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Artist Chaz Guest: 'I'm battling having my culture be so misrepresented'

by Veronica Esposito
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'When I paint I'm feeling joy. I'm feeling what life is supposed to be like,' says Chaz Guest.
Photograph: Amanda Demme

The painter, cosigned by the Obamas, talks about his new solo exhibition, his respect for his ancestors and why he remains fascinated by Black soldiers.

"When I paint I'm feeling joy. I'm feeling what life is supposed to be like. I'm feeling free. I'm going after what it means to be a human being." These are the words African American artist Chaz Guest spoke to me from his studio in Los Angeles on the eve of a new solo show in his home city. Joy is very much evident in Guest's recent work, his paintings glowing with beautiful, otherworldly combinations of color and luminous emotions, even as they depict the gritty realities of warfare and the deep complexity of the Black experience. From now through 30 July, Guest is exhibiting these works and more at Los Angeles's Night Gallery, his first solo exhibition with the venue.

Although Guest has risen to prominence, with galleries pricing his paintings over \$100,000 and collectors that include the Obamas, the climb has been a long one. Guest first sold cartoons he drew as a young boy in the 1970s, and for the rest of his life he aspired to live off his own creations, eschewing gainful employment. After graduating college in 1985 with a degree in graphic design, Guest made his way to New York City before venturing to Paris in 1986, where a chance meeting with Christian Lacroix changed the course of his career. "I fancied going to Paris, so I got a one-way ticket. I wound up doing the cover of a magazine, and that

magazine sent me to Christian Lacroix. I did a drawing for him, and he told me, 'I think you should be a painter.' I transformed into the journey of having painting become my life."

Guest's paintings are typically meditative, moody portraits of Black individuals. Giving off a sense of the everyman, Guest's subjects exist on the canvas with a profound dignity and depth of emotion, their postures connoting restful power, contemplation and compressed emotion. For Guest, it is all about attaching greater individuality and selfhood to historical archetypes about African Americans. "The only thing I'm left to do is paint about it, and hopefully one day these people that I conjure, they will gain enough respect to be seen and heard as human beings. Not as slaves, but as a person that was enslaved."



Chaz Guest - *The Decision*, 2021 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery Los Angeles. Photograph: Amanda Demme

CHAZ GUEST

Guest's influences are multifarious and idiosyncratic. An opportunity to visit Balthus's studio early in his career was of immense impact, and he also credits discovering the work of fashion illustrator Antonio Lopez as being "a life-changing experience". Surrealists including Giorgio de Chirico have been important to Guest, and jazz music has played a large part in his artistic formation. "Musicians like Coltraine, Monk, Miles," said Guest, "all helped me mold my own way of painting because it was like conducting music. I learned a lot from how they layered their compositions."

In part, Guest's style derives its particular form from his love of Japanese culture, and this connection goes back to his boyhood, when he was amazed by the dedication of Japanese gymnasts. A confirmed Japanophile, he has visited that nation many times, falling in love with the culture's symmetry and precision. "I'm amazed by the aesthetics of Japan," he said. "The wood, that calligraphy. I bought stretchers all over the world, but when I bought stretchers from Japan, I never wanted to put a nail into them. they were just so damn perfect!"

In particular Guest has found his medium in Japanese Sumi ink. He first discovered this ink in 1997, in another one of the remarkable coincidences that have defined his life as an artist. Asked to paint onstage during a jazz performance, he jumped in without much of a plan of action, and as he was swept up with the energy of the moment he fell in love with the medium. "I was very nervous, painting on stage with a jazz musician. I had to let myself go and just listen to the music and be present in the vibrations and the torrents that were coming at me. Every time I paint, I try to return to that moment in 1997."

The pieces in the Night Gallery exhibition continue his work of depicting the Buffalo Soldiers. Formed in 1866, the Buffalo Soldiers were the first all-Black regiments in the US army, and they are known for being sent to battle Native Americans throughout the latter half of the 19th century. For Guest, painting these warriors is a way of reclaiming Black identity against the many negative portrayals that are still ubiquitous throughout society. "I'm battling having my culture be so misrepresented. I'm trying my best to bring it back to a sense that Paul Robeson or Shirley Chisholm would have appreciated."

With the work in Night Gallery, Guest takes his relationship with Black soldiers into the 20th century, dealing with individuals who fought in the second world war. For Guest, there is a very personal link, as his father was one of those soldiers, and the money that Guest's father received via the GI Bill helped Guest become educated and empowered. "I'm one of those children. I want to tell what things were like

then. They were never really told, at least in a way of my satisfaction."

Guest's memorable depictions of battle tend to be made on cinematically wide canvasses, the chaotic, action-filled scenes that he paints contributing to that epic sense. They are dominated by horses plunged into motion, their riders bearing looks of preternatural composure and determination. Trees sketched in bent or undulating lines lend the paintings a dash of the surreal, as do the figures of warriors in the background caught up in their own imponderable struggles. They are a remarkable tableaux, powerful and overwhelming in the way that great art should be.

Ultimately, Guest's work is about respecting his ancestors and doing right by his cultural heritage. His paintings are as powerful as they are humble in the face of the task he has assigned himself. "It's energy that I conjure. I have these individuals start telling the story. They scream back, 'we want respect, we're people, and we're proud, and we never got a chance to tell you who we were.' It's to help to tell the story, so that we can get some kind of respect."

Gaining Pride with Promises Broken is on show until 30 July at the Night Gallery, Los Angeles.



Chaz Guest - *The Lineage*, 2021 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles