

THE BIG DIG: DAVID HARTT • THE HISTORIES (OLD BLACK JOE)



## DAVID HARTT IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN CORBETT

**John Corbett:** I want to talk about the overarching notion of doing these three segments of *The Histories*.<sup>\*</sup> What is the course-correction you see these histories engaged in?

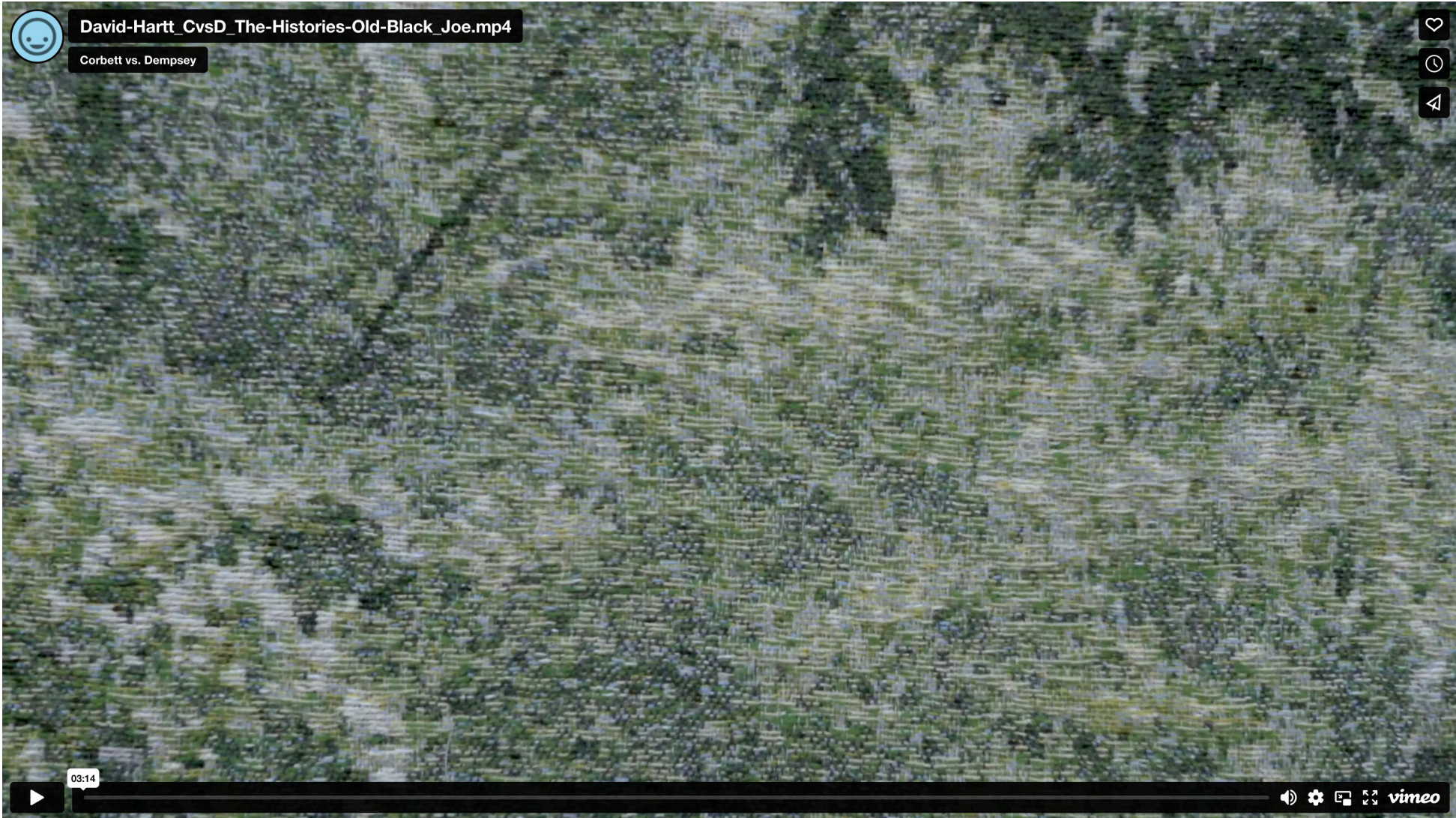
**David Hartt:** Sure. I can address the desire to restate, relearn, ideas of how we understand history, how we receive it, how it's written, how we participate in it. Those are all big questions. But I think perhaps just starting a moment earlier in regards to why the form itself. The work, up until the point that I initiated this project, involved these isolated projects that were focused on a single site and subject. And because I have a research-based practice, there's a lot of work that went into making each one. I realized that I was leaving a lot of work undone – that there was a lot of potential that remained within the conceptual territory that I wasn't using. And so I wanted to figure out a set of strategies that would allow me to spend more time, working with a concept.

