

## PIN-UP

# ARTIST JACOLBY SATTERWHITE'S EUPHORIC UNIVERSE TRAVERSES DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL REALMS

By Mahfuz Sultan

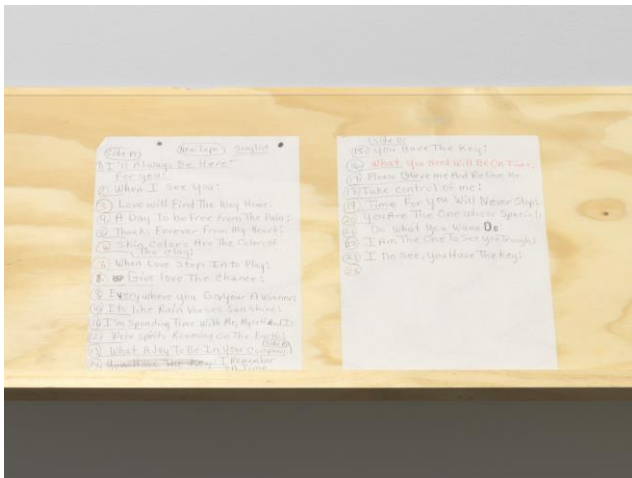


Installation view of Jacolby Satterwhite, *You're at Home*, Pioneer Works, New York. © Dan Bradica

Imagine that all the works of Jacolby Satterwhite are the suspirations of a single, continuous world. A world in which everything flows and reality has assimilated the smooth transitions, bends, and breaks of dance music. A world where all things touch ends if you change their tempos enough and there are no hierarchies of scale or value. And what we call art, on this side of the looking glass, is a provisional form of communication between that world and ours; that the translation of the other world into painting and sculpture, video and installation are Satterwhite's efforts to showcase a reality that exists beyond the pale of what can be said about it.

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In *You're at home*, his exhibition at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, these objects have migrated into our world. In addition to a main room featuring sculptures, videos, and a record store installation, there is the series *Birds in Paradise* (2017–19), a two-channel video installed in a black box theater and a room of drawings and writing by Patricia Satterwhite — his mother, muse, and artistic collaborator. Her handwritten texts often end as architectural edifices in the artist's digital world, writing that proves itself as habitable as any building. In this show, Patricia's work having twice crossed the boundary between our world and Satterwhite's, re-enters ours as 3D printed sculptures, sitting on cabinets distributed throughout the space which, in turn, read as extrusions from patterned wallpaper designed by the artist and derived from the same universe as his videos. If anything, Satterwhite's practice involves a special gift for moving between the digital and physical world while erasing the order of operations.



Lyrics written by the artist's mother Patricia Satterwhite included in *You're at home*, Pioneer Works, New York. © Dan Bradica

The score of this iteration of *Birds in Paradise* is taken from Satterwhite's LP with Nick Weiss titled *Love Will Find A Way Home* (cover shot by Wolfgang Tillmans). Released in tandem with his Pioneer Works show, the album features grainy, faded recordings of Patricia Satterwhite singing acapella over expansive house music. In one of *Birds in Paradise's* recurring vignettes, avatars dance on the steps of an elliptical colosseum set about a Beaux-Arts style garden. The steps are a shelf of flames or flickering tongues. Their choreography is highly regulated, pared down to a clockwork of assembly line labor and geometric precision. A flying sentinel on winged horseback, cowboy hatted and gyrating in their saddle, orbits a suspended jumbotron in the sky and casts its searchlight at random over the dancers and twilight landscape. In this fantastic world, the only hierarchies, if any, are ones of size and visibility. There are the larger performers in the center of the amphitheater, the aerial sentinel, the overseers on the

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steps freed from the pods that the smaller dancers sit inside, and the figures atop the jumbotron floating overhead. There is a solitary dancer that spontaneously bursts into flames and the sudden appearance of a wheeling carnival dissolving into vapor.

Elsewhere, on the adjacent channel, Satterwhite is being ritually unwrapped by a nude bather in a live action video sequence layered against a birds eye view shot of agitated blue seas. An event that reads equally as Yoruba ritual and baptism. The potential for religious iconography and overlapping mythologies drawn from disparate traditions is a hallmark of Satterwhite's. Later in the same video, the artist is dancing on a bridge that projects from a stone wall while pulsating machines float in and out of the frame: a phantasmagoria of winding figures and energy pulses, the platform of dancers in miniature, and the streamers and entrails in an endless fugue state. There are films within films as well: footage of natural disasters and Satterwhite's baptism on the beach nested in the jumbotron that hovers above the colosseum while 3D-animated Renaissance machines cross back and forth between the video channels.



