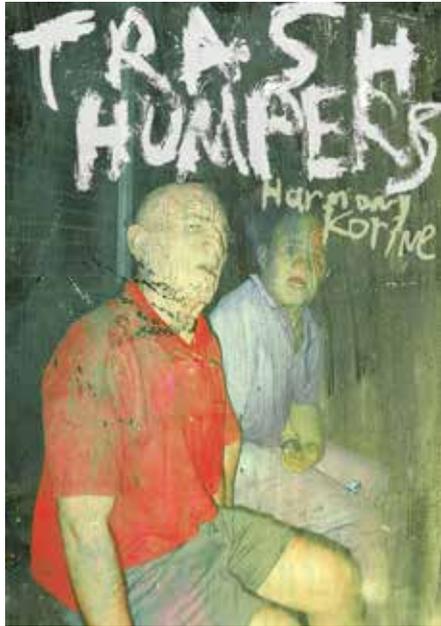




## **Harmony Korine** Shadows and Loops

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery  
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With their crudely painted figures, rough surfaces, and distorted patterns, the paintings of Nashville-based filmmaker and artist Harmony Korine emphasize raw expression over nuance, instability over intellectual clarity. Add to his seemingly offhand technique a penchant for playful titles such as *Special Needs Chex* (2014) and *Caker Plino* (2015; cover) and it becomes evident that these paintings are meant to convey the trenchant strangeness found in his films. Yet they evince a droll restraint that may seem surprising in the hands of a screenwriter and director known for transgressive films that defy boundaries of taste and convention.

Figure 1

In movies such as *Gummo* (1997), *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), *Trash Humpers* (2009), and *Spring Breakers* (2012), Korine tells tales from the edge, combining an abiding affection for the outcast with sly humor and gratuitous sex and violence. He uses handheld camera work and radical montage to imbue the floating psychosocial lives of his disaffected characters with a sense of ephemerality. The films transpose writer Greil Marcus's idea of the old, weird America—a place haunted by the poetics of death, loneliness, sexual frustration, and melancholia—onto a generation of teenaged skateboard slackers, dysfunctional families, lost souls, hustlers, and other exiles from the normative who occupy Korine's vision of the American substrate (fig. 1).

Although they are not as experimental as his films, Korine's paintings similarly offer up a universe of alienated weirdness. His figurative works have the spontaneity of old-school graffiti, with patches of color, rough textural elements, and random marks developed into characters that have the amorphousness of ghosts hovering halfway between the waking and dream worlds.

Some of them are direct extensions of his gothic imagination, like the nightmarish *Kotzur Gift* (2014; fig. 2). In this work, paint is smeared over photographic images of characters wearing grotesque masks of creepy old people, such as those seen in *Trash Humpers*, a bizarre film that follows zombielike characters working their depraved mischief in the neighborhoods of Nashville.

