

Alex Chaves: The Chrysler Set

30 Orchard St, Gallery 1 ▪ Mar 20 - Apr 25, 2021



Harkawik is pleased to introduce a new suite of paintings by Los Angeles based artist Alex Chaves. Here, the painter elaborates on his investigations with letterforms, unconventional framing devices and pictures-within-pictures, ribald and quixotic portraiture, American corporate mascots, and fragmentary, artifactual abstractions that serve to “uncomplete” an otherwise rigorously consummated image. The Chrysler Set brings these to bear on an entirely new and rather pressing set of concerns: the fallacies of Western capitalism, the spectre of political brinksmanship, and the twin projects of rational egoism and new liberalism, both arguably failures. At its core is the art deco skyscraper built by Walter Chrysler in 1930.

Chrysler appears unfailingly corporeal, and when absent, is never gone, seen in the blocky edges and heaplike comportment of Chaves' pliant figures. An interest in the Morton Salt girl has given way to a Sweet'n Low mascot. In *Pink Panther (from behind)*, the familiar character is a gumshoe, his file-folder body a geometric study ala Mondrian or

Bart Van der Leck. When he returns in *Mugshot*, he's more Pinko than Pinkerton, holding the artist's Jasper Johns in defiance, his whiskers oddly terminated by the edge of his inverted collar. Like Bibendum, weaving his way through lower Manhattan in "Ghostbusters," or Johnnie Walker, the devious cat killer of Murakami's "Kafka on the Shore," these mascots register as cognitive dissonance. In *American Flag*, Chaves' unique syllabary, the Playboy Bunny, and the spectre of postwar masculinity are all legible. The painting's subject, a Navajo Rug, is a case of a container breached by its cargo; its stripes run past its edges, under tassles, and beyond the bounds of the canvas.

Framing devices are a crucial tool for Chaves, and monumental architecture is frequently undercut in the manner of propaganda—situated as backdrop to a cast of heroic proletarians. These are always other artists. Paul Sepuya sits for *Paul*, a striking scene in which the photographer's torso, cased in Eames fiberglass, seems to force everything else in the picture out of the way. This is the New York of Atlas Shrugged but also dutch painter Madelon Vriesendorp, who in the 1970s envisioned Chrysler as a personified lover, bent around her Empire State mate. In *Hiroshige print*, New York and Tokyo are joined quite literally by a twisting Western Juniper, a tree endemic to Chaves' home and their geographic midpoint; *Eagle Gargoyle* provides a roofer's view of twin suns; one white and one burning Rectification red, both held uncomfortably by an oblong halo. In *Snake Vase Still Life*, a twisting cobra, outlined in an exaggerated glowing line, serves as an uneasy vessel for an arrangement of sunflowers. The flowers are snakelike and the snake, floral. In their pistils, primate faces, apple cores, and a painter's palette are all visible.

The Chrysler Set is pinned on 3 new muslin works, their scrimlike quality reinforced by visible seams, chiefly in *White House*, where the neoclassical building, clad in rising sun, is framed by a shrublike terrier: the ultimate symbol of subjugation. Yet absent from these canvases are the social conflagrations that previously held the painter's interest. Chaves has chosen to spend the pandemic creating smaller, solitary pictures, which are situated in the gallery alongside aluminum locker-room benches, inviting another sort of solitude: that offered by the encounter between a person and a painting.