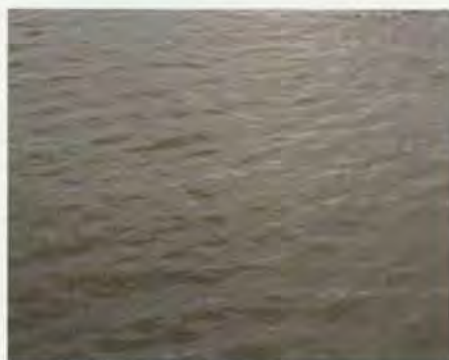


ENCODINGS

The Studio Museum in Harlem
Artists in Residence 2008-09

Khalif Kelly
Adam Pendleton
Dawit L. Petros





Dawit L. Petros, *Untitled (Water Barriers; Occupying the space between two rivers)*, 2009

In November 2008 Dawit L. Petros set out to make pictures—not of Manitoba’s wintry vastness where he once visited, nor landscapes of his native Eritrea where he returned recently, nor portraits of the East-African diaspora he found scattered throughout suburban North America. Rather, Petros ventured no farther than Harlem, working systematically within the confines of the neighborhood, from east to west, block by block, to photograph what he encountered on the street. Unlike James VanDerZee’s iconic portraits or photojournalist Bruce Davidson’s rigorous documentation of the residents on East 100th Street, Petros’s work focuses on objects and buildings rather than people. Through photographs he has created a collection of colors culled from the neighborhood, from the diaphanous blue of a trash bag to the orange of a door to the buff abstractions of a once-graffiti-covered wall. As compelling and formally interesting as they are, these images are not works of art themselves. The artist was simply gathering colors for his palette.

Before Petros could metaphorically put paint to canvas, he needed a structure. He looked to the work of Dutch-Surinamese artist Stanley Brouwn. In the early 1960s, Brouwn asked passersby in Amsterdam to draw maps for him, diagramming how to get from one point to another. The sparse drawings, often consisting of a few lines, rectangles and circles, are stamped with the words “THIS WAY BROUWN,” marking them as projects of a minimalist flaneur. Brouwn’s project provided the conceptual framework for Petros’s work in Harlem. His photographic catalogue of colors alludes to the neighborhood the same way Brouwn’s

drawings offer the vaguest of clues to Amsterdam’s layout. While clearly fixed in geography, the respective artists’ drawings and photographs are frustratingly elusive, more maps of the mind and atmospheric than delineations of streets and avenues.

For Petros, color is a way into a locality, a means by which to engage a neighborhood artistically and personally. It is not a search for color—for a search implies a certain goal—but a wandering and discovery of color, a way of moving from point A to point B without knowing (like Brouwn) one’s exact origin or ultimate destination.

Petros’s collected colors became the foundation for a series of abstractions based on monochromes. For each, he sampled a hue of interest and created a consistent color field as a digital image. By combining various monochromes, the compositions became visual building blocks for wallpapers, installations and wall paintings that Petros calls “Harlechromes.” One installation consists purely of blues and black—a grid of digital prints ranging from baby blue to midnight hang above a field of black plexiglass. To the uninitiated eye, it is a simply chromatic abstraction, no more than a dark mirror reflecting the world below happier ceruleans. And yet, the work is loaded with broad associations: blues literally distilled from the streets of Harlem express the same shifts of tone and modality as Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* (1959) and the same complications of color as Byron Kim’s monochrome paintings based on skin tone. Similarly, the dark plexiglass speaks to Petros’s past works, especially his projects in Manitoba and East Africa, which highlighted the material’s ability to reflect



