

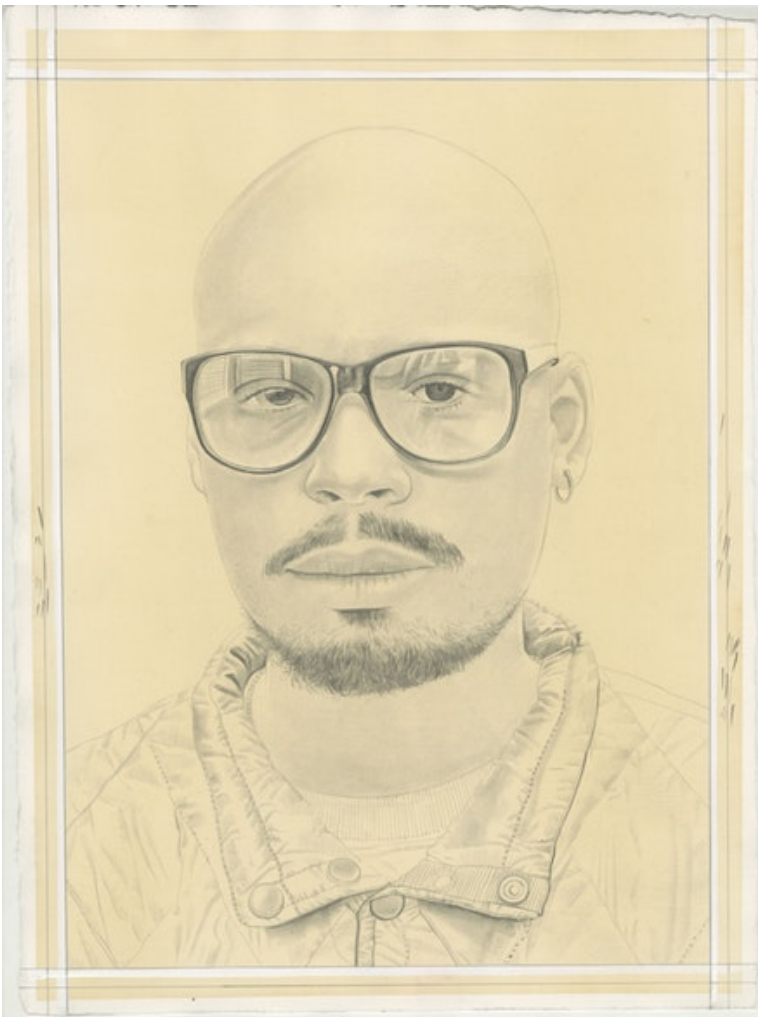
Press: "Marcus Jahmal with Louis Block," by Louis Block. The Brooklyn Rail. June 2019.

BROOKLYN RAIL

Art **INCONVERSATION**

MARCUS JAHMAL with Louis Block

JUNE 2019



Portrait of Marcus Jahmal, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

To enter Marcus Jahmal's Bushwick home and studio, I squeeze past a giant canvas leaning against the hallway stairs—a sunset through an open window, stratified like sand art in a vase, its horizon pulled apart into infinite variations, infinite color. The home studio is stuffed with work, evidence of the restless energy with which he paints.



Marcus Jahmal, *Reverse Migrate*, 2017. Diptych, Oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 96 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech.

A Brooklyn native and a self-taught artist, Jahmal has a multi-faceted approach to his practice, having exhibited interiors, landscapes, figural and abstract paintings—as well as sculptures—all within the past three years. We tour the studio and its overflow into the rest of the house. On the canvases: demi-gods, skeletons, cops, a man in deep contemplation on a tree stump, an upside-down chair buffeted by the wind of a desk fan, models in chic attire. I focus on a vacant interior, its walls bleeding rainbow swatches from the ceiling. Unstretched canvases are stacked haphazardly on the floor. Marcus hands me a book, its cover concealed by impasto fingerprints in multicolor paint—it is Federico Fellini’s *Book of Dreams*.

Louis Block (Rail): How did you find out about Fellini’s dream drawings?

