

BOTANICAL BARISTA

Multidisciplinary artist and Bloom & Plume entrepreneur Maurice Harris mixes art and commerce as effortlessly and beautifully as he combines florals and feathers in his signature arrangements.

BY **ALLISON BERG**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MAURICE HARRIS**



A self-portrait from Maurice Harris's August 2019 installation *A Self-Managing Diva Creating Their Own Throne*, staged inside The Broad's "Soul of a Nation" exhibition

‘IT’S LIKE CHOPIN’S MUSIC WHERE

there are a lot of minor chords and a lot of dissonance, but then it comes together as a beautiful harmony,” explains Maurice Harris when speaking to his personal narrative. Having opened his bespoke Echo Park flower shop in 2010 and an adjoining coffee shop of the same name only seven months ago, he does not attempt to romanticize or apologize for embracing diametrically opposing concepts. Harris has spent his life in a system that doesn’t often validate his experiences as a gay, black man. Nonetheless, he is working hard to successfully carve out a space for himself—and others like him—artistically, socially and commercially.

“My businesses are holding on by dental floss. That is my really uncomfortable reality,” says Harris. He fastidiously designs arrangements for international fashion houses and Los Angeles’s most stylish set, and his sculptural installations and performances are finding their way into major museum shows at institutions, including MOCA, San Diego Art Institute and The Broad. All of his endeavors are part of a collective art practice.

Harris and I settle at a satiny gold table for two in Bloom & Plume Coffee’s greenery-adorned purple alcove off Temple Street on an unusually hot Sunday morning. The inspired coffee shop is the brainchild of Harris and his younger brother, Moses Harris. It is a seemingly successful bid to fill the void of a community gathering space in a neighborhood grappling with gentrification.

Spirited chatter amongst friends and local acquaintances pervades the quaint and whimsy-sprinkled (thanks to Harris’s “merch” obsession) cafe such that we relinquish our coveted orange wooden seats in exchange for two very high stools tucked away inside Harris’s flower shop next door. Harris, easily a foot taller than I, immediately senses my struggle to climb up on the stool and insists on taking the less stable one. Surrounded by voluptuous cream-colored feathers and botanicals of various shapes, scents and sizes, he removes his multicolored floral Nike jacket to reveal a yellow and black polka dot neckerchief over an orange T-shirt as we continue our tête-à-tête without missing a beat.

Growing up the oldest of four—he has two brothers and one sister—in the Northern California suburb of Stockton, Harris says he has always studied the aesthetics of everyday life and is constantly thinking about how he can make his surroundings more beautiful. His hands move in lyrical synchronicity with his storytelling as he reflects upon his youth. “I wasn’t out then, but I did always have a florist,” he laughs. “I went to the chicest shop in our city, San Francisco Floral. This lady, Carrie, took me under her wing and made corsages for my dates, bouquets for my mom and taught me a few tricks, like how to hold a flower knife.”

Aside from a flower course in junior college, Harris forgot all

about florals for several years. Graduating from college in 2005 with a major in sculpture and new genre and a minor in fashion, he did a stint at Barneys, danced in commercials and had a variety of creative freelance positions before reencountering flowers at the Juicy Couture display department around 2008.

Harris began sourcing things at the flower market, and co-workers jumped on his bandwagon with requests for their bosses, baby showers and weddings. While making arrangements, Harris caught himself humming and singing. “I really liked the instant gratification and sense of accomplishment. I would spend an hour on this thing, and it looked good. I originally went to school for fashion. If you have ever designed a garment, it’s three muslins, corrections, the real fabric, and two or three weeks later you are often like, ‘I hate it!’” he says. “The flower thing was cool and kind of untapped back then.”

His status became more official when his assistant at the clothing brand told him he could do her friend’s entire wedding as long as he had business cards. “It was so random, but I said, ‘Okay’ and then came up with a business name,” giggles Harris. He wanted it to be something that conveyed romance and dreamy, old-world sophistication. His best friend devised “Bloom & Plume” based on flower synonyms and Harris’s feather obsession. An old Disneyland silhouette cutout became the logo. “I always hated that thing, but it suddenly became fabulous and has stood the test of time,” says Harris with a shrug. His career really snowballed when fashion designer and boutique owner Jenni Kayne, for whom he had been doing windows, gave him the opportunity to style flowers for her photo shoots. “I gave that job my all, and Jenni told all her friends about it,” says Harris.

After almost ten years of arranging florals professionally, he finally calls himself an artist. “I never felt validated as an artist because I always worked in commercial forms. I kind of thought that title was reserved for classic art forms like sculpture, painting and old school photography,” says Harris, who shoots digital. “Now, I realize being an artist is who I am, and the forms I choose can be anything. I am interested in moving conversations forward and changing narratives through my art.”