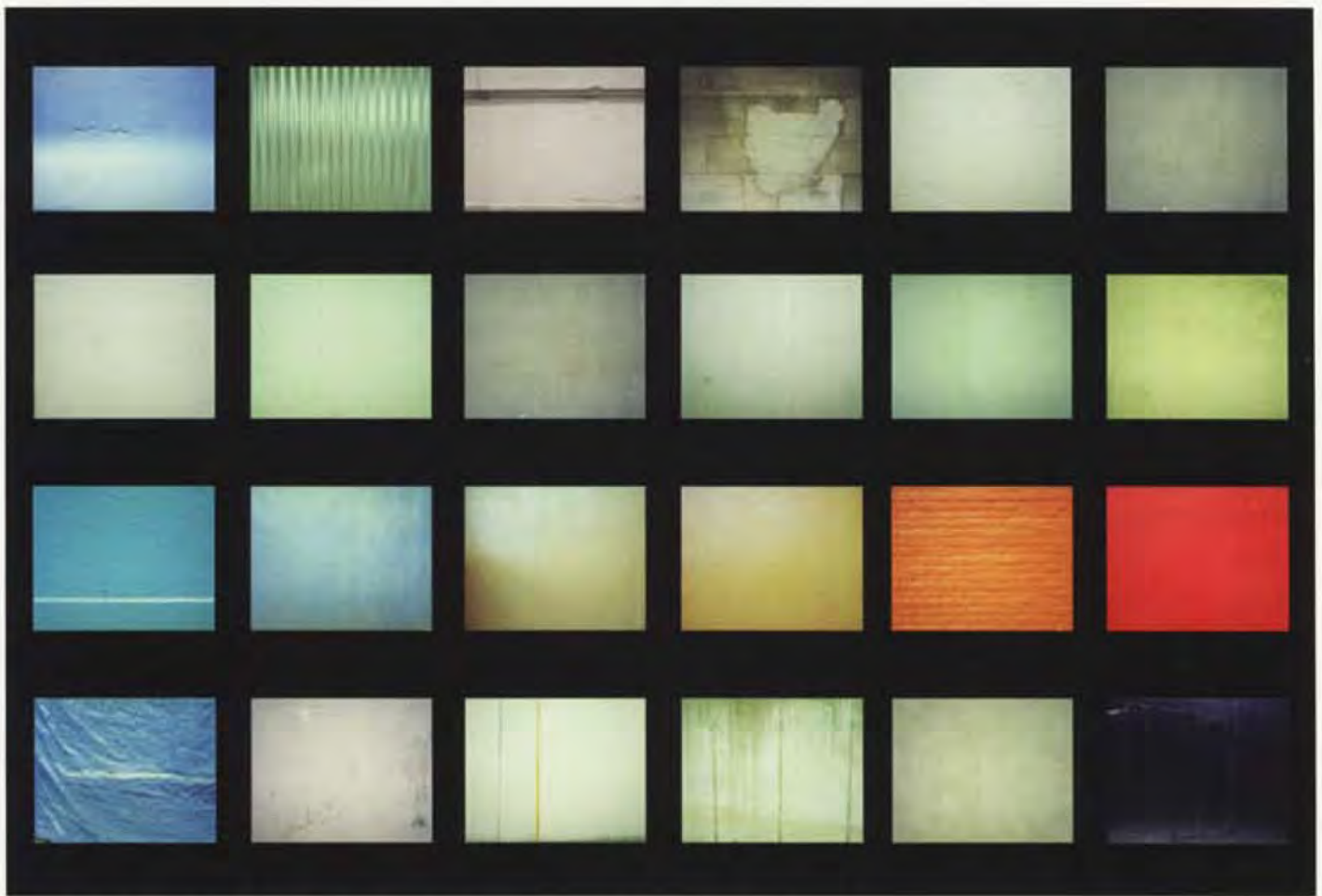
Dawit L. Petros, *Harlechrome* (*Architectural interventions on West 126th Street*) (studies), 2009

and absorb the light of its surroundings. Petros's trip to northern Canada led him to create a dark reflecting pool titled *The Instability of Differentiation* (2007), and his travels to Kenya and Eritrea resulted in landscapes obscured by dark plexiglass and related black monochromes. In both works, what initially appears as pure blackness gives way to a paradoxical experience of a sheer surface and profound depth. Depending on one's angle of view, the works either reflect all surrounding colors or absorb them into blackness.

Petros's work implies movement, but it is a movement within boundaries. The photographic triptych, *Untitled* (*Water Barriers; Occupying the space between two rivers*) (2009), alludes to the geographical limits of the artist's study, bounded

by the Hudson River to the west and the Harlem and East rivers to the north and east. Between the two photographs of water is an image of the artist—the back of his head. A kind of monochrome in itself, in which the background seems to seep into his brown shirt, the central image reads more as a placeholder for a portrait than as a true portrait. It gives little: the artist's shaved head is hardly recognizable, and the background is hardly distinguishable from the foreground. Stripped spare, it is simply a body sandwiched by water.

Similarly, Petros looks to the man-made boundaries of Harlem in his *Harlechrome* (*24 Readymade colors and exterior walls on the way around the boundary*) (2009). By photographing the walls of buildings that mark the periphery of the



Dawit L. Petros, *Harlechrome (24 Readymade colors and exterior walls on the way around the boundary) (study)*, 2009

neighborhood at close range, Petros has created a series of found monochromes. They depict somber concrete, steely corrugated metal and the ashen surface of old cinder blocks. Detached without being distant, the abstractions are grounded in conceptual practices rather than photographic tradition. They are more in line with Hans Haacke's 1971 investigation of New York real estate or Dan Graham's *Homes for America* magazine spread (1966) than with Aaron Siskind's photographs of paint peeling off walls or even the readymade cool of Walker Evans's iconic shots of distressed and weathered billboards.

Petros has come full circle with his "Harlechrome" series. After taking photographs of the neighborhood, he extracted color from the subjects to produce monochromes and subsequently walked the periphery of Harlem to find objects that were themselves monochromatic. The end result of one work (the abstraction) becomes the starting point for the next (the walls of Harlem), which itself harkens back to his point of departure—images of site and

place. In this sense the series folds back upon itself like a loop in which color and its associated objects are divorced and yet their relationships are further enriched.

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