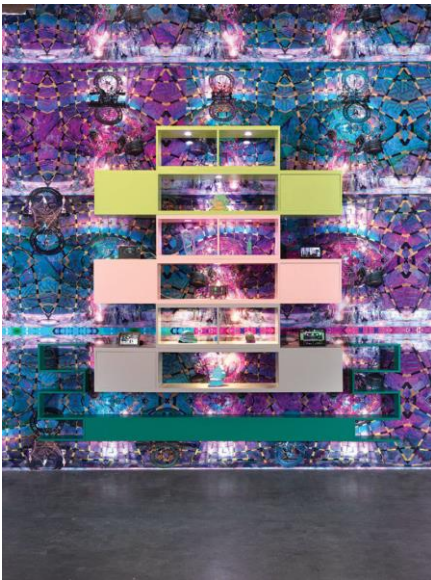


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Issue #150: Jacolby Satterwhite by Sean Capone



Shrine for American Dream Designs, 2019, mixed media, 114 × 131.25 × 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works, Brooklyn. © Jacolby Satterwhite.

Back in the '90s, I became interested in the then-nascent mediums of digital animation and virtual reality. The cyberpunk aesthetic of the time hinted at a future where social identities could be constructed and inserted into new kinds of digital social space. This space seemed full of radical potential as an art medium and as an expressive tool for queer people (or anyone for whom identity is a more metamorphic concept). But the liberating possibilities of these technologies felt less explored, in favor of the dystopian ones, which have become our reality in the post-Internet world.

So Jacolby Satterwhite's work struck me as somewhat of a revelation. He uses digital sculpting and world-building techniques to create computer-animated characters and immersive environments. Across these virtual landscapes, Jacolby copy/pastes live-action footage of himself, creating an intimate visual universe that brings together art history, "expanded cinema," and the pop-cultural worlds of music videos, social media, and video games. After following the

development of his work from single-channel videos to expansive mixed-media installations over the last several years, I sat down with Jacolby at his home studio to discuss his exhibition *You're at home*, on view this past fall at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn. I learned how the adversities he's faced in life help to form his art, making it not only a tool for survival and healing but something that perhaps lives up to the medium's original emancipatory potential.

Sean Capone

So your mother produced this incredible trove of creative material that you continue to work with—drawings, recordings, schematics for inventions. How is this material framed or translated over to video, performance, and animation? Why these mediums in particular?

Jacolby Satterwhite

After ten or twelve years of painting education, from boarding school through graduate school, I started to do performance. It was the only approach I felt some autonomy with. It gave me agency. I was dealing with this very personal narrative, and it seemed like the only way to resolve a collaboration with my mother's drawings was through performance. I mostly performed *with* them, using her instructions and spontaneous language as prompts for action—a Dada/Fluxus strategy. It was almost like Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), but instead of domesticity, I was mining a schizophrenic woman's drawings for "labor utilities." This was all with a point-and-shoot camera and green screen. I wasn't drawing anymore.

At Skowhegan in 2009, I wanted something to meditate on, so I started to teach myself software like After Effects and Maya. All the rotoscoping I was learning made me realize that I could trace the lines of my mom's drawings and render them into these massive, crystallized tableaux, reflecting what I was trying to achieve with painting. And I could perform inside those spaces as well.

SC

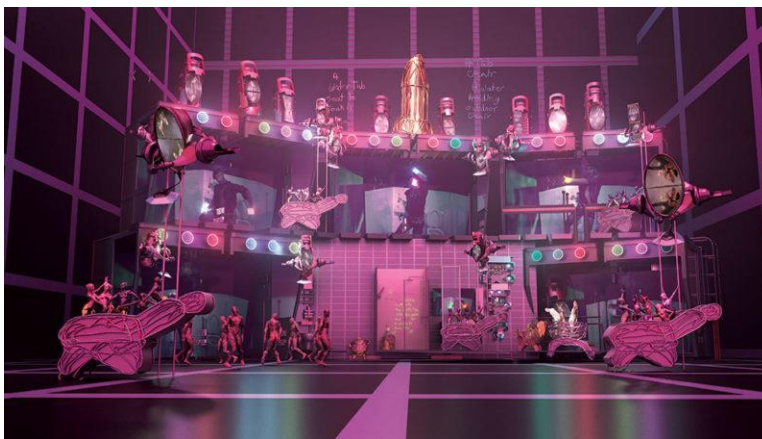
By tracing her handwriting as a kind of virtual signage, you seem to conflate the idea of an invention with its actual form. It's interesting that you started from such a conceptual framework, as opposed to something more material. A lot of artists might choose to recreate these sketches as sculptures or installations.