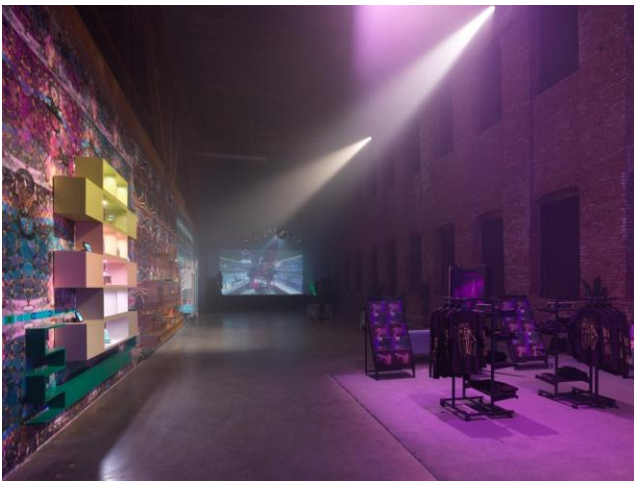
Jacolby Satterwhite photographed by Benjamin Erik Ackerman for PIN-UP Magazine.

All of this is not to say that Satterwhite's world has no antecedents in ours; in fact, his work holds an almost impossible intertextual density. There is Satterwhite the landscape painter — with sunsets and silhouettes of trees at the edge of amphitheaters, gardens, and populous steppes. The work gives itself over effortlessly to the panorama and leporello, the gatefold, forms of representation that expand longitudinally, that spread into space. There are open nods to Hieronymus Bosch, Caravaggio, and Picasso; particularly the promiscuity of the late Picasso with his insatiable will to remix the work of his forebears. And then the painterly

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tropes: the Baptism, the Annunciation, the mortification of the flesh, and the anguished pleasures of self-flagellation. However, this is a nocturnal classicism, these are the bathers on the platform after the night turns purple and the subway makes every stop. This is pleasure extracted from every single inch of religious fervor.

There are faint intimations of the hermetically sealed worlds of Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976) and *Jubilee* (1978), the naked jousting of Steve McQueen's *Bear* (1993), the infinitely protean imaginary landscapes of Bjork, and Britney Spears with her glistening cathedrals of pop culture; the elevated nightclub platforms reimaged as the aristocratic menageries of Versailles. And what about the 17th-century fleshiness? The tableaux of writhing bodies, the tiers of thrones and angels that line the ceilings of Baroque churches, the rippling folds that suggest bodies multiplying themselves and the fluids which foam indefinitely. The pomp and circumstance of the masque, the games of hide and seek played by candlelight in the arbors of Watteau and Fragonard — the long shadows and faint sounds of running water set in a garden that orbits a dancer the size of a planet.



Installation view of Jacolby Satterwhite, *You're at home*, Pioneer Works, New York. © Dan Bradica

Satterwhite's work also speaks of the innumerable, uncountable characters of the epic; the epic that runs without end; the snake consuming its own tail; the characters that are avatars of the poet. The ones that capture states of feeling and release symbolic charges rather than express unfolding personalities. One is left with the lingering sense that works such as *Birds in Paradise* not only chart the evolution of the artist's interior world, but the rich and teeming life of an entire people from somewhere else, somewhere behind the screen. They gesture at the massive worlds and nonlinear storytelling of *Final Fantasy* (VI & VII especially). It is worth noting that the artist came of age at a time when video-game designers such as Hideo

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Kojima styled themselves as film auteurs, as world builders and storytellers rather than programmers or developers. To a certain extent, this could explain Satterwhite's reticence to make a fetish out of his use of technology, he is a dreamer and painter first, the software just software, as invisible in his hands as the pen when writing.

For the space of a month and a half — the show closes November 24 — Pioneer Works has been transformed into a bridge to Satterwhite's universe and what the work is or what the work is about are best left to art history, with its convenient binaries and insatiable desire to call everything by its name. These are maladies of our world, not of his. Now if Satterwhite's practice is taken as a form of world-building, then there are the practical questions to answer. The weather? Hazy and overcast, except in outer space where there is only wind and chill. There is a vague neon effulgence that hovers around every object and a digital aurora borealis that starts as meteor showers on high and turns to fluorescent rain as it nears the ground. There are lightning flashes set to the metronomic rhythms of strobe lights. The government? A hegemony of velocity. Some things remain stable for longer than others, some things are perpetually in flux. It is a universe of hybrid figures like the Sphinx or Chimera, a place where the undeniable and fundamental queerness of all of our mythologies flourish. The religion? The night, the nightclub, sex, and more sex, leather, whips, anguish, and orgasm. Fluids? brine, bile, blood, cum, and urine. And all set to pulsating dance music and the voice of Patricia Satterwhite running through his world like the breath of a god.

Installation images courtesy the artist and Pioneer Works. Portrait by Benjamin Erik Ackerman for PIN-UP.