MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, Hurvin Anderson was staying at a hotel in Montego Bay when he spotted some kids climbing a mango tree through the window. The image brought back vivid memories. The youngest of eight children, all of the artist's siblings were born in Jamaica, while he was born in Britain. Like so many others, his family migrated to the UK in the 1960s and became ensconced in the African-Caribbean community. Growing up in Birmingham, Anderson recalls his brother constantly climbing trees "scrumping" for apples.

Looking out of the hotel window in 2006, the painter was transported to his childhood and saw his brother high up in the thicket of branches. He photographed the moment, which inspired multiple studio drawings and paintings. "Rootstock" and "Cloning," two large-scale 2016 paintings exploring the image, are on view in his exhibition "Foreign Body" at Michael Werner Gallery in New York.

Anderson walked me through the gallery, recounting the story about his brother, how he works through ideas, and how what he sees, upon reflection, may indicate something much more personal or political than what is on the surface. He says he weighs "the idea that things match up on one level, but may not on another."

A graduate of the Royal College of Art, Anderson's works are grounded in memory and history, and defined by his family experiences, British background, and Jamaican heritage. Blending abstraction and figuration, he depicts landscapes and places of personal and cultural significance, settings that capture singular moments that speak to important arcs of time.

His process for capturing the boy in tree is typical of how he discovers an image or latches onto an idea. Anderson paints from photographs, drawings, and recollections of what he has seen, often executing multiple canvases considering various perspectives and meaning in the same image.
For many years, Anderson has revisited barbershop images. The series was presented at the Tate Britain in 2009, and later that year at the Studio Museum in Harlem, his first U.S. solo museum exhibition. When Caribbean migrants arrived in Britain in the 1950s and 60s, their reception was such that they felt more comfortable creating their own social environments—including black churches, black bars, and black barbershops, often in people’s homes. The artist’s barbershop paintings from 2007-2009 are shot with color, and range from figurative to completely abstracted, color-blocked canvases referencing the architectural perspective of the space.

The new paintings at Michael Werner consider the barbershop from entirely new vantage points. Both the figure and the space in the traditional sense are absent; countless bottles and potions crowding a counter are abstracted; and he has introduced images of universal black cultural figures (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela) commonly found on the walls of these social gathering spaces, having been hung decades earlier. In one canvas, all of the elements are stripped away, except the silhouetted shapes of the pictures on the wall.

“It was about these figures always being here, always being overarching figures into the present day. I think part of my thinking is, ‘What does it mean that we are still looking to these figures in this day and age?’” Anderson says. In a gallery space featuring “Jet” and “M.J.,” two of his more recent interpretations, Anderson discussed his exhibition of new paintings at Michael Werner. The artist is incredibly contemplative, regularly pausing mid response, before proceeding once he has settled on the right words.

CULTURE TYPE: Your art focuses on personal and political history. The barbershop images and visual references to Jamaica recur in your work, when did you first begin to define what your practice is about?

HURVIN ANDERSON: I guess in art school you just become interested. I kind of describe them as the way the past kind of just hangs around. I was making a particular painting called “Ball Watching” [1997] which is a painting about when we used to play football and this ball goes into this lake or this pond. Once you paint an image, it starts to become something else. It seemed to be about these guys who didn’t know how to cross this river, this lake, this pond. So it tinges on something else. It was no longer a minor incident. It became more of a thing. I became interested in how these kinds of things play
out. Can you push this thing away? Can you make an image that is without any context or non-political and just be a personal image?

CT: You have described the act of painting as a way of seeing. Is that correct?

HA: That sounds like me. I guess what I probably meant is it's my language. I am not a writer. I am talking in a way. This is how I try to discuss things or bring things up.

CT: In a new series of paintings, you depict Marcus Garvey who was of Jamaican heritage and then you have Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. who were American and other figures from various places. What is the political symbolism in the works? What are you saying?

HA: It was about these figures always being here, always being overarching figures into the present day. I think part of my thinking is, “What does it mean that we are still looking to these figures in this day and age?” This series reflected the start of something. It's the beginning of an idea in a sense. It was just starting to kind of formulate. Yes, you have Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and then you also have Steven Biko. I am not sure how it is in the states, but I know in the UK there’s a big thing about representation and who is representing you in a way and it's just a kind of a conversation. Part of it was going into these barbershops and these places and [these figures] they are still here. All this time people are still looking to them and so how is the conversation changing?

CT: In terms of representation, do they represent you or what do they represent?

HA: I think they represent me in some ways, in some sense. It was just an idea. I am trying to pick through this idea, this image that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., were opposite ends of the spectrum. One represented one part of blackness, and the other represented another part of blackness. There was a photograph just before Malcolm X died where they were discussing how they could work together and be progressive. Just to have the two of them next to each other, I just felt like even that is a kind of statement in some way. I was trying to change the narrative, trying an idea, thinking about something.

CT: The Arts Council England acquired your 2016 painting “Is It Ok To Be Black?” Did these paintings featuring cultural and historical figures grow out of that commission?

HA: I was trying to make four paintings and in the end one painting just started to emerge as if this was going to be the thing. So it was a way to take some of the ideas from that painting and kind of extend it out. I do see my work as an observation. What's happening and what's around you. What I was trying to represent is some of these figures just being around. You go in someone’s home and they are there. I went to Sri Lanka years ago and you saw Bob Marley everywhere as an image.