Marcus Jahmal: When I was 19 I was working at a video game development company directly under the Chief Creative Officer, and his job was to produce “high” ideas, new game concepts. The work was very fluid and entailed a lot of research and looking beyond gaming to the arts, to architecture, and to integrate that back into video games. It was a very immersive position that allowed me to explore all these different facets. He had Lichtenstein posters on his wall and Eames chairs all over his office—I didn’t know about any of that stuff before I worked there. One of my tasks was to order research books, which is how I came across Fellini’s *Book of Dreams*. I knew that he was a filmmaker but not that he was an illustrator and that he wrote his dreams out. I ordered it for them and I was just blown away.

Rail: Were you interested in the connection to the unconscious? Getting pictures out of the dreams?

Jahmal: I was trying to figure out how he could remember his dreams so vividly, because usually we can hardly remember our dreams, and they are mostly in black and white. It was interesting to see all of that color, and think about that place of origin for making images.

Later, as the company started to phase out and they were laying everyone off, my boss at the time let me know that he was going to lay me off, and started apologizing. I said, "Well can I at least have the Fellini book?" [Laughter] and he let me have it. I had already begun painting around that time, so I felt like it was heaven-sent, this book—just perfect timing, references for me to see and a lot of color as well.

Rail: What led you to work at a video game company? Were you drawn to the interactive and storytelling aspects of gaming?

Jahmal: I grew up playing video games, and so when I got the opportunity to work behind the scenes at a development company, I was completely thrilled. I had an internship at a music company that shared office space with the game company. We kept bumping into each other around the office and one day Jamie, the CCO, asked me to work for him. Since I wasn't getting paid at the other company it was a no brainer. I didn't know where it would lead me, but I was curious and optimistic. It's funny, I stopped playing games at that time. [Laughs] The function of video games got replaced—to see the inner workings of that world made me not want to use it as a form of entertainment anymore. We would have to have these "high" ideas and try to push them as far as creatively possible. Once we had a preliminary deck down, the production department would tell us what was actually realistic and possible to execute. I learned a lot about compartmentalization then, how separate moving parts all come together to make a final product come to fruition. Painting isn't like that—it's something that you can conceptualize and execute on your own. Painting also allowed me to execute an idea without relying on digital technology and its constraints.

Rail: You said you had already been painting for a little while when you were working at that job?

Jahmal: Yes, it was right between Flatiron and Chelsea, so it encouraged me to walk over to the galleries, something I wouldn't have done otherwise. That area was just so accessible at that point, it opened me up to art and painting in that kind of context. Growing up, my visual appetite consisted of cartoons dealing with a lot of color, comic books, and video games. Now that I'm painting, I feel like I can't watch cartoons anymore, I can't play video games, I can't do anything else with intense color, if that makes sense.

Rail: It does, it's exhausting to be that saturated all the time.

Jahmal: Especially surrounding myself and living with the work.

Rail: Who were some of the painters you were looking at?

Jahmal: At the beginning, it was all about the '80s painters for me, Neo-Expressionists, Clemente, Basquiat, Schnabel, and then the German painters, Baselitz, Lupertz, and the likes. That radical return to painting caught my eye. I would go to the Brooklyn Museum all the time—it was right in my neighborhood. I remember the Keith Haring retrospective, the Murakami show, the Basquiat show—it was so accessible. The Brooklyn Museum introduced me to a lot of painting.

Rail: What kind of work were you making after leaving the video game company?

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Jahmal: I had time to make work. I was just living with the bare minimum, and I would do odd jobs to make a little bit of money to buy supplies. The things I was making at that time were naïve and derivative of some artists I was inspired by. There was an artist at the game company named Alexander Reyna, who had a studio in Red Hook. I needed a critique so I rolled up some canvases I had been working on and brought them to his studio. [Laughter.] He bluntly told me that they looked too much like Basquiat. It was this kind of naïve approach to painting that made me feel at home—it felt like hip-hop. And the subjects were things and people I was familiar with. That was the turning point when my work began to change and I started to study more art movements—within this, finding my own voice.

Rail: What kind of materials were you using?