I think the first opportunity that I was given to do that was for the *Negative Space* work, where I had produced a film, a series of sculptures, and photographs for Galerie Thomas Schulte, back in 2017, and realized that I was just scratching the surface. I think there's always this focus when talking about my practice on prioritizing the conceptual labor, but not necessarily fully acknowledging the formal aspects of the practice. And that's where it gets really interesting for me, once you've created this conceptual terrain, there is so much to explore. So, what I realized was that the sculptures, the film, and the photographs were only the beginning. And when Stephanie Smith at the ICA in Richmond offered to show the work, she also asked a really important question, which was, is there anything left undone, is there anything that you want to continue to explore? And I was like, yes, absolutely. And so that was actually the impetus for me to do the first tapestry. It was a format that I had been exploring for a little while. I was interested in the way that it allowed me to deal with some of the limitations that I saw in photography, specifically in terms of scale and materiality, and tapestry was something that allowed me to go larger, as a means to deal with what I think of as the power and spectacle, of history painting. It has a particular kind of authority, and also I love the way that history painting plays with different temporalities simultaneously. And the other thing is that, photography, when it gets to a certain scale, begins to fall apart, the medium itself has these inherent limitations, and the tapestry allowed me to escape those. As you approach the work, the material itself started to reveal a whole new set of textures and qualities. So in producing that tapestry it really opened up a whole range of options in terms of where I could eventually take the work in the future. I was also really excited about the idea of re-exploring the terrain that I thought was abandoned.

*The Histories* was really an attempt to create a strategic framework that allowed me to explore a lot of material and to develop the work over several chapters, several iterations.

When talking about modernity, I had originally been focusing on the postwar moments, after WWII, with the advent of postcolonialism, and globalization, before the post-modern moment, but to understand, to understand it fully, I think you have to go much further back. And so for me the 19th century became critical in terms of understanding the physical and psychic infrastructure that continues to haunt us today. So, if we think about postcolonial identity, we have to go to the moments of the formation of colonies. We have to think about the movement of peoples, of diaspora – we need to move back to the point where these groups are being mobilized, either through their own volition, or through the institution of slavery and conquest. I wanted to kind of go back to a period where you actually see the present taking shape.

Herodotus's (c. 484 – c. 425 BC) text, the source of the title, was a model. A model that accepts the movement of people, and of culture, as a deeply human activity.



David Hartt, *The Histories (Old Black Joe)*, installation documentation, Corbett vs. Dempsey, October, 2020. Video by Robert Chase Heishman

**JC:** Mmhmm.

**DH:** And what I wanted to do was transpose his model to the geography of the Caribbean, a place where we see all of these different races and cultures and societies coming together violently in a place that's deeply foreign to most of them. And so that, for me, is the birth of modernity, the formation of something unprecedented. Something deeply connected to our present.

**JC:** And what about the historical figures in the work?

**DH:** Yes, about those figures: I am not making an argument for exceptionalism. Instead I'm choosing to see things through their eyes, and to see how they're participating, and to understand what they're producing. To see how the structures of language and ethics and ideology move these figures forward.

**JC:** Can we go straight to *Old Black Joe*, as a way of instantiating what you just mentioned? Let's name the figures who are part of each of these *Histories*. Each work has multiple figures and bringing them into constellation is part of the point, right?

**DH:** Right. Correct.

**JC:** It's about constellations of figures that you, in a way, mash up. They're not figures who would have necessarily had anything to do with one another but the point is that by bringing them into some kind of proximity, you evoke something else about each of them.

**DH:** I would suggest that they always have; they kind of illuminate each other.

**JC:** Right, I don't mean to say that it's arbitrary, because it doesn't feel postmodern in the sense of the author as the godlike figure who can then pick things at will from anywhere and throw them together and make sense of them.

