

**ArtSeen**

# Marcus Jahmal: *Mining*

By **Jessica Holmes**



Across the empty landscapes of self-taught artist Marcus Jahmal's recent paintings, barren trees dot empty horizons, bathed in the hot glow of ambers, burgundies, and reds. Stripped of any foliage, their limbs reach like outstretched arms towards the sky while hollows in the trunks form elongated mouths that look as if they are singing, moaning, or supplicating to the gods. These anthropomorphized trees are just one of the sibylline symbols that populate the canvases of Jahmal's arresting new body of work, now up in *Mining*, his first solo exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery.

The act of mining is conceptually potent, with a meaning that can be left open to interpretation. One might mine their innermost self, plumbing surface thoughts and experiences for deeper, more ancient meanings. One may also mine the earth for its many resources—precious metals, gemstones, coal, or perhaps most substantially, oil. This last example is especially powerful for the artist, whose great-grandmother owned an oil well in Texas that was a source of much family lore. Jahmal, who eschews straightforward narratives in his work, invites these multiple meanings. His paintings read forthrightly, and then all of a sudden, they don't.

The large canvas, *Living off the land* (2021) is representative. A densely black-painted figure, with mouth opened wide, stands atop the hood of a car planted at the center of a stark, Jahmallian landscape. The ground is a sallow yellow, the sky a burning red. Pallid green trees behind echo the figure's face with their own, gaping maws. In one respect, the figure is quite literally living off of the land, perched as he is on the one manmade object in the painting, the boxy car. But of course, the phrase "living off the land" as it is commonly understood means someone staking their livelihood upon a dependence on Earth's resources. Suddenly, the car becomes a possible symbol for that mined oil; the sickly colors of the trees and their landscape a metaphor for the ecological damage our reliance upon it imparts.

*Excavation* (2021), with its title a synonym for the title of the show, again connects to the concept of mining on a superficial level. Here, a brown-bodied man, shirtless and shoeless, bends over in an ambiguous gesture in a field of black grass. He is flanked by a black bird on one side, and an amorphous white shape, resembling a ghost, on the other. Against another fiery red background, a lasso is tossed in his direction from somewhere outside the painting's frame. Silhouetted against the sky, the lasso frames a lone tree on the horizon. Jahmal's swooping brushstrokes lend an urgency to the painting, conjuring a feeling of swift movement across the canvas. Its action feels equivocal, possibly ominous. Is the man simply bending

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to examine the strange little, white shape at his feet? Is he working? Or perhaps fleeing? Is the rope a lasso and if so, is its intent to capture the man, or the tree? Is it even a lasso at all, or could it be a noose? The raven seems to portend an ill omen. But then again it could be just a bird, after all.



Marcus Jahmal, *Living off the land*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 80 x 96 inches. © Marcus Jahmal. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

sprouting limbs, black holes simply hollows carved by time and nature. But sit quietly with Jahmal's paintings, and one begins to see their imploring arms reaching outward, and almost hear their song, a dirge to a broken landscape.

Wide open skies, inky black oil, lassoes. In other paintings, a rearing horse, imploring skeletons, barbed wire, and barbecue pits all surface. Taken together, Jahmal's hieroglyphs begin to point to a particularly uneasy, and a particularly American, experience. There is something to be said about our collective psyche in thrall to rugged individualism, in thrall to material and capital, in thrall to a personal freedom that comes at the price of shattered community and a fracked and wounded terrain. We begin to comprehend these signs of fraught histories and quiet desolation, putting them together like a puzzle. There is a story unfolding here but it is an enigmatic one, and one that can only be reconstituted through a personal, introspective mining process.

And above all those moaning trees. Jahmal dedicates one painting solely to them, *Tree still* (2021), somehow at once both vibrant and subdued. In warm, earthen reds and oranges, Jahmal renders three trees, and gives them center stage. They are the focus of the canvas rather than details in a background. Externally, they are just trees—trunks

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## Contributor

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