CT: This is about your process, developing multiple paintings from one image. I am interested in how you work, how you have these ideas and pursue them in different ways. Can you talk about that part of your practice?
HA: It’s about ideas. It’s about painting. I think you go into a painting with one idea, this is what you want to do and then once you actually start to make the work, it opens up other things. You take something on, start opening it up, start discussing, start taking it apart. It’s partly a kind of obsessiveness on my end I probably have as well.

CT: It’s fascinating to look at the paintings “M.J.” (Michael Jackson) and “Jet” side by side, one is essentially an abstracted, silhouetted version of the other. Talk about balance, your approach to using abstraction vs. figuration. Do you use them for different purposes or when you are thinking about different concepts?

HA: I was trying to understand how I could you read a document and its being censored. It feels like a censored document, so you start to kind of allow a play between these two images.

CT: I see, so the figures are censored, redacted like FBI documents?

HA: Yeah, yeah, it’s just an idea. In the black community in the states and in the UK, there is, how can you describe it? There are questions now really being confronted because you feel as though these questions these issues should have been dealt with years ago, but now it’s really come up again. Maybe it has a hint of that tone, that kind of questioning of the time, kind of in an obtuse way.

CT: When we were looking at “Rootstock,” the painting of the boy in the tree, you emphasized the technical aspects of executing the painting, which seems to be very important to you. Tell me about the role of technique in your work.

HA: I am just trying to find a way to discuss this image. You have to find ways to, techniques or ideas to, keep control of the image. You are pulling things apart and you want to keep hold of where you want to go and how you want to it to be read, how the image should be read. So you develop things. That painting felt like it was one moment, that was what it wanted to be. But then this is where I will go back again and play with it even more and maybe kind of destroy it. I am interested in ideas where things meet up, if they meet well or not well, if that’s the case. Maybe I’ve been trying to explore and in the end that’s part of what’s very interesting—how things mesh together or don’t mesh together.

CT: You were saying the way you want the painting to be read, does that mean you want to make sure that the visual image or your concept is clear to the viewer so they have a basis for interpretation, or you are trying to convey something specific to the viewer?

HA: I guess it’s just more a balance, because you have these two images and there is a multiplicity of ways in which...

CT: The two images are the tree and the figure?

HA: Well there are two trees involved. They’ve been collaged together. You are trying to pull things together and supposed to make it work, just trying to get an idea with that painting. I think in the next painting I’ll take another approach, maybe I’ll take on something else.
CT: You do multiple paintings because you have a number of ideas and inspirations that come out of one image or concept. Do you ever feel like one of the paintings is the best version or what you were ultimately going for?

HA: They come in and out of each other. Sometimes you think you are less interested in something and as time has gone and you see it again and you think it's fine. I try not to think about it on that level at all. When you see them, you understand what you were doing. Especially now, this is a moment where you are really just trying to experiment, just push the boundaries, much more than I think I have ever done and see what comes with that, whether it’s good, bad, or indifferent.

CT: Your first solo museum show in the United States was at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2009. Was having your first American show in that venue of any significance to you? Can you tell me about that time and how that exhibition came to be?

HA: I had a show at Tate Britain. It was part of a series of exhibitions called Art Now. Thelma [Golden] saw the exhibition at the Tate and wanted to move it to the Studio Museum. It was all such as blur at the time. I think Harlem has a real history and to show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, to be a part of that history is incredible. Chris Ofili showed there. It was a fascinating time. I’d use the Schomburg Library. I knew Harlem fairly well.

CT: We talked about one of your prints “Mrs. S. Keita,” which you have recast with different colors in the background and patterns on her dress. You said it came from a photograph that had the same feel as Seydou Keita’s work and called it an acknowledgement of the Malian photographer. Who are some of your other inspirations, artists whose work inspires you?

HA: British painters. There’s a character called Michael Andrews I looked at a lot. Oddly enough, when I was making this series I thought about Van Gough a lot just because you felt like when he was...
making those drawings and he was taking them back to the studio and painting them, you felt like they were kind of a code. When he made a particular stroke or line, you felt like okay, I know what that means. I was thinking a lot about that. It’s quite technical. I am not sure if it’s true... I was thinking about it terms of organizing things. Part of my obsession is how do you keep track of things? How do you know where things are, where things sit?

**CT:** **When you say this series, do you mean...**

**HA:** The whole thing, the whole work, the whole exhibition. I guess I have to say Kerry James Marshall, too. I respect him. In some ways we are very different, from two different places. But some of the ideas that he has I recognize, you know, so that’s kind of fascinating and I think the Black Arts Movement in Britain.

**CT:** **Have you seen the Kerry James Marshall exhibition at the Met Breuer?**

**HA:** No. I’m going to see it this afternoon.

**CT:** **You talked about Kerry James Marshall and some of his ideas. Are you referring to the ideas in his paintings or are you talking about how his practice is very much about the art historical canon being more representative, about the importance of images of black people and the black experience being in museums? Do you have any thoughts about that?**

**HA:** I think everyone has to do what they do. History is going to look after itself. You know you are going to be there. I understand him, I do, but I think we just make what we make and then everything else sorts itself out. **CT**