Jahmal took place two hours before the opening of his first solo exhibition in China and fifth solo collaboration with Almine Rech Gallery. In the interim of our scheduled talk, we took a stroll around the exhibition named *Fragments*, which, true to its title, did not attempt to tell a complete linear story but rather gave the impression of scattered slices of narratives. If the viewer was seeking clues, they may find within these fragments fierce dogs, suits, screaming tonsils, and cigarettes lit between the index and middle fingers. This array of subjects, however, is but one component used by the artist in order to achieve his creative goal: much more is hidden within the palette of colors and in Jahmal's compositions.

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Installation view of Marcus Jahmal's *Fragments*, Almine Rech Shanghai, February 2 — March 9, 2024 / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang



Marcus Jahmal, *Triplet*, 2023-2024 - Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist frame - 203.2 x 142.2 x 17.8 cm, 80 x 56 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

The dreamlike, heterochromatic eyes of animals and humans, the intersecting directions of motion, the irregular and slanted perspectives, and the canvas edges that abruptly stop *Fragments* at precise points while hinting at the extension of scenes beyond the frame, all entice the brain to actively adjust its

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Marcus Jahmal, *Triplet* (Detail), 2023-2024 - Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist frame - 203.2 x 142.2 x 17.8 cm, 80 x 56 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

visual logic and complete the image. As we tried to use rational associations to compare the paintings on-site with the artist's explicitly self-referential previous works (almost all of which were completed within the last two years), and to make links to artists like Martin Kippenberger, Phillip Guston and Karel Appel, the paintings fulfilled their “original habits” – they aimed to attract the audience, enchant them, and ultimately captivate them. (Michael Fried, 1980)

Arriving on time for our interview, Jahmal entered wearing a baseball cap and appearing somewhat shy, but his essence seemed to instantly complete the exhibition. The artist's older works “split” from the newer ones, and combined with the artist in-situ, formed a network of intersecting dimensions.

To paraphrase Jahmal, his work has become more refined. The paintings appear more restrained; Jahmal did not pursue realistic perspective and light effects but focused on harmony between figuration and abstraction. For example, the work *Triplet* (2023-24), which is primarily composed of three dogs facing the viewer, a stable triangular relationship supports most of the painting, with red paint occupying a third of the canvas. A small oval within this red area creates a pause in the rhythm of the painting, similar to a rest in music. The artist endeavors to connect with the viewer, their gaze follows moving slowly and orderly, the rhythm flows again passing across the suspended green lampshade's bulb, returning to a trio of dogs' noses, flattened and heart-shaped.

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Different colors collide and merge with each other; the use of complementary colors over large areas, although intense, reveals a restrained aspect upon closer inspection. For instance, the symmetrical standing dogs are painted in magenta, while to the left of the the canvas the door is bright red, and vermillion covers the round handle; all echoing shades of red. The same goes for the blues on the canvas; Jahmal outlines to the sky-blue dog with navy, while the edges of the two magenta dogs are lake-blue, with different shades of blue used in the lampshade as well. Two protruding legs and the chin of the dog in the foreground line form a navy-blue triangle that corresponds to the triangular relationship mentioned earlier. Jahmal uses a method of nesting circles, repeating with slight variations to express rhythm.



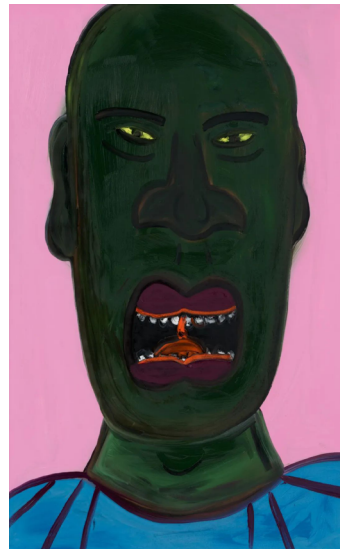
Marcus Jahmal, *Midnight Smoke*, 2023-2024 - Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist frame - 203.2 x 142.2 x 17.8 cm, 80 x 56 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

This method was also applied in the painting *Midnight Smoke* (2023-24). The base tone is set by a large area of orange-pink, while the green of the chair's backrest and the yellow correspond with the colors inside and outside the lampshade, respectively, and the purple-pink lips are remotely connected to the purple on the ground. In between, the white of the vest and the white lines of smoke create tension, and this dynamic white line finally draws our gaze towards the brightness of the light bulb.