JS

I just use my own approach, which is derived from world-building. When I was young I would read Tolkien and buy these massive strategy guides for video games and role-playing games. They all had maps and legends, maybe even languages you had to learn. With *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Final Fantasy*, there's always some dense codex you have to get into, taking on the folklore. So, I was into immersive languages.

And for me, making sculptures wasn't the first solution. I needed an economical way to deal with those variables quickly. Working with architecture and terrain digitally, I could manipulate space in an ephemeral way, moving things around, taking chances. I did this for ten years in order to gain some mastery over real space and then finally produce complicated sculpture and painting shows.

But my mother has definitely become the clickbait part of the process. I work without any hierarchy, though, and there are many other elements—models I solicit to perform on green screen, Google images downloaded for mood-boarding, landscape shots, and so on. It's a complicated, forty-gigabyte palette of hard drive space that I'm trying to consolidate into some weird, metastasized utopia.



Room for Demoiselle Two, 2019, C-print, 45 × 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Jacoby Satterwhite.

SC

Fantasy games often use the gesture of drawing or writing as an invocation. Your work takes linear, two-dimensional material and transposes it into virtual, three-dimensional space. The line becomes an object suspended in an environment. It's a conjuring, like a magician surrounded by

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

glyphs. There's a recurring image in *Reifying Desire 6* (2014) of you in a recumbent pose surrounded by glowing geometric shapes, using dance as a kind of spellcasting. Is what I'm saying too esoteric?

JS

No! I consider the formalism of my dance strategies as a method for casting a spell of visual harmony. I have a strong grasp on my visual language and what I want to achieve with it. That's what keeps the viewer locked into the mystery. I'm committed to the composition, to the performance of a ritual.

With *Birds in Paradise* (2019), I used virtual reality to build and animate an ancient coliseum—a 360-degree space. That's on one screen, with West African shrouding rituals on the other, integrating different forms of regeneration and spectatorship into one composition. It's like abstract painting, but with a visual rhythm of circularity: crop circles, coliseums, and performances that turn my body into a maypole. I try to stay consistent within a motif and make a narrative out of it.



Money Room, 2019, C-print, 47 × 80 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Jacolby Satterwhite.

SC

The consistent thing in your work is how you make an exterior world to inhabit out of an inner space of imagination and desire. To me, that's part of the whole project of being queer in the world.

JS

Right. To survive as a queer person in this world, you extrude a fantasy and commit to it, assimilating into structures where you don't necessarily belong. I create safe spaces to stay sane. I used to think I was just world-building as escapism, creating a space for my own personal language to thrive, but as I get older, it feels less private and divisive, more generous, like a form of poetry. Like maybe Barnett Newman woke up in the morning and created zip paintings as a way to meditate on the vertical line, or as a reflection of skyscrapers in the city.

SC

With *Blessed Avenue* (2018), you dramatically expanded the variety of actors you work with. You've said that you hate when people compare the spaces in this video to a nightclub, but I do think of it as a virtual pleasure dome.

JS

But it isn't really about pleasure. Yes, they're naked and have BDSM gear and harnesses on, but that's more about the slave-master binary. It's a blurry binary, though, sure. You can't even find a master in the scene, just like you can't see what's being produced by all of these labor gesticulations. In one scene, figures fly over disaster zones—hellscape afflicted by climate change or war. These characters are complicit in the system but kept above, aloof to what's happening below.



Installation view of *Birds in Paradise*, 2019, two-channel video. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Jacolby Satterwhite.

SC

There's more labor on display than just that of hedonism. The characters look like implements in a soft machine or biomechanical contraption.

JS

It looks very *hentai*, in a way. I wanted that ambiguity between pleasure, play, and work. If Instagram was a ballet, this is what it would be.

SC

You never show explicit sex. The work doesn't feel pornographic, though it seems you approach the line.

JS

I'm approaching the aesthetic of BDSM because I want it to be like a factory. A tongue-in-cheek, sartorial decision—mostly about nudity, not sexuality.

SC

But there are certain visual codes you have here: the bondage gear, the way they strike alluring poses and discipline each other, working each other's bodies.

JS

But that's because they're *working!* That's the double entendre I'm dealing with conceptually. They're hot and naked but not performing eroticism.

SC

A fine line to straddle!

JS

The next time I make a fuckin' body of work, it's going to be the most banal, corny, happy flower candy, just you wait. I don't even have sex anymore, so I definitely have nothing to reflect on regarding that subject! (*laughter*) I push sexuality and queerness into the work because digital

media is such a cold and callous thing. I keep it raw and fleshy, compositing carnal stuff into a medium that's anything but. That's the kind of tension I like to reinforce.