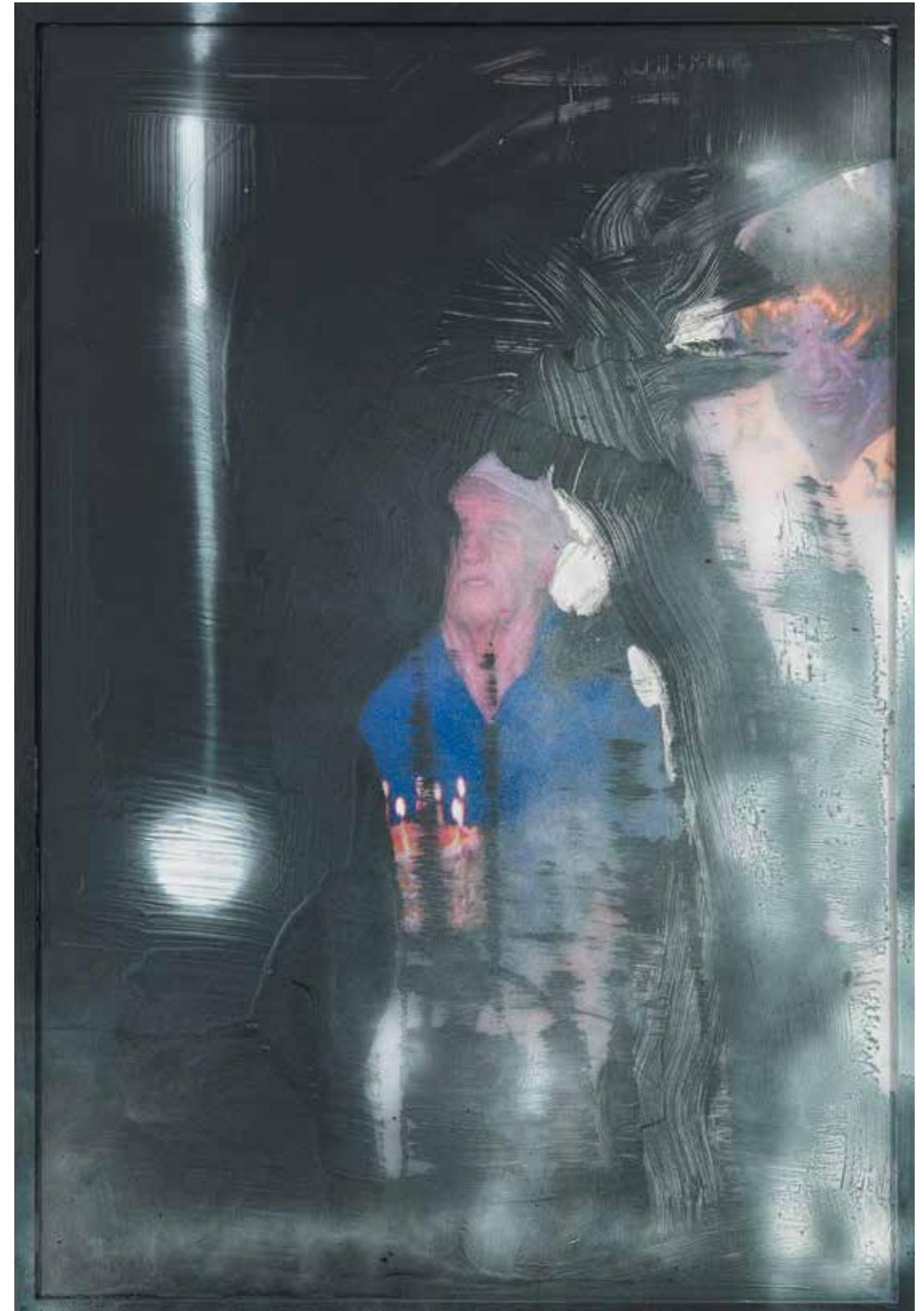


Figure 2



Figure 3

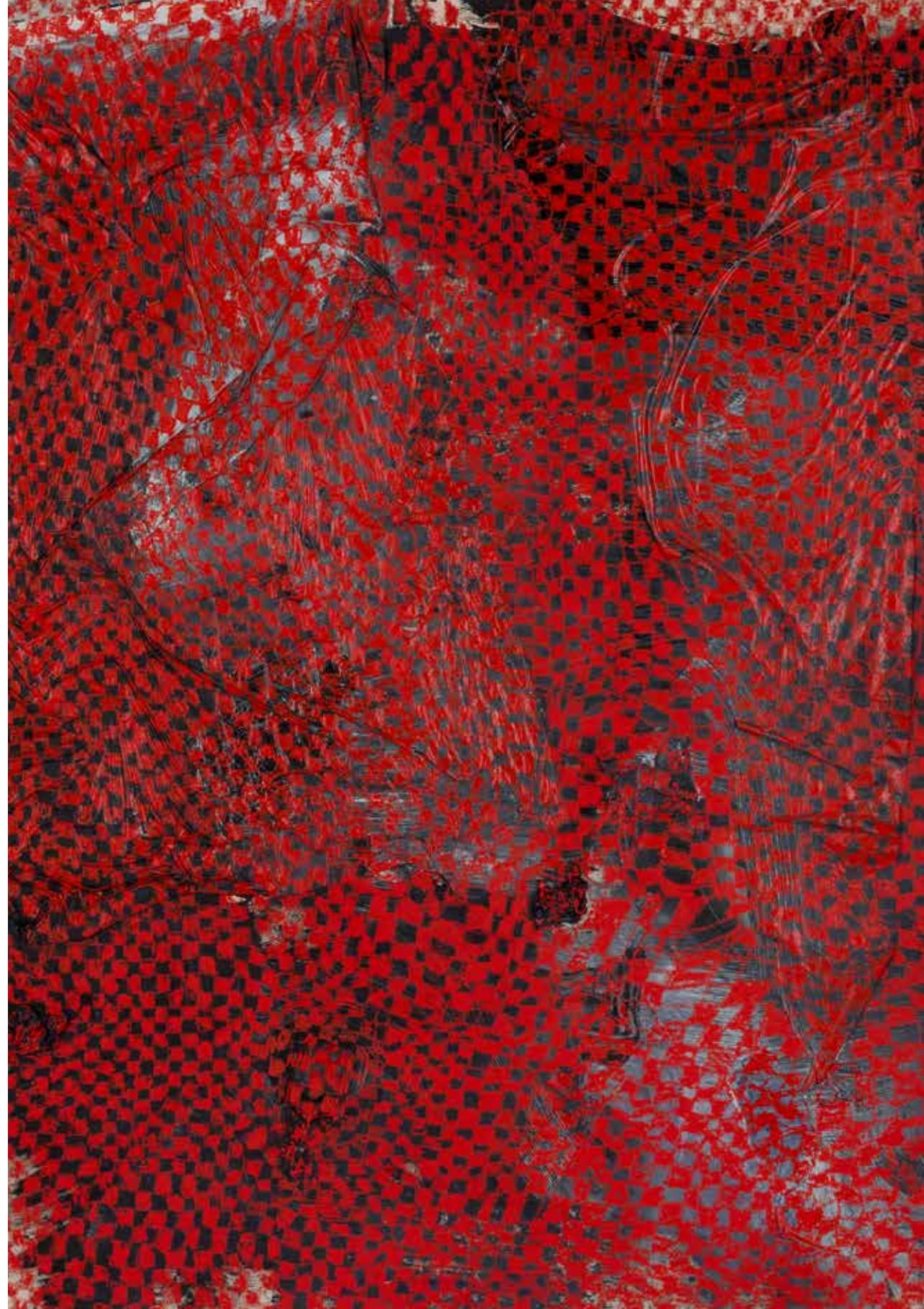
lying flat, the checkerboard ripples, buckles, twists, advances, and recedes to create competing allusions, from emulating the topography of a bunched-up coverlet to suggesting a cosmic warp in space and time. The surfaces are disorienting more for their optical effects than the unsettling content of the figurative works, although they retain a pungency that seems central to the sensations Korine wants to elicit.

In *Special Needs Chex* (fig. 4), a red checkerboard covers the surface. Through gaps in the grid we see a sublayer, a shadow world of doleful gray forms that seem vaguely recognizable, hinting at scatology, greasy internal organs, or piles of rags. Often, when an artist allows such peeks into the basement, the intent is to increase our understanding of what happens on the ground floor; it reveals motive. But in this case, the relationship is more cryptic, conveying a disjunctive split—mystery instead of compounded meaning.

Figure 4

There are less disturbing nods to cinema in *Mini Sitter 2* (2014; fig. 3), which features a filmstrip-like sequence of black-and-white photographs of a room where his family babysitter is sitting. This looping tableau is overpainted with white spatters and drips, which aggressively obscure parts of the seemingly neutral setting. In both of these works, the layering of photography and paint constitute a call-and-response, the portentous photographic imagery inspiring an emotional outburst in paint.

Such layering appears differently in his *Chex* paintings, a series of works in which a checkerboard-like grid is painted over an abstract background. Instead of



The grids in the *Chex* paintings partly cover underlying shapes, leading the viewer to look into and through them, to read them as spatially deep. In works from the *Fazor* series, concentric patterns radiate outward, pushing the viewer's eyes to the edges of the canvas as if following a sequence of waves pulsating from the center (back cover). The series title is a riff on the phaser, a sound processor that creates waveforms in the frequency spectrum, often to hypnotic or psychedelic effect.

