Family Portrait

Photographer Lyle Ashton Harris confronts convention

December 1, 1994 By Johnetta A. Alston

Lyle Ashton Harris is not one to shy away from much of anything -- especially a camera. His latest show, *The Good Life*, prominently displays self-portraits in the flamboyant and grandiose style for which Harris is famous. That in-your-face style takes center stage in “Toussaint L’Ouverture” where we find Harris seated on a throne as if holding court, elaborately adorned in a plumed hat, costume and full makeup. The image of Harris as L’Ouverture is half 18th-century Haitian liberator and general, half vogueing 1990s drag queen. But then the HIV positive artist frequently forces us to address the issues of his ethnicity and gay sexuality in his photography.

Addressing issues seems more important to Harris than the particular issues being discussed, even when it comes to AIDS: “I’m ambivalent about death, sex, prevention.... I think there needs to be more work, more disclosure. A lot of my friends are dying. I guess what pisses me off most is [that] not enough people account for the full complexity of their lives to the point of talking about it. I’m tired of anger, let’s do the work. Let’s document what’s happening and hold people accountable for their experiences.”

With the addition of a new theme, family, Harris’ own latest work attempts to better reflect the full complexity of his life. *The Good Life* is billed as Harris’ first solo show in New York City -- yet not all the photographs in the show are his. Sharing the gallery with Harris’ often life-size photographs are an equal number of family snapshots. The smaller photographs are by Harris’ grandfather, Albert Sydney Johnson Jr., whom he credits for laying the groundwork for his love of photography.

Because much of Harris’ inspiration had come from his family, he says it was strange for him as a young art student to find that many of his peers believed they had to sever ties with their families in order to find their identity. “I never hid the fact that I was close to my family but, in a certain sense, when I would talk about them, it would always be met by very awkward responses.” It was often difficult for him to make people understand how “clearly grounded in the structure of family” he is. But that effort for him has always been a “pleasurable, elegant exertion,” a phrase he uses to describe his work in the show as we talk at the gallery.

"Historically, people of African descent have had extended families, extended communities and a lot of unconditional love. Through my work I am dispelling the myths that African-Americans have a harder time with acceptance. *The Good Life* is an ironic critique of those myths.“ The show takes

a long, hard look at love in its many dimensions: Love of family, as we see the many photos of relatives; love of self, as clearly indicated in the many self-portraits; and romantic love, as witnessed in ”Tommy and Lyle, Vancouver, Washington."

“Tommy and Lyle” gathers all these types of love together in one frame as they coexist in one life. The photograph shows Harris and his “soulmate” Tommy standing nude in a bedroom as reflected in a mirror. Standing on the dresses below the mirror are framed family photographs. The viewer can hardly escape contemplation of the overlap of familial, romantic and self-love.

While studying ad the University of California Los Angeles, Harris gained a particular appreciation for the importance of overlapping issues when he met Dr. Vicki Mays, head of a project called Black Care Community AIDS Research Education. “This was a turning point for me in terms of making me deal with the impact of AIDS on men of African descent. What came out of [Dr. Mays’] study was that most of the men had never had proper health care or been in a hospital before. It challenged my own misconceptions of these men because it wasn’t just about HIV and AIDS, but just one problem compounded by a whole set of other issues.”

Or perhaps one life with HIV compounded by a whole set of other issues.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Family-Portrait-16572-2147