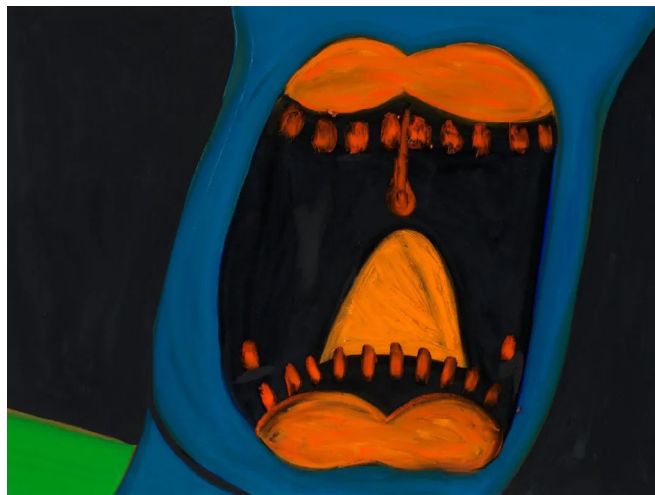


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Marcus Jahmal, *Rage*, 2023-2024 -  
Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist  
frame - 142.2 x 96.5 x 17.8 cm, 56  
x 38 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal -  
Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica



Marcus Jahmal, *Screamer*, 2023-2024 - Oil and Oil stick on canvas in  
artist frame - 96.5 x 121.9 x 17.8 cm, 38 x 48 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal  
- Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

Looking around the entire gallery space, the rhythm formed by color and composition on individual canvases naturally links together. This is particularly true for *Rage* and *Screamer*, as well as *Midnight Smoke* and *Guston's Hand*, which correspond to each other in pairs, as if the latter in each pair is enlarged and split from the former. While discussing this sort of permeating relationship between the works, Jahmal took out his phone to me photos of his studio in Brooklyn where various-sized paintings haphazardly hang on a wall. He said, “I always have several paintings up in the studio, and then I look and think until I see what to do next. I like to switch back and forth between a few pieces of work.”

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According to John Milton, God created man in his own image out of a desire not to be alone. The famous “Hand of God” from Guston’s painting *The Line* (1978) descends and becomes the hand holding a cigarette in Jahmal’s *Guston’s Hand*. The figures born under the artist’s brush, whether they are humans or animals, might all be avatars of the artist himself.

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Marcus Jahmal



Portrait of Marcus Jahmal, 2021 / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech

**Q: Describe the exhibition in three words.**

A: Bold, Dreamy, Vulnerable.

**Q: The new works exhibited relate closely to your work from the past two years, such as *Midnight Smoke* (2023-24) and *Evening Smoke* (2022). Why reference previous works?**

A: It stems from a thought: I wanted to get closer to contemplate my previous creations. In the process of zooming in, colors and details are changing, and sometimes even the theme changes. There are no specific rules, the only similarity is that they all start with self-reference. When this series of works reached a certain stage, I found this approach conceptually very interesting. Overall, I’m exploring the possibility of past works morphing into new images.

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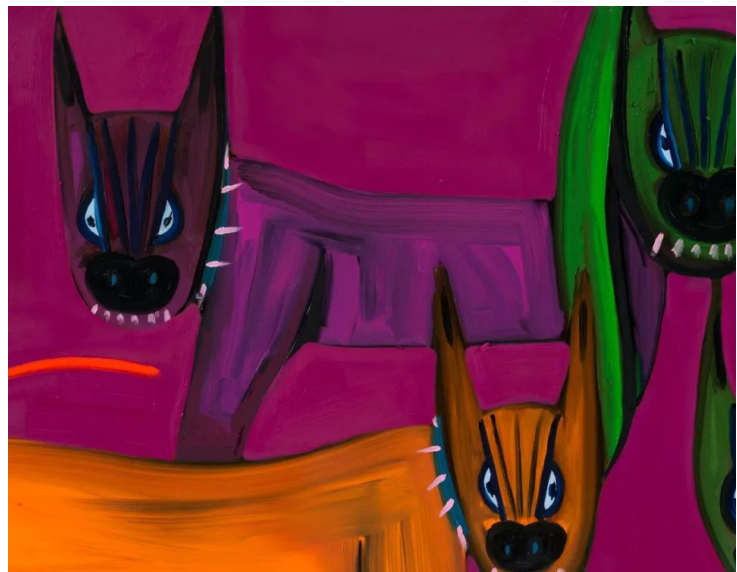
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Installation view of Marcus Jahmal's *Fragments*, Almine Rech Shanghai, February 2 — March 9, 2024 / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