Jahmal: Mixed media: acrylic, oil sticks, spray paint, markers.

Rail: Were you in contact with other artists at the time?

Jahmal: Aside from Reyna, I met the artist Hugo McCloud, who had just moved to Brooklyn from California. He had a studio in Bushwick and was working on large abstract paintings made from roofing materials, working with a torch. He embraced me as a mentee and I would visit his studio and see his process—it was just totally radical what he was, and still is, doing. He's also a self-taught artist. A year or two later, I'd go on to actually assist him for a few months so I could make some extra money to buy some materials. We're still good friends now.

Rail: We talked the other day about drawing versus painting in your process, and you consider them very differently. The drawing isn't necessarily a sketch for a finished painting—they're two separate avenues. Maybe a good way to think about this is to consider the different speeds of the work, the speed of the development.

Jahmal: Obviously, drawing is much quicker. Usually I make four or five drawings within a session. With painting, I work on a bunch of paintings at once: I'll get them going in the same room and they'll all inform each other, so it's a longer process, it takes months to do. I see the drawings as independent from the paintings, I can't say I consider any of my drawings to be maquettes. They both inform each other, though. Paintings can come out of drawings, or vice versa.

Rail: The backgrounds in your works are so abstract and colorful. I'm thinking of the painting *Confrontation* (2017)—the negative space between the figures is as active as the figures and just as powerful.

Jahmal: Totally, that was intended. That was a painting I made when I felt like my last love relationship was coming to an end. The patches of color surrounding the two figures exposes the tension between us in real life. The color takes on the role of setting the mood and tone. The background in the work goes on to narrate the subjects, not the other way around.

Rail: Do you begin with the background?

Jahmal: Yes, but lately I've been completely painting out the backgrounds with one color, allowing the figure to exist on its own without so many hints. I'm always thinking of abstracting something, either physically or conceptually. It's like I'm hiding the intent of the painting more and more. But the backgrounds start first, and then the figure gets built up out of the background, further informing the mood once again.



Marcus Jahmal, *Black and blue*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Zach Krall.



Marcus Jahmal, *Confrontation*, 2017. Oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech

Rail: A lot of the paintings have narrative elements, but they are more like clues. Do the paintings come out of stories, or are they creating their own narratives in the process?

Jahmal: The latter, but I would say I'm not so interested in storytelling. I'm more interested in depicting movement—not in the way of, for example, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*—but in a more suggested way. They seem to be going somewhere, leaving you in a state of questioning, very similar to a film still.

Rail: They do seem frozen at a climactic moment. Multiple things could happen but you don't know what. The early interiors didn't always have figures in them.

Jahmal: No, I wanted it to feel as if someone had just passed through the space, but wasn't present at the moment.

Rail: In some of the interiors, there are also more surreal elements. I'm thinking particularly of *The blaze putting itself out* (2016), where fire extinguishers are spraying on their own, and there's also a radiator—

Jahmal: Yes, those are kind of funny puns of figuration. I was making figures without making human figures. I was focusing on drawing still life objects. I was particularly drawn to the fire extinguisher for its color, the shape, how it sprays something out—I thought that was really interesting—I love depicting smoke and gas in paint, so it was a motif that allowed me to practice all of my interests at once. It has this red but also it always has a label with little instructional figures, so that was a way of creating painting within painting, these small odes to figuration.

Rail: The fire extinguisher and the radiator especially seem to have so many elements that can be anthropomorphized, like the nozzle as mouth, or the ribcage, elements that seem human.

Jahmal: Right, and radiators have steam that comes from them. So that's how I would choose my subjects—they had to have a certain number of elements involved. Even though it might seem surreal, I'm searching for reality. No matter what I do, my version of what is real is going to be singular, since I'm not traditionally trained.

Rail: How did the first show at Five Myles come about?

Jahmal: Five Myles is in Prospect Heights, where I grew up. I went there and met Hanne Tierney, the founder. We talked outside of the space, and I invited her to my studio. When she came by the next week and saw the paintings in progress, she said, "We need to show these right away," and gave me a show date a few months after that. They were interior scenes on plexiglass. At the time I was rejecting traditional painting surfaces.