**DH:** Right.

**JC:** So you're looking for inherent connections...

**DH:** Yes.

**JC:** ...but the inherent connections might not have been so evident to anyone else, or even to the participants, it's that there are these crisscrossing lines of connection.

**DH:** Yes.

**JC:** And that feels consistent through them.



**DH:** Sure. So if we start with Robert Duncanson (1821 – 1872), his name came up in research that I was doing on Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829 – 1869), who was the key musical figure in the first chapter of *The Histories, Le Mancenillier*. Gottschalk is a synthetic figure, someone whose way of working hybridizes ideas and relationships from many cultural spheres, and this is why I was pushing back slightly against this notion that they are somehow unrelated or occupying entirely separate orbits of existence and influence. Duncanson comes up in my research because of Gottschalk's interest in literature and the fine arts; you learn that he's in conversation with Frederic Church (1826 – 1900) and also with Stephen Foster (1826 – 1864), and with Mark Twain (1835 – 1910). All of these different dimensions of the American cultural universe that are interrelated. Duncanson is in the outer orbit but he comes closer for a brief moment and you begin to realize this person is interesting.

So Duncanson is self-taught, he's a housepainter, and at that moment, housepainting meant doing decorative painting, not simply whitewashing the walls and painting them a nice color, but doing, specialty trim, faux finish, all of these things.

**JC:** Early 19th century.

**DH:** Yes. he's working, as a decorative painter, and he's not satisfied with that. He has greater ambitions, he wants to be a fine artist, and so he works. He works hard, he learns, he begins to find clients. Both the moment and the place he's in happen to be supportive – abolitionists are advocating for change and finding ways to support their cause. One of which is by giving commissions to a young, aspiring, Black artist. And what's important to understand is that Duncanson is one of the first Black artists to emerge and to participate within the discourse of Western art history. That's not to say that there were not Black artists before him, it's simply to say that they were marginalized to work with the traditions of craft and weren't always able to enjoy this idea of authorship. Duncanson can and does participate within the conventions of painting, and is in dialogue with painters of the Ohio River Valley, which is associated with the Hudson River School.

**JC:** Where was he based?

**DH:** He was in Cincinnati.

**JC:** Cincinnati.

**DH:** He is in Michigan for a period, in a small town, before he moves down to Cincinnati where he receives the support of wealthy abolitionists, and that's where he decides to make a name for himself. He eventually leaves and is supported, to the Grand Tour in Europe with another painter, William Sonntag, who he's in deep dialogue with and who he's learning from. They go to Great Britain, then France and finally Italy. He sees the great European landscape paintings in various collections and he makes work there of his own. When he returns he is by every measure participating within the traditions of the Hudson River School. I'm interested in his emergence, right? And the way that I can begin to understand American history through his participation and his relationship with the abolitionist movement. Later, during the Civil War, Duncanson leaves the U.S. and goes to Montreal, where he is introduced to the nascent community of landscape painters in Montreal. He then begins to contribute to and help formulate the school of landscape painting in Canada.

**JC:** Wow.



David Hartt  
*The Histories (after Duncanson)*  
2020  
Photogravure from a 18 1/4 x 27 inch plate  
22 1/4 x 31 inches  
Edition of 10 and 1AP



Robert S. Duncanson  
*Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami River*  
1851  
Oil on Canvas  
29 1/4 x 42 1/4 inches  
Cincinnati Art Museum, gift of Norbert Heerman and Arthur Helbig

**DH:** When he was in Cincinnati, he worked occasionally for James Ball (1825 – 1904), an African-American photographer in Cincinnati who had one of the city's most successful photo studios. Duncanson is doing retouching work, as well as painting backgrounds. He then goes to Montreal and does the same thing for William Notman's (1826 – 1891) studio, which is the most prestigious photo studio in Canada at the time. And so you really see, Duncanson being this synthetic figure, moving through these different communities, moving between photography and painting. Through him I could explore all of these different locales and histories and mediums, and understand them through the lens of Blackness, but also understand them more holistically as well. And I think it's important to recognize that this concept of Blackness is actually woven through the history of that moment.