**Q: Are the characters depicted in your paintings based on real-life models? And what about the angry dogs?**

A: These characters are self-portraits from a parallel dimension, as well as people and animals I have encountered. Those dogs have also appeared repeatedly in my dreams; they look ferocious, but once I try to interact with them, they become very friendly. This reminds me of the prejudices in human society, where encountering someone very different from oneself often leads to preconceived notions, but these ideas can be entirely wrong.



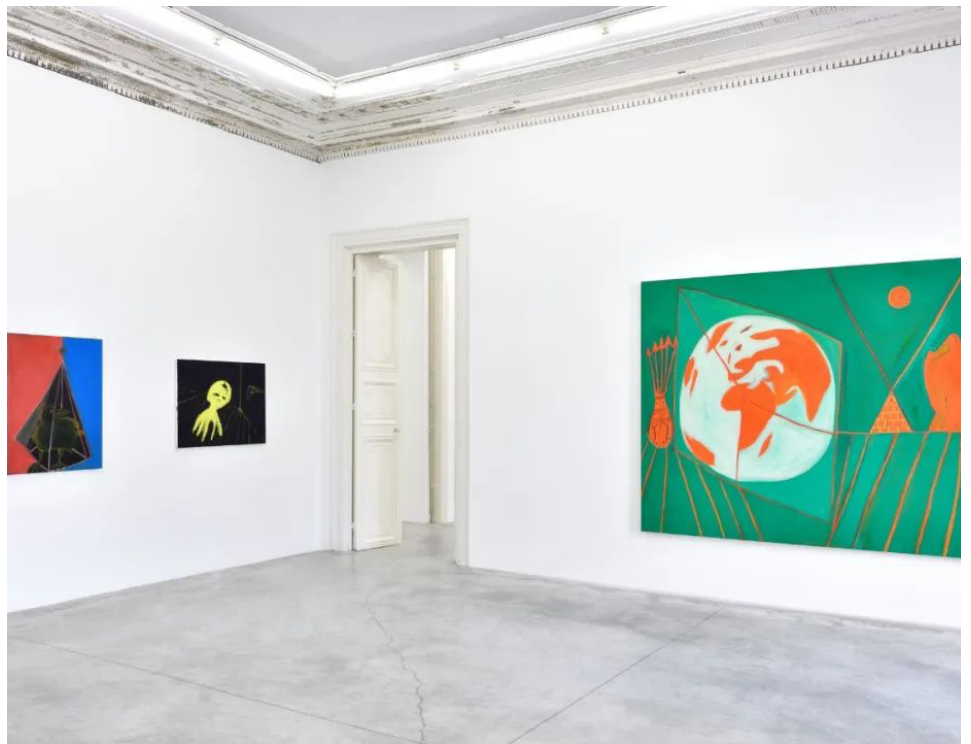
Marcus Jahmal, *Dog composition*, 2023-2024 - Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist frame - 96.5 x 121.9 x 17.8 cm, 38 x 48 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

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**Q: Would you describe your work as personal?**

A: It's somewhere between the personal and the worldly. I think almost all art is personal on some level, undergoing a process of transformation to reach a point where anyone can connect with it. My work is perhaps in the midst of this process.



Installation view of Marcus Jahmal's *New Religion*, Almine Rech Paris, April 15 — May 29, 2021 / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Rebecca Fanuele

**Q: The overall color scheme of this exhibition is very special. Do you usually choose colors intuitively? Do these colors have special meanings? I noticed that your last two solo exhibitions – *New Religion* (2021) in Paris and *Spiral* (2022) in London – both had relatively clear color uniformity, and color played an important role.**

A: For the works in this exhibition, I chose colors intuitively, but I didn't use a wide variety of colors because I didn't want to stray too far from the specific emotions I wanted to convey through color. Those emotions are indescribable in words; perhaps psychologists could help us understand all this.