It was amazing because my grandmother still lives up there, so she was able to just walk over to the show along with a lot of other family members. The opening was basically all my family!
[Laughter.]

Rail: That's great! You had mentioned musicians in your family, and growing up making music.

Jahmal: My grandfather was a jazz trumpeter. He was from Galveston, Texas originally but he had the opportunity to travel the world to play with B.B. King. He got booked to play at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, and that's when he brought my grandmother, my dad, and his brothers and sisters up to New York. A friend had a connection in Prospect Heights for an apartment, so they got a lease and lived there. But then my grandfather kept moving; he went to Germany after that to play, and wound up starting a whole new life and having kids. My grandmother was strong enough to stay in New York as a single mom with three kids, and she wound up getting a good job at a bank, and they survived. That's why I'm in New York in the first place, because of music.

Jazz just wasn't the thing for a young kid growing up in Brooklyn, it was hip-hop, and that's what I would hear in the street, that's what my dad would play, so I was a total hip-hop head. Hip-hop of the 90s was a strong period and was the theme music of the inner city streets. It resonated heavily with me. I wanted to be involved in that world, to produce and make beats, compositions for the rappers or singers or poets to use as a background for their vocals. But around that time [2010s], it had turned all digital, things were changing, it wasn't analog anymore. I was searching for something more fulfilling. I get turned off by digital technology and the way it lacks a human feeling, that can get in the way of creating. So I'm trying to escape to something analog—

Rail: And we're sitting in front of this painting in progress that has musical notation on it.

Jahmal: Yes, it's sheet music. It's always making its way into the practice, one way or another, in this particular case it's sheet music, but when I was painting still lifes, I would paint instruments as well, which have references to the body. Also, I like to equate my use of color with a replacement for the urge that I had to create those musical melodies and compositions. The intuitive use of color—the way I use the brush and place colors next to each other—is in a way my musical inclination coming out visually.



Marcus Jahmal, *VooDoo floater*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech.

Rail: You also had a series of sculptures that used drums as part of the composition.

Jahmal: I wanted to create a body for these vintage mannequin wig heads that I found on Etsy. I thought they were really fascinating readymade objects in the shape of a head, and made out of canvas. They're so versatile, the way I can paint on them, I can stick things in them, like map pins, and personify them, but then they need a body. One day, I had the drum sitting there, I had the head there, and I combined them. I'm thinking about how I'm taking something musical like the drum and giving it a new function; to be taken in visually, recontextualizing it just by simply turning it upside down—it changes so much.

Rail: It draws attention to the similarities that it shares with human proportions once you turn it upside down.

Jahmal: The heads had no expression—that's where I came in. These materials used for purposes unrelated to art are perfect catalysts to bring out my ideas about the human condition and the body.

Rail: I also wanted to talk about the imagery—some of it seems automatic, but in the works you showed in Brussels there are some figures that are placed in the desert or in a wide open landscape. How is that imagery encountered?

Jahmal: I took a trip to Samana Province in the Dominican Republic for a month, to rejuvenate, and I had time and space living in nature. This allowed me to start intuitively laying color down in a landscape format, since I had been painting interior scenes prior. The figures came out of my interest in the paranormal and the stretching of reality.

Rail: In some of these works, you were focusing on animal life, some of them are even like humans with animal heads.