**JC:** Yeah.

**DH:** Duncanson becomes one pole that the work circles around. With *Le Mancenillier* I had this wonderful pairing of Haiti and New Orleans. I was interested if possible, to do the same thing with the second chapter. So, I looked at that historical period, and at different countries in the Caribbean to see what artists were active and that's when Michel-Jean Cazabon (1813 – 1888) emerges. His parents are from Martinique. The French abolished slavery before the English did, so Martinique is free, and there are free Blacks that are landowners there. So Cazabon's family...

**JC:** Is this the same period as Duncanson?

**DH:** Yes, exactly.

**JC:** Right.

**DH:** So Cazabon's parents go from Martinique to Trinidad and they become landowners and slaveowners. They're very wealthy. They can afford to send their child, their son, to England, where he attends boarding school. He then returns to Trinidad and decides that he wants to be an artist, and so he's sent to study painting in Paris. He becomes associated with the artists of the Barbizon school, and is shown in the Louvre. He marries a white Frenchwoman and returns to Trinidad where the British have abolished slavery. It's a changing cultural and economic situation. There is a period in Trinidad called apprenticeship that gave the British an opportunity to begin to exploit other corners of the empire. We see the mass migration of Indian laborers into Trinidad working in essentially indentured servitude. This is what Cazabon returns home to, this rapidly changing country where the demographics are actually in the process of shifting to what we understand Trinidad to be today.

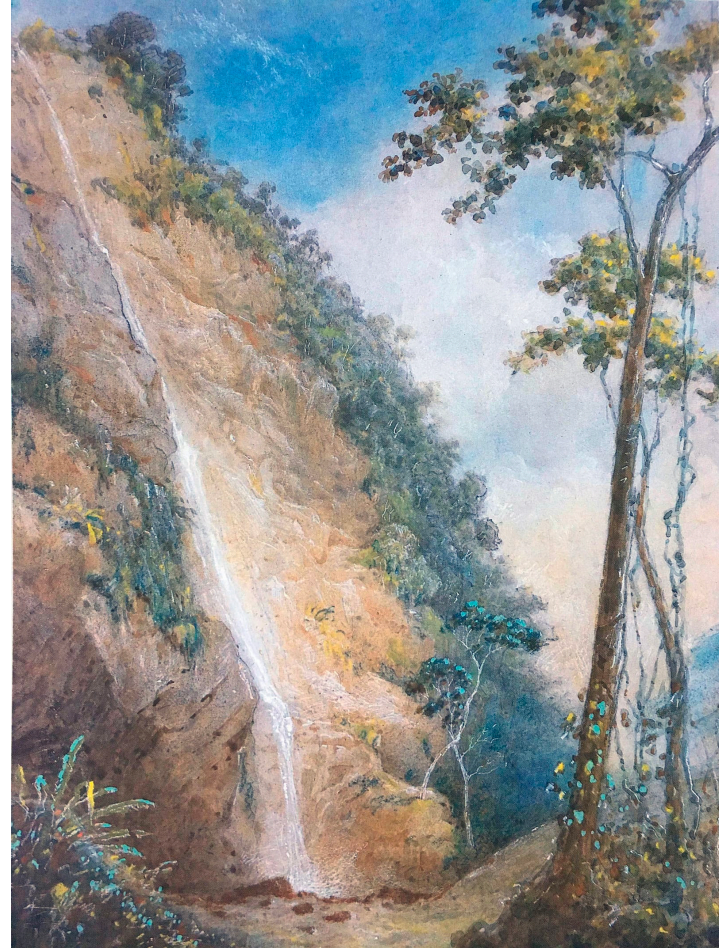
His first commissions come from the British ruling class – he paint views for them of the landscape, of the plantations. Souvenirs of their time in the colonies that will hang when they return in their manor houses. One of the most significant collections of Cazabon's work is in the Harris Collection at Belmont in Kent, England.

I think the other interesting thing is that in the U.S. at that time, the most successful form of painting that's being collected and supported is Hudson River School artists. Frederic Church is at the height of his career, but the style is soon to be eclipsed by the popularity of the Barbizon school. I love the way that art historically, there's this continuity. So there we have two figures, both Black, and both deeply synthetic individuals who allow us to weave together these historical contexts, whereas previously we always thought of them as being very separate and distinct.