For anyone familiar with Harris’s work, it comes as no surprise that his fresh floral sculptures were highlighted in MOCA’s *One Day at a Time: Manny Farber and Termite Art* last winter. He installed a new design each week throughout the show’s duration and spent over 14 hours excruciatingly affixing Swarovski crystals to live petals and stems for the final installation. “It’s just about not wanting to do anything regular or ordinary,” explains Harris. “I am constantly searching for the weirdo stuff.” Whether it is a rare and



A 2017 Bloom & Plume creation entitled "Paulina Morango"



Harris juxtaposes the natural beauty of flowers and the way black bodies are often seen as “less than” in his images in order to create a tension, but also a sense of resolution, as in this portrait of his friend Reese Ford titled *Reese Black & Blue*, 2019.

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unusual carnation or strange colored greens, he is thinking about what has been forgotten and needs to be brought to the forefront. He celebrates the interesting underdog through flowers.

“I am always referencing myself as the person who isn’t necessarily being seen,” confides Harris. “Flowers are Mother Nature’s beautiful miracle—always shining and always living their best lives. I’m attractive. I’m worth it. Bees, come and get me!” Harris throws his head back and opens his long graceful arms. He sees flowers’ natural beauty in juxtaposition with the way black bodies, particularly in America, are often seen as “less than.” He is concerned that black people are not humanized enough, and he wants to be seen as more than just his skin color.

A central part of Harris’s practice is utilizing creativity to process complicated racial situations and histories. Discussing police shootings of black men, such as Eric Garner and Trayvon Martin, Harris says, “I find it very complicated because that isn’t my experience as a black man. I grew up in the suburbs where my parents intended to give us ‘better lives.’ They taught me how to speak to police, how to behave in predominantly white spaces and how to be the only black person in the room ‘representing my people well.’” He continues, “Also, being a gay male, I am often fearful myself of hypermasculine black men. Ironically, if those same people would have seen me walking down the street in a hoodie, I would have gotten shot too.”

Harris thinks about how he is servicing primarily the one percent, which is mostly a population that does not look like him, but with whom he shares mutual love, adoration and respect, while people who do look like him are being murdered for no reason. It weighs heavily. His solution is to be the change he wants to see—“I love that quote,” grins Harris. He creates new imagery of blackness with flowers. He wants to bring both black bodies and flowers to the forefront in order to create a tension, but also a sense of resolution. These beautiful images have gone viral through his well-curated Instagram feed and his biennial calendar, *Shades of Blackness*, that he launched in 2016.

“I wish I could just be creative, share things and make the world more beautiful. However, I can’t go to a paint store, a photography shop or a flower mart and say, ‘Give me everything for free because I am creative,’” Harris laughs again. The way Harris has negotiated commercial realities is by always having projects that are just for him, so to speak. Once flowers became

his job, he immersed himself in dance and then photography as his personal creative outlets. He is always doing something—including making flowers that are not for sale, so he can explore his creativity without parameters.

Harris has learned that appreciating things and paying for things are two very different propositions. “The hardest part of having a creative business is justifying all the work that goes into it. The most expensive part of both my businesses is labor,” he says. “Clients don’t mind paying for flowers, but they don’t want to pay for me picking them out, packaging them, picking them up, putting them in my car, driving them to my studio, processing them, cleaning up a vase, putting a vase together, getting it prepped, making an arrangement, packaging that up, handwriting a note and delivering it to the recipient. Everyone is like, ‘Why is it so expensive?’ Sometimes I don’t even know! I mean, I know, but who has the time or wants to hear it?”

While Harris loves talking about his process, he finds it frustrating having to educate people on the costs of creativity. He works really hard, has sleepless nights and has been single for 20 years as a result of his dedication. “I don’t need any sympathy, but I just like to put it in perspective,” says Harris. When he started his business, Harris was convinced that he could create floral arrangements cheaper, faster and better than his counterparts. That lasted for a minute while he was working out of his home and didn’t have any insurance, employees, multiple vases, worktables or an annual \$1,200 LLC fee. “I didn’t realize the overhead it takes to make a real business sustainable because I just wanted to make pretty things,” says Harris. Now, he views what he does as akin to ballet and ballerinas—“It looks so easy to everyone, but I know how hard it is.”

Though Harris hasn’t held back for a second, I am hyper aware of a guy in a baseball cap peering through the door. He desperately wants Harris’s attention, so I quickly ask, “What is next for Maurice Harris?” He is excited about his new Quibi show, *Centerpiece*. Part of the new streaming network’s April 2020 launch, each ten-minute-or-less episode, produced with Rashida Jones and Will McCormack, will follow Harris as he interviews other multidisciplinary artists to understand their creative processes and then creates a floral installation based on what he has learned. “I am actually trying to simplify,” says Harris, “but when you own your own business, you can never turn it off.”