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Installation view of Marcus Jahmal at *Spiral*, Almine Rech London, April 7 — May 14, 2022 / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Melissa Castro Duarte

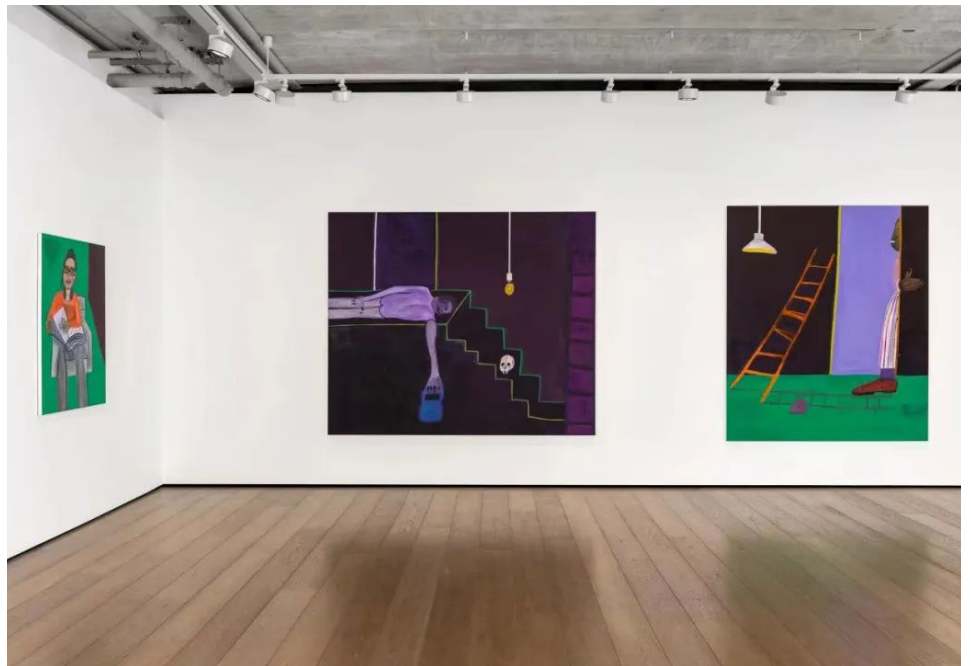


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Q: Why did you reference Philip Guston’s *The Line* in your work *Hand of Guston* (2023-24)?

A: It was a coincidence. When I was painting it, I actually referred to an old painting I created in 2022 – from which I enlarged and extracted the image of the hand. One day, looking at the painting, I suddenly felt it resembled Guston’s *The Line*, and then I laughed to myself and decided to name it *Hand of Guston*. It wasn’t intentional, but his influence crept in.



Installation view of Marcus Jahmal's *Spiral*, Almine Rech London, April 7 — May 14, 2022 / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Melissa Castro Duarte



Marcus Jahmal, *Hand of Guston*, 2023-2024 - Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist frame - 142.2 x 96.5 x 17.8 cm, 56 x 38 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

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**Q: What role does the use of oil sticks play in your paintings?**

A: Oil sticks are tools with an immediate quality, allowing me to express quickly, whether in drawing or filling color. After using oil sticks, I usually smooth out the hand-drawn traces with a brush. The sticky, thick texture of the oil sticks interacts interestingly with the softer feel of tube oil paint.

**Q: Your work has been described as 'filtered realism.' What do you think of this characterization?**

A: I think it's a relatively broad way to describe the composition of the work because what I create is neither surrealism nor expressionism, yet it presents clues to real life and actual situations through a somewhat flattened perspective.



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**Q: Tell us about your painting process. Do you plan your compositions based on sketches in advance, or does the entire work evolve naturally bit by bit?**

A: A lot of thinking goes into my work before I start painting. My creation stems from repeated contemplation, continuous observation, and noticing what's missing—things overlooked due to a particular perspective, or elements that are missing in my own paintings or within the genre of painting itself. It's like a response to the Zeitgeist. Once I start painting, I allow chance and coincidence to intervene, layering the composition until I'm satisfied.