**JC:** Yeah.



David Hartt  
*The Histories (after Cazabon)*  
2020  
Photogravure from a 27 x 18 1/4 inch plate  
31 x 22 1/4 inches  
Edition of 10 and 1 AP



Michel-Jean Cazabon  
*Maraccas Waterfall I*  
1849  
Watercolor  
10 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches  
Collection of William Burnley; Fane-Gladwin

**DH:** Musically, starting again with Gottschalk, Foster emerges. This deeply problematic figure whose music tapped into African-American traditions of song, who made music for minstrel shows, who also wrote this incredibly beautiful piece of music, *Old Black Joe*, which tried to connect and empathize with, the black condition. It's a deeply spiritual piece of music as well.

**JC:** Well, in a really simple way, it suggests that there are multiple cross-cultural borrowings occurring at once.



DH: I'd be careful with that, though. Because what I'm getting at is that they are not borrowing but instead are participating within.

JC: Right, sure.

DH: So they are as much responsible for the authorship of those positions and those histories as anybody else participating in it.

JC: I mean, they're contributing to it and then they're not being afforded a central position in its subsequent representation.

DH: Yes.

JC: Can you, maybe play out how the Disney component of it works for you in all this?

DH: The most obvious association is Van Dyke Parks. One of his earliest professional engagements was actually doing the arrangements for "The Bare Necessities," for the Disney film. He was like 21, or something when he does that. *The Jungle Book*, was exploiting not only Rudyard Kipling and a kind of concept of India and the colonies, but also merging that with African-American identity through use of Black voices and Black song in the music of the film.



JC: Voices that were often played by white people. Like Phil Harris and Bruce Reitherman, or Louis Prima.

DH: Yeah. There's a synthesis that happens within the film.

JC: Right.

DH: You know, it doesn't represent any place, or any culture. It actually represents an amalgamation of all of these fictions of place and culture and identity, to create this both idealized and deeply conflicted representation of identity.

JC: Van Dyke Parks is such an interesting character in terms of being a kind of a crossing guard for all sorts of different kinds of music. He's so deeply involved in Trinidadian music. He's synthesizing all sorts of things from different communities, and then if I think about the overall soundtrack of *The Jungle Book*, the way that it condenses a certain attitude, in an American context, about jazz as a kind of music that allowed the white American public to access some of the great wealth of musical ideas circulating within the African-American community.

DH: Yeah. This is something that Van Dyke saw happening with Calypso.

JC: Exactly!



DH: It's an activist music, that plays a deeply political role in Trinidad. It's independence, and then you see it adopted by all of these American celebrities, it becomes deracinated and loses all of its capacity to critique.

When I was doing research on Gottschalk, I would look for recordings of Gottschalk's music and I was really surprised to find a recording of *Souvenir de Porto Rico*, which we're including as the B-side of our single, by Van Dyke. I was like, wow, fuck, Van Dyke, of course. I just kind of filed it away, not knowing what to do with it at the time, but, you know, immediately it brought Van Dyke into orbit around the work from the first chapter.

When I started thinking about the second chapter of *The Histories*, and thinking about Trinidad, and how do I begin to access Calypso but not in an anachronistic way, I wanted to avoid the kind the spectre of cultural imperialism. I wanted to access that history and set of traditions in a more sincere and authentic way? And I actually had a recording that Van Dyke produced of the Esso Steel Band.

JC: Mhmm.

DH: I found afterwards, the record that he produced for The Mighty Sparrow, "Hot and Sweet" (1974), and then one record that was super important to me, because it was Van Dyke synthesizing what he had learned working with Trinidadian musicians and incorporating them into the American songbook. It was Van Dyke's second solo record, *Discover America* (1972).

JC: Yeah. A spectacularly great LP.

DH: And so, for me that was a kind of (snaps fingers) catalytic point where I was like, oh shit, this totally blows it open. So what I asked him to do, I asked him to apply the same strategies to *Old Black Joe*. I asked Van Dyke to do a Calypso version of *Old Black Joe*. Because what it allowed me to do was to be recursive with all of these associations, bringing together, but combining them in a way that it actually produced something unexpected that wasn't simply a simulation of something that already existed in the past.

JC: Right. Right. Totally.

DH: That it somehow was processed through the lens of Van Dyke's experience and position as a historical figure.

