

Charlie Alston: *Tonight Turns to Day*

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The logo for GNYP Gallery, consisting of the letters 'GNYP' in a bold, black, sans-serif font, centered within a light gray rectangular background.

Charlie Alston's canvases, shown at GNYP Gallery in Berlin for the first time, are a meeting place. First, they are a meeting place for the elements that constitute the artist's relentless cultural appetite: they are formed by juxtaposing his archivist inclinations with the newest visual trends and also by merging different artistic languages, old and new, with personal details. The private and the public fuse, almost without any mediation whatsoever. Here and there, what began as a virtuosity exercise in abstraction becomes an experiment with color fields arranged in a nearly concrete organizational grid. Several chapters of modernism and postmodernism history molded into one place. The intensity with which the artist tackles such moments, full of gentle concentration, is almost contradicted by the speed with which one thing turns into another. Different temporalities, historical and aesthetical, are gathered in these paintings.

Yet Alston's canvases are a meeting place for something else, too. They are not just the generous and sometimes beautiful space where history meets. Be it the history of painting or world history. These paintings testify, likewise, to the smaller schemes of things, despite their size and loud statements. They are the meeting place, also, of Alston's private world. They are the space, thus, where the visage or body of those dear to him appear, where the slogans, colors, and imagery of the world that impresses him sometimes collide, sometimes merge. What's interesting to these paintings, in any event, is how these leanings are also present at the formal level.

One could assume that one of the few ways to handle such grand themes would be through quotation marks—that is, through shallow nods, references, and appropriations. After all, how does one conjugate the irreconcilable differences that structure the world? How do we approximate contrasting views into the limited space of the canvas? What Charlie Alston does is show that all references should be treated with due respect. In his artistic terms, that means establishing a deeper relationship with his materials. "Depth," by the way, is the word the artist uses himself; a suiting term for whatever happens on the surface of the canvas and our relationship to the world in general. "Depth is a big word ringing through my body these past months," Alston tells us. "So, the colors are deeper, the layering more diverse, more color blocking, more mass."

But this same depth also opens up other layers of meaning. As the show's title suggests, Alston is also worried, in his own words, "with the idea of twilight as setting, dawn, dusk. Where the present somehow exists as the twilight between past and future. How during twilight, it's hard for us to distinguish light and shadow, space, depth, objects, and edges." The stabilization brought by the depth he is interested in, in this sense, is problematized by the eternal inconstancy of things, symbolized here by the twilight. The more he digs, the more unstable things seem to feel. To try and get closer to the true nature of things, the artist intensifies his efforts—an ethical as much as an aesthetical attitude.

It couldn't be different. For a young artist growing up in an interconnected world, interested in diverse chapters of the history of his medium, the difficulties and wonders of global travel, the sheer number of images and ideas out there can abound to a maddening degree. Still, Charlie Alston may have found a way to organise all that, at least for now. Not afraid of all the references around him, he captures all he can, sets them into his canvases, and treats them with intense thoughtfulness. By doing so, he creates not only an exciting compilation of some of the images and cultural tendencies of our times, but also shows a way—through the gentle clashing of his colours, themes, and references—of how to live together.

João Gabriel Rizek

About the artist

Charlie Alston (b. 1997, San Francisco, USA) currently lives and works in Paris, France.

Using pop-cultural elements from comics, branding and advertising, Alston examines the various influences he is confronted with in his life. A global citizen, exposed to many social and cultural narratives, the artist digests conceptually and formally the popular culture at large. Taking inspiration from among other things post-war magazines about and for African American people such as Jet he crates collage-like paintings in which figuration and abstraction melt into each other. His interest lies in the twilight zone, the area where the ambiguity reign and meanings get shape.

Alston received his BFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2019. Recent solo exhibitions include M+B, Los Angeles and Deli Gallery in New York, NY. He has been featured in group exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Museum, Philadelphia; Mana Contemporary, Jersey City; Twelve Gates Arts Gallery, Philadelphia; and California Institute of the Arts, Valencia.