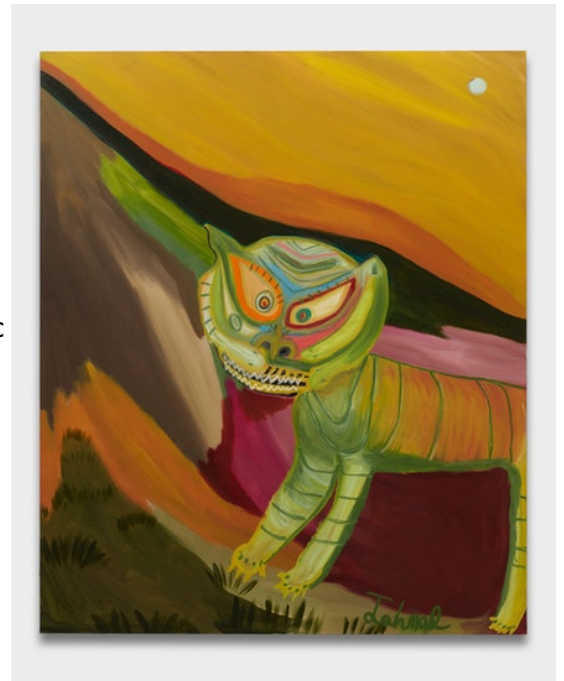
Jahmal: Totally. I wanted to explore the connection that all life has and to play down the notion of human superiority to animals, and how this ideology could be transmuted into a picture. I drafted these figures morphing from human to animal form.

Rail: They are reminiscent of mythological influences, but there aren't overt references to anything specific.

Jahmal: They go through a filtration process as well: I'll take the inspiration in and then I'll play around with it. In this particular instance, this face on the subject here, it came from an Asian dragon mask, and then from there I created a series of works on paper where I kept tweaking it a little bit and making different variations of the mask. Once I had that middle process of works on paper, then I created several paintings with the same dragon reference, and it eventually became a tiger, so in that case it's like a filtration process.

Rail: And you see how it has morphed because of the process that it went through. This might be a good time to talk about the motif that's right underneath this painting, the iron fence, which is in a lot of the recent paintings.

Jahmal: The ironwork is one of those things that sits in everyone's subconscious and exists in the visual landscape of New York, New Orleans, and all throughout France. I first consciously came across it when I moved to Bushwick.



Marcus Jahmal, *Gato Salvaje*, 2018. Oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech.

Rail: You see it everywhere just walking down the street.

Jahmal: They're fascinating. I have a dog that I'm taking for three walks a day and he taught me to walk slowly without any particular place to go. These fences stood out to me because the designs were very reminiscent of plants, and this motif of the ironwork was something that I felt connected several cultures: New Orleans culture, where my mom's family is from, French culture, and the local culture here in Brooklyn. I wouldn't say there are many things like that in the world, that have this kind of triangular connection. It speaks of conquest and the spreading of culture. In that way, I felt it was a strong subject. Recently, I had a studio visit with a friend, of French and African ethnicity, and after seeing the work, she told me the French would bring in African slaves who were very skilled at working with iron, to have them design and build these ironwork gates, but at the same time they would have them build their own shackles, so that connection was really potent to me. Just looking at it, I can feel all that history and geography.



Marcus Jahmal, *Venus*, 2019. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Zach Krall.

Rail: Even looking at this skeleton here with the bare ribcage and thinking about the bare trees in the paintings, there is this repetition of things that are empty yet seem to hold a lot of weight conceptually. The tree stumps as well—

Jahmal: I'm referencing things that are crude to focus on the beauty within the seemingly obscure. I'm not interested in beauty in the more obvious way, for example, a tree heavily vegetated with colorful leaves. I'm more interested in the ephemeral quality of the bareness of a tree that will no doubt change.

Rail: These most recent paintings will be included in your upcoming show in France, at the Passerelle Centre d'art contemporain in Brest, but I know that you will have time to work on the paintings there in the space. What are your plans for completing the work once you're there?

Jahmal: Once I'm there, I'm going to focus on the painting as object. I'm taking wood panels off the wall and then building steel legs for them. I don't have an exact plan for what the paintings will be image-wise, but the structures will form a sort of ballet in the space. It's interesting to work on a double sided panel, you'll have to move around in the space in order to see all the sides, which engages with the spectator much differently than a wall painting. In fact, the works will feel like walls themselves.

Rail: And a lot of the paintings with the ironwork in them are going to France. They will be going to the place where those forms originated.

Jahmal: True, but it went through a lot of filtration.

Rail: Do you think about the audience for the work in a particular place, what the imagery will mean to them?