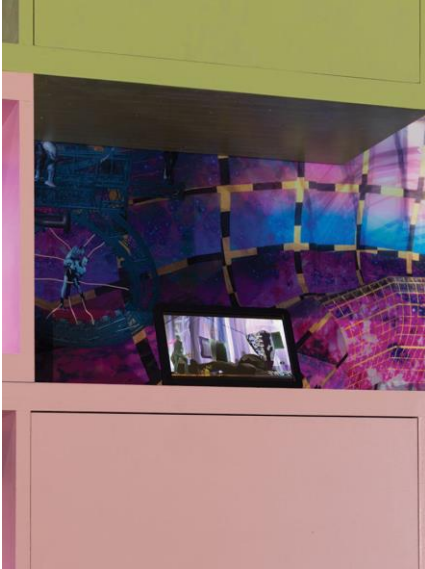
SC

I used to think that queer people would really embrace and identify with digital space, virtual worlds, and digital characters. I don't know if that's really happened, though, unless I'm not paying enough attention to the right corners of the Internet. But this might also relate to the increased visibility of queer people in the real world. It seems the codes are being rewritten in mainstream culture, helped by shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Pose*.

JS

That's natural. Every decade something mainstreams really hard, but it's all based on agenda. We're just puppets. That's kind of what *Blessed Avenue* is about: crowds being pushed around. I'm sorry I'm so cynical now! I don't find my queerness or anything about it to be a tool for poignant artmaking. I don't find that conversation or "take" on things to be interesting or rich enough anymore.

But yeah, I'm excited as fuck about society moving in such a positive direction, with people getting to share their voices, and the culture becoming more nuanced and demanding more intelligent things. Right now we're in a didactic phase, though, where everything is very lesson-oriented in order to get the masses ready. I can't wait until 2025, when we can go back to being rude again. *(laughter)*



Detail of *Shrine for American Dream Designs*, 2019, mixed media, 114 × 131.25 × 12 inches. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Jacolby Satterwhite.

SC

It's a minefield right now.

JS

I think it will soon become corny to be so didactic. It's such a conservative cancel culture and very vindictive. This is a micromanaging period of time, but the pendulum always swings the other way. I'm so ready for the next wave of nuance, when art can really happen again.

But back to *Pose*. It was sublime because I had never seen anything that looked like me or the narratives that I've personally experienced, and all of it given form on such a massive platform and done well. I cried a couple times watching that show, like a Lacanian moment for a thirty-three-year-old. It gave me a sense of purpose and form, and I think I needed that experience. White dudes watching *Queer As Folk* in the 2000s probably felt similarly. I didn't know I was missing that feeling.

SC

For me, even though what *Pose* depicts wasn't my culture growing up, watching the show with my mother gave me a chance to bond with her about aspects of my gay identity that we just never talked about. It's really a show about motherhood, isn't it? Is there a connection there, like in how your work deals with both your mother and voguing?

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JS

Well, okay, there's voguing in my work, but the movements are also inspired by contemporary dance improvisation. Like the techniques of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and William Forsythe—people who use drawing movements to carve out space.

SC

So, this scene that we're watching now from chapter four of *Birds in Paradise*—

JS

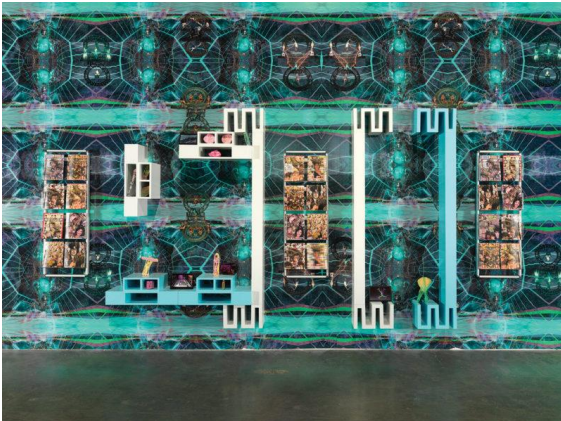
People have trouble with this part because these white, white-garbed figures are hanging and flogging me—a sort of erasure—then shrouding me afterward. The song playing is about second chances and resurrection, containing a regenerative air about being given another chance. The Yoruba Egungun masquerade culture informs a lot of motifs in these films, so it's about renewal, not hate crimes. Although it's kind of a Rorschach test for the viewer, depending on what part of the world they're in.

SC

Meaning how they interpret this flogging and hanging of your body?

JS

Yeah. The blurring is intentional but also ironic because the song is about finding love for a second time. You see this figure being deconstructed, made strong and silver, bathed and reborn. The film is about healing.



Shrine for Drug Designs, 2019, mixed media, 92 × 206 × 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works, Brooklyn. © Jacolby Satterwhite.

SC

Many artists who work with this medium tend to use computer-generated characters, but you have this really distinctive live-action component. You shoot footage of yourself and performers or actors, using the bodies to activate these digital spaces and contraptions.

