



JUST BEYOND THE RIVER

THE PAST FLOWS THROUGH THE WORK OF DAESHA DEVÓN HARRIS

BY AMY GODINE

THE ARTIST

Daesha Devón Harris doesn't wait around for inspiration. She looks for it; she brings it home. She takes it from memories of family picnics at Moreau Lake and Fish Creek near Saratoga Springs, where she grew up. From black folktales, slave narratives, poems of the

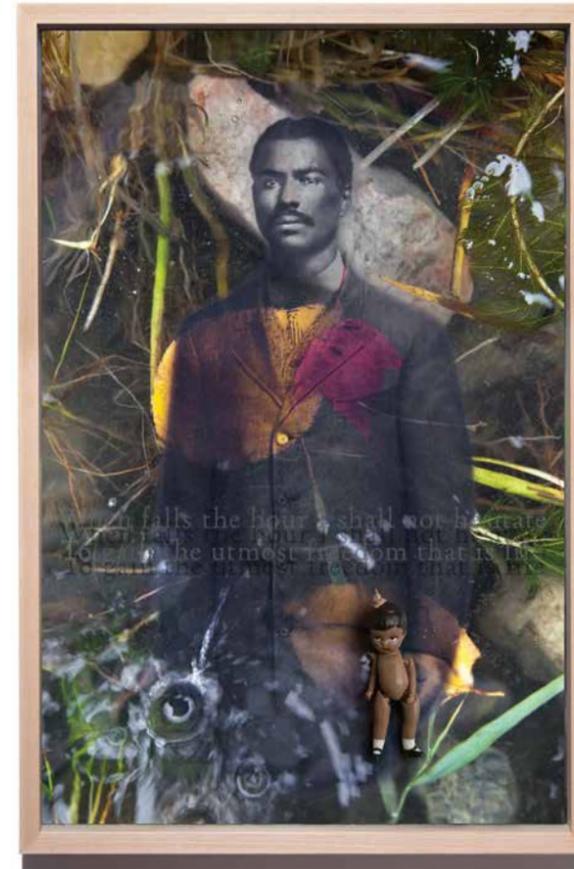
Harlem Renaissance, and the story of Timbucto, an antebellum black settlement in North Elba she discovered in an exhibition at the John Brown farm. These influences inform her sense of mission as lushly as springs refresh a stream, and you can see them pulsing in her art as well, especially in her recent solo exhibition, *Just Beyond the River: A Folktale*, in the Courthouse Gallery at the Lake George Arts Project.

It's not what Harris knows, however, but what she doesn't know that seems to bring the most delight. Harris's attraction to stories of loss and disruption from black America is more than keen, it's compelled. In the Lake George show, for instance, several ethereally tinted photo-dyed silk hangings feature young people in water, moving, running, turning fast. Who are they? We see bodies and bare feet stamping up white clouds of sand, but no heads, no faces. They're cropped out. The subject here is energy and action, but it's all in hiding, undercover. Water is a refuge. Are they escaping? Are they fugitives? The thought is no great stretch in the context of this show; the 16-some mixed-media portraits on the gallery walls show black Americans no more than one or two generations out of slavery. And like the running figures on the banners, they are youthful (mostly), and unnamed.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DAESHA DEVÓN HARRIS



The artist at work on *Just Beyond the River*, a series of mixed-media portraits. Facing page and page 39: Images from the series. Page 38: A piece from a related series, *One More River to Cross*.



Harris, an eager scavenger, finds vintage photographs—cabinet portraits, cartes de visites and the like—in flea markets and antique shops or given to her as whole collections. The people in these pictures share a resolute composure; they face the camera calmly, and meet our gaze head-on. Why not? Paying for a studio portrait was an act of proud assertion. It said, I am worth knowing; I count, too. And in the absence of names or information, those steady gazes challenge us as well. Know us, they say. Imagine us. We were once as real as you.

Harris's process begins with the initial act of reclamation (repurposing discarded "junk" as worthy of redemption) and continues with the enlargement of each image and its conversion into a transparency. Then comes this 30-something artist's real work, the pilgrimage and baptism.... There are sweet spots in the Adirondacks Harris loves. A stretch along the Ausable River, a wetland near Caroga Lake, a Keene pond. Places where she can wade into wild water and work with it, count on it not to dislodge her tripod, to keep its clarity and calm. Her camera's on that tripod, staring right down at the surface. Harris presses her transparency under water until it's resting on the riverbed; skewers hold it in place. She's got green stuff with her she has harvested from the water's edge—pickerelweed, a spray of berries, maple leaves, odd twigs. All this goes in the water, too, right on the transparency. She moves a wide leaf here, a black-eyed Susan there, garlanding the sunken image with scavengings until the image underwater is garbed in Adirondack verdure.

Now the camera is poised to capture not one but three layers of informa-

tion: the image itself and all the river stuff around it, but also the dance of light and bubbles on the water's surface, and whatever mucky stuff is on the riverbed itself.

The final image will be blown up big, and the 21-by-31-inch Chromira print will pick up every petal, vein of leaf, and weedy tendril around the figure, gazing out, a frame within the hardwood frame. Color throbs, and a hint of depth (for the surface of the water with its bubbles and play of light is part of this new image, too). But the artist isn't done. Inside each frame is room for one small artifact, maybe a spyglass, tiny shoe, string of beads, oar lock, scrap of lace. And etched into the glass over the photograph is a line of verse by a Harlem Renaissance poet. What links them all? The image, bits of green and gold and red, homely artifact, scrap of verse whose author is unnamed? It's up to the viewer to fashion an independent narrative for these "reliquaries." The effort to construct a story out of a smattering of clues references black America's much harder work of salvaging a coherent family history out of the wreckage of enslavement.

And seek for story lines we do; these prompts, however modest, are too beguiling to resist. It's funny, too. Photographs of long-gone unnamed people staring out at us from under water ought to feel, well, a bit macabre. Yet it doesn't. This water

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doesn't drown. It revives. It washes the bright hues of Adirondack leaves and summer berries into the stern, staring figures and warms them up, so what might be creepy is now hopeful, and images of antiquarian interest take on an aura of enchantment. Wild nature has an uneasy name in black folklore. Swamps are haunted by malevolent spirits and the dreadful memory of bloodhounds. High branches of Southern trees once swung with lethal ropes. But Daesha Devón Harris's Adirondack water replenishes. In her salvaging hands, the unnamed destination "just beyond the

river" promises new life.

Harris's show at the Lake George Arts Project closed in April, but several images from this series may be seen in *Upon the Ground, Below the Water*, a group show at the Albany International Airport Gallery, through September 3.

See more of Harris's work at www.daesha-devonharris.com. ▲