

Kayne Griffin Corcoran CULTURED

Charles Harlan Brings A Baptistry To Frieze New York



Charles Harlan's installation at Frieze New York. Photography by Charles Harlan

Charles Harlan's solo booth at Frieze New York began with a road trip. One that the New York-based artist was still recovering from when I met him at his Red Hook studio in early April. His haul, a new baptistry from an online church supplier in Roanoke, Alabama, greeted me at the door. Although the plastic tub was originally designed as a cleansing pool for adults and babies alike, its jacuzzi-like shape felt more pagan than protestant. For me, it brought to mind a cartoon of an Aztec temple with its two sets of descending stairs—a resemblance that only grew stronger when the artist tipped it to show me the upright posture it would take at the fair. "It's going to be anchored by a birdbath," he explained pointing to another ready-made component, a simple stone bath he picked up at Olde New England Reclamation. "I like this doubling of baptismal images. First us and then the birds."

I imagine the completed scene as almost alter-like. Harlan nods. "I was really interested in this sculptural idea of the cantilevered weight and the act of holding an object the wrong way," Harlan explains. "In this piece, there is obviously a lot of potential symbolism. Religion is loaded like dynamite, so of course, taking a specific object such as this out of context offers a kind of philosophical or political critique by default. In this case, it's an object that offers a kind of ritualistic transformation in which one enters with sin and exits redeemed. What happens to this story when this path of ascension and ascension is disturbed?"

As a child growing up in Georgia, Harlan attended church three times a week and was baptized in a similar pool. In this way, the baptistry and birdbath hold both personal significance and dissonance. "This piece is a lot more biographical than I'm used to," Harlan confesses. "Even though some of the industrial materials I've used in the past have come from my background, they rarely read that way," the artist explains of his referencing his mother's hardware shop through the use of construction materials. "People perceive it as post-minimalism."



The Detail of Harlan's Birdbath, 2018. Photography by Charles Benton

Despite Harlan's pared-back aesthetics, one can see the biographical turn in the work by looking at the artist's two most recent gallery shows at [Kayne Griffin Corcoran](#) and [JTT](#) (the two galleries are co-hosting his booth). The back-to-back exhibitions, "Jon Boat" and "Sailboat," unpacked the father figure through the materiality of a ship. I remember walking into JTT in 2017 and finding myself adrift in a sea of pretty parts. The show's anchor, a boat belonging to gallery owner Jasmin Tsou's step-father and quartered by Harlan, felt like a broken portrait. One that haunted me. "Those shows felt like bookends," Harlan tells me. "But they led me here to a point where I'm digging into my history more directly."

While seemingly at odds with the fair atmosphere, Harlan's baptistry actually speaks not only to an individual experience but a collective one that has been practiced for thousands of years. "I know as far back as Egypt, people were performing ritualistic washing," Harlan says. "So whether or not you believe in the specifics of Christianity's version of transformation is irrelevant. These ceremonies are integral to our experience of each other as a species."

—Kat Herriman