Jahmal: I'm usually acting upon my own impulses and research when it comes to an exhibition. In this case, I am working with a curator. This allows me to focus on the body of work and the curator, Loïc Le Gall, will help with contextualizing and choosing precisely from works out of the studio. It's great to alleviate those duties and have a second eye, especially with someone who is knowledgeable about the area of Brittany. It's a contemporary art center, but it's really focused on building awareness of its local artists and local history of the area, so it's very interesting to merge my ideas and intuition and aesthetic value with the history in that area. That's why I can't plan too much of the work that is going to be made there.

Rail: And you'll be making the pieces in the same space that they'll be displayed in—that will inform them.

Jahmal: Especially since the work I'm making there will mostly be suspended in space as opposed to hanging on the wall. There will be paintings hanging as well, but they were mostly made in New York. Paintings will also hang in the corridor outside of the actual exhibition room. The corridor has a skylight that stretches over the whole building and a large rectangular hole in the middle that leads to the ground floor. Both rooms are breathtaking.

Rail: Where were you before this studio?

Jahmal: I was in Ridgewood, before that Bed-Stuy, before that Crown Heights, so I've had many studios in Brooklyn and Queens. My Ridgewood studio was a large loft with 12 panel windows—so a lot of natural light, but I wanted to live with the work, and now I have north light. This is a pre-war house that has been renovated to keep its original aesthetic, and the ceilings are really high. I have a yard now for the dog, and for painting outside during the warmer months. This will be my first time working in Europe.



Marcus Jahmal, *Crab Charmer*, 2019. Acrylic and spray paint on double sided panel with painted steel legs, 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Margaux Germain.

Rail: And the space is almost all the way on the tip of Brittany, there are wide open landscapes there.

Jahmal: That's true, I visited there a few weeks ago, and we went to the coast, the Pointe de Pen-Hir, where there are these gigantic cliffs with crashing water. Étienne Bernard, the current director at Passerelle, showed us around. One thing I noticed, particularly in that area of France, is that you can't really tell when you're approaching the coastline. The way the vegetation is growing, it seems like you're still inland: the grass is super green, there are still trees, that's what makes it beautiful. That's kind of particular about that place, because usually when you get close to the coast or the water, everything starts becoming more brown, just less vegetated in general.

Rail: You also have a show this fall at Almine Rech—do you have a body of work in mind for that, or do you think it will stem out of what you're doing now?

Jahmal: I'm very excited about that, because it's been three years since I've shown in New York. The gallery spaces on the Upper East Side are more intimate, in old residential buildings.

Rail: You can usually tell that you're in what used to be the bedroom or the kitchen.

Jahmal: Right, and I'm working out of a residential place too. The show in New York will be personal. Being a native New Yorker, I feel inclined to dig and present a side of the city that's peculiar to a pre-gentrification era. It feels like a duty to keep the feeling of community alive in some way. The work will reflect this conceptual framework



Installation view: Marcus Jahmal: Gumbo, CAC Passerelle, Brest, 2019. Courtesy the artist and CAC Passerelle.

Rail: Do you have titles for the shows yet?

Jahmal: The name of the show in France is Gumbo. The title is presented as a signifier, in this case specific to New Orleans, where the dish finds its origin. Creole people themselves are very mixed, because Creole is French, African, and Native American. In fact, they were the first people from New Orleans to open up theaters and operas. They brought a lot of creativity to that part of the world. Figures like Fats Domino and Robert Colescott were Creole. Having all these cultures embedded in you, and how you can channel these things to inspire others is something to embrace and harness

Rail: Do you remember the first time you painted?

Jahmal: A friend bought me some supplies, a couple tubes of paint and some paper, I had asked for them as a Christmas gift. In 2010, we had a bad blizzard, and it forced me to stay inside—I had nothing else to do but start painting.

Over time, I actually got my practice in and earned my stripes. That muscle memory is very important. Even now, I make a painting and it will just be a totally intuitive gestural abstract background. It's just so natural—moving the brush in a specific way, mixing colors. Whether I'm painting interiors or landscapes or pure abstractions, that intuition is going to remain consistent. It's the thread that ties everything together.

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Installation view: Marcus Jahmal: Gumbo, CAC Passerelle, Brest, 2019. Courtesy the artist and CAC Passerelle.