JC: Right.

DH: In chapter one of *The Histories*, the music is interpreted by Girma Yifrasheva. An Ethiopian musician who studied music in Europe. I was interested in how he would process the music of Gottschalk through the lens of his own experience and of the present.

JC: Jim and I were so honored to be present for some of the recordings Girma made for you.

DH: I didn't know what to expect from Van Dyke's version of the song, but when I was in LA and I went to the studio and heard a rough version of it, I have to say that I was astonished. I didn't know what to do with the sound effects they were incredibly disturbing. And so then Van Dyke and I were talking about the different production methodologies that he was employing. And he mentioned Esquivel and Chuck Jones and all of a sudden it made fucking sense to me. Really dark, black comedy, it reminded me of Ralph Bakshi's, *Coonskin*, which stars Scatman Crothers.

JC: That was who I was gonna bring up, yeah.

DH: Which is the polar opposite of *The Jungle Book*. *Coonskin* recognizes the inherent racism of those depictions and runs with it, runs into the fucking dark with it! (laughs) And so that's what I realized he was doing with the music. He was going Bakshi on me, (laughs) and I loved it, and I loved it, but I needed to realize that. I needed to realize what he was doing, you know, what he was seeing, and what he was capable of. It's in the realm of Van Dyke's artistic trajectory, he's deeply empathetic, but he's also a showman. And so he uses the language that he knows to provide a comic critique, in a way that exploits his critical faculties that are indebted to parody, to satire, to dark comedy, to spectacle. And that's what the work ended up being, that's what the music piece ended up being.



David Hartt and Van Dyke Parks, in conversation in Los Angeles at Philip Martin Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition *This Synthetic Moment (Replicant)*, curated by Hartt, July 13, 2019.



Photograph of Robert S. Duncanson taken in 1864 by William Notman.

Courtesy the Notman Archives, McCord Museum, McGill University.

JC: Last question. Talk for a second about this notion of putting these things all in one space together and to what extent are you interested in controlling or leaving completely open one's experience of these simultaneous materials – soundtrack, tapestries, furniture – as an orchestrated event?

DH: That's a great question. It's very deliberately theatrical. I was looking at a portrait of Duncanson, done in Notman's studio in Montreal, where he's sitting in an Adirondack-style chair, with a painted backdrop behind him. And in some ways I'm recreating that. So the work is activated by the viewer, who comes in and becomes part of the tableau. They somehow occupy this space of synthesis, you're a privileged observer but you're also a participant. It's also a way to kind of dislocate the work temporally. It doesn't sit anywhere comfortably. It could have been made 150 or 400 years ago, or it could have been made yesterday. And that's something new about the work. It's starting to move temporally in terms of its physical iteration, not just in terms of its associative iterations. It's not stable. One can walk in and feel that they're in the cloisters or in an old time photo studio or a film set or on stage at the opera. I love that it could sit as comfortably in the 19th century galleries at the museum as in the contemporary section. That's a new language developing with me and with the work that I'm really happy about.

PLATES





Van Dyke Parks



The Histories (Old Black Joe)

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7" Single

Van Dyke Parks

Old Black Joe

Stephen Foster (1860)

Arr./adapted by Van Dyke Parks

Music for an installation

By David Hartt

b/w

Souvenir de la Havane

Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1859)

Arr./adapted by Van Dyke Parks

CvsDS002

### FOOTNOTE

\*The Histories is a three part cycle of works by David Hartt begun in 2019. The first iteration, *The Histories (Le Mancenillier)*, is a commission from the Beth Sholom Preservation Foundation and was originally sited in their historic Frank Lloyd Wright designed synagogue in Elkins Park, PA (September 11 - December 19, 2019). *Le Mancenillier* cites historical figures including Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Martin Johnson Heade and explores the geographical regions of New Orleans and Haiti. The installation consists of two large scale tapestries, two films, numerous orchids and tropical plants together with a soundtrack of recordings by Ethiopian pianist Girma Yifrashew performing scores composed by Gottschalk. *The Histories (Old Black Joe)* is the second iteration which debuted at Corbett vs. Dempsey September 18 - October 23, 2020. The third iteration will be *The Histories (Crépuscule)* which explores the regions of Newfoundland and Jamaica and will debut in 2021.