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**Q:** I have some more personal questions to ask you. This is your first solo exhibition in China; how does it feel?

**A:** It's something I could never have imagined when I first started painting —my work coming to such a distant place. I think this exhibition is a great start; it's very succinct, and the message is clear. I look forward to seeing how the audience interacts with my work. At the same time, I know there are some great art institutions around the gallery, which makes me feel like I'm part of the conversation here.



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**Q:** Besides New York, which other places have influenced your artistic practice?

**A:** I reflect on my family history. As a fourth-generation New Yorker, it can be hard to see beyond New York. But as an artist, you delve into where you come from, and my ancestors once lived in New Orleans, Texas, and Puerto Rico. The culture in these places is quite different from New York, and I imagine their lives there. Additionally, as an artist, I get opportunities to visit places with rich histories, and the influence of these places accompanies me back to my studio.

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Marcus Jahmal, *Royal Appointment*, 2023-2024 - Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist frame - 203.2 x 142.2 x 17.8 cm, 80 x 56 x 7 in / © Marcus Jahmal - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

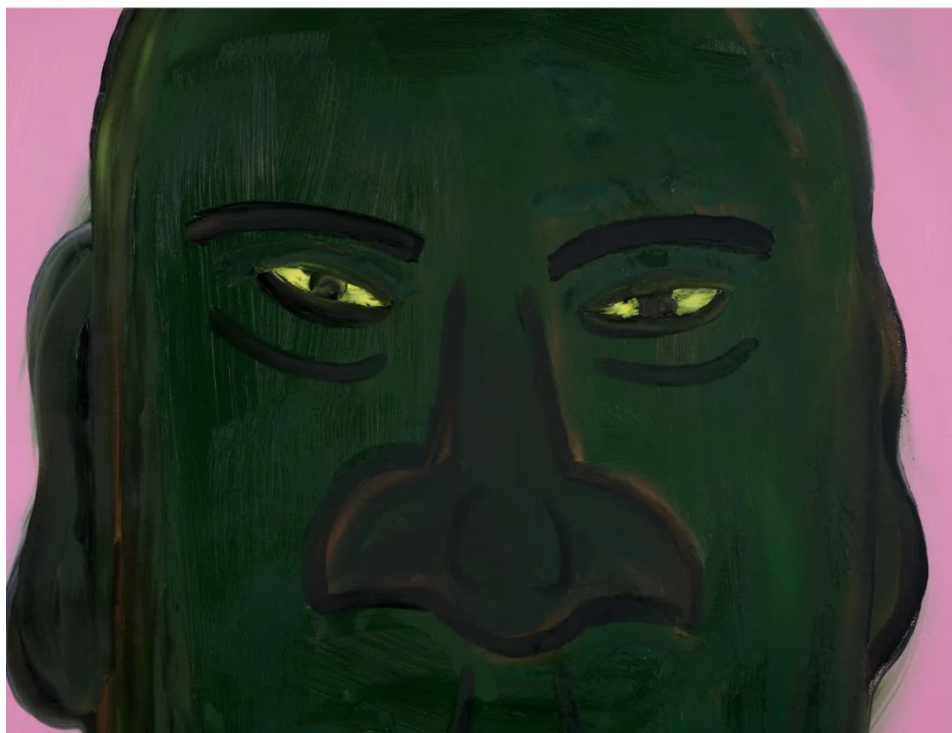
**Q:** Looking back from the present, how do you view the works you’ve created so far?

**A:** To me, I’ve been painting the same things from the start, only they’ve become more refined over time, but the information, references, and quotations have also become richer. There’s always a recognizable scene or theme in my paintings, whether it’s an interior, a landscape, a portrait, or animals. Recently, more allegories and richer layers have appeared in my works. The surface of the paintings you see is just the beginning.

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*Rage*, 2023-2024 (detail)  
Oil and Oil stick on canvas in artist frame  
121.9 x 76.2 cm 48 x 30 in



**MARCUS JAHMAL**  
**FRAGMENTS**

**马库斯·哲马尔**  
**片段**

**2.2.24 — 3.9.24**

**ALMINE RECH**