Korine hopes that his abstract paintings will alter perceptions in a similar way. He says, "I'm chasing something that is more of a feeling, something more inexplicable, a connection to colors and dirt and character, something looping and trancelike, more like a drug experience or a hallucination."<sup>1</sup> Early in his career, he sought such extreme experiences, in his films, in confrontational social encounters, and through his abuse of drugs like meth and heroin. Now clean of addictive drugs, he nevertheless remains heir to another apostle of excess, Arthur Rimbaud, the French nihilist poet who spoke of the "derangement of all the senses" as a desired end.<sup>2</sup> "I want to do extreme damage," Korine told an interviewer for the *Guardian*. "I want to be disruptive."<sup>3</sup>

Artists often value impulse, accident, and intuition as vehicles for drawing repressed forces to the surface and creating psychological disturbance. Virtuosity can get in the way. Korine says, "I really don't know what I'm doing. I never had any training with anything I've done. I try and turn my total incompetence into a virtue."<sup>4</sup> Yet in both film and painting, he shows an intuitive pictorial intelligence marked by formal tension, a capacity for freshness and surprise, and a controlled depiction of altered states. He de-emphasizes conventional painting techniques, working with materials and tools that resist facile manipulation, such as house paint, glue, mops, tape, squeegees, and sticks—anything that might yield an immediate unrefined impact similar to that of outsider art, which Korine admires for its unsophisticated directness.

His films likewise play with the perception of amateurism, with shaky camera work, off-kilter colors, soft focus, interruptive glitches, and disruptive editing evoking the undirected spontaneity of a street encounter. They are often created using outdated or retro technology, like Polaroid, Super 8, and 35 mm film, bringing to mind archives of old home movies



Figure 5

and photographs, in which faded images have a dreamlike quality that serves as a signifier of memory. Films such as *Gummo* (fig. 5) inspire strong reactions from viewers. Some are attracted to the films' visual intensity and dark humor; some find them morally suspect, technically inept, and even repulsive. At times, a viewer might experience both reactions simultaneously.

This potential ambivalence is less pronounced in Korine's paintings. Nevertheless, the combination of shadowy sublayers and psychedelic looping patterns, rough physicality and luminosity, and humor and melancholia shows Korine to be an artist of psychological complexity—an artist whose paintings enact his deep desire to be a cultural disruptor.

Mark Scala  
Chief Curator

#### Notes

1. Harmony Korine, e-mail to Mark Scala, May 24, 2016.
2. Arthur Rimbaud to Georges Izambard, May 13, 1871. Available as "Lettre à Georges Izambard dite 'du voyant'" at [abardel.free.fr/petite\\_anthologie/lettre\\_du\\_voyant.htm](http://abardel.free.fr/petite_anthologie/lettre_du_voyant.htm).
3. Nosheen Iqbal, "I Want to Do Extreme Damage': Harmony Korine's Third Coming," *Guardian* (London), February 24, 2016, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com).
4. Korine to Scala, May 24, 2016.

## About the Artist

Nashville-based film director, screenwriter, and artist Harmony Korine (b. 1973) studied dramatic writing at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, dropping out after a semester to pursue a career as a skateboarder. In 1993, the photographer and director Larry Clark invited Korine to write a script that became *Kids* (1995), their film about drug-using, homophobic, sex-obsessed skaters in New York. Subsequent films include *Gummo* (1997), *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), *Trash Humpers* (2009), and *Spring Breakers* (2012). As an artist, Korine is represented by Gagosian Gallery and has exhibited his work in museum shows throughout the United States, as well as in Belgium, France, Germany, and Japan.

## Illustrations

Front: *Caker Plino*, 2015. Oil, acrylic, house paint, and ink on canvas, 101 x 72 in. © Harmony Korine. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

Inside front: *Burst Manga*, 2014. Ink on canvas, 102 x 84 in. Collection of David Perry. © Harmony Korine. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

Figure 1: *Trash Humpers*, 2009. Image courtesy of Harmony Korine and Drag City Inc.

Figure 2: *The Kotzur Gift*, 2014. Oil, latex, house paint, and spray paint on Plexiglas mounted on photograph in artist's frame, 41 x 28 in. © Harmony Korine. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

Figure 3: *Mini Sitter 2*, 2014. Oil, latex house paint, and collage on canvas, 48 x 32 in. Collection of Larry Gagosian. © Harmony Korine. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

Figure 4: *Special Needs Chex*, 2014. House paint, oil, and collage on canvas, 102 x 84 in. Private collection, New York. © Harmony Korine. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

Figure 5: Jacob Reynolds as Solomon in *Gummo*, 1997. Photograph by New Line. © 1997 New Line Cinema

Back: *White Porridge Circle*, 2015. Oil and pastel on canvas, 70 x 64 in. © Harmony Korine. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

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