JS

I find it weird when I get ghettoized as a virtual-reality artist. If artists like Joseph Beuys and Bruce Nauman—artists using their bodies as a modernist object—were coming up today, they'd be articulating their ideas with whatever the most prominent medium in consumer culture happened to be. Right now we're in the land of Netflix and Pixar.

SC

So these techniques connect to the history of conceptual art and body art, which is where video art started to some extent.

JS

If the world ended, art is all I have. I've committed my life to studying art history. Performance, painting, sculpture, moving image—all just faces on a prism that I pay equal respect to.

SC

What's your relationship to these performers in your videos, in terms of sensitivities and boundaries?

JS

They trust me, but I've had to build up to that. When I was in graduate school that was the hardest part, so I used my own body over and over. I didn't want to be responsible for anyone else's failure while working under my name. So I failed using myself. I didn't trust my own gestures and concepts then. I was still marinating and massaging things. When I felt my voice to be more mature I decided to expand, and that confidence allowed me to become a fun collaborator. People usually give *more* than what I'm asking. (*laughter*) People overdo it, and I'm like, "I don't want to see all that, girl!"



Detail of *Room for Doubt*, 2019, five-channel video, insulation foam, expanding glue, resin, fairing filler, plywood, faux-leather vinyl, double-faced chiffon, polyester rope, thread, automotive paint, and inkjet print on synthetic cotton, 93 × 96 × 96 inches. Courtesy of the artist; The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia; and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

SC

Is this because contemporary art is now being asked to challenge notions of the individual ego? There are conversations happening around community engagement, social practice, audience outreach, and so on.

JS

I smell that shift, but I don't know where I fit into it. I'm inherently political just by existing, just by being honest in public. I live under the weight of many different categories of discourse, but for me, I'm just writing poetry.

SC

It's interesting how you've resisted all the surface-level readings that I've tried to make.

JS

I have fun with the work's reception being flat sometimes, teetering between bad and good taste, high and low. What would life be like without making an interesting gumbo of things? There's a more ambiguous poetry happening underneath any of those surface readings.

SC

Okay, let's shift gears and get to some more production-related questions. How tightly do you storyboard and script these films? Would you be able to work with junior animators or art directors in your process?

JS

No. There's an improvisational story here that involves shifting mediums around. It's very spatial, like digital installation. I'm moving around blocks and language and narrative like a choreographer. There are so many spontaneous decisions and retractions of those decisions that I could never work with someone else on that facet of the work. My eccentric system of labelling is way too intense. And it's a personal way of animating that wouldn't work if traditionally storyboarded, though I do start with these massive prints.

SC

Oh, I would have thought they came after, as a result or document of the video being put together.

JS

No. I make like twelve C-prints, write about them, and figure out how they will segue into one another. The tableaus come first, since I feel they have to stand on their own as images. This is a very ambitious way of storyboarding compared to pen-and-ink sketches in some little squares. It's more like going to the Met and curating a selection of paintings, then sitting down with a journal to devise a way to get them all to intersect narratively. How do I go from a Rubens to a Titian? What if I curated seven different Renaissance allegories and built transitions between them as an animator, as a storyteller? It's kind of a window-within-a-window-within-a-window framework, where I'm playing exquisite corpse with multiple languages: drawings from my mother, performances from the green screen, art historical references, etcetera. Maybe I'm a little schizophrenic in this process, but it's not too loopy.

It takes months of twelve-hour days, anxiety attacks, pacing back and forth, trying to remember file names, and being hungover. It's thought through and really slow, all based on feelings I get about how it has to move together. It takes so much to get that door open, which leads to the next door.

SC

This year you had a well-received foray into pop culture, working with Solange Knowles. Your work already operates within the language of the music video, so how did this go?

JS

It was really meta. When I was a kid, what got me excited was Nick Knight's music video for Bjork's "Pagan Poetry." I loved her and wanted to make shit like that but went to boarding school to paint instead. In that context, music videos were not something to aspire to.

SC

I would think that, as a young person, making music videos would seem much cooler.

JS

No, I went to a fancy art school that was brainwashing us to be elevated. I was to be a serious painter at a formalist school. Very tight up the ass! The whole model was first to be a "Frick painter," then transition into being a "Mary Boone painter" or whatever. I'm not shitting on this education, since that's what gave me discipline. But it's also part of why I can't relate to other new media artists, because my thinking comes out of a whole different language.

SC

Video art came from a kind of formalism too. Early on it was about the banality of the television as object and minimalist sculpture. I feel the moving image is now less about the formal qualities of the medium and more about the idea of entertainment becoming accepted as a kind of artistic material. You can work fluidly from installation to music video and then onto whatever. What's your future dream project?

JS

I want to work in everything! I like writing too. Julian Schnabel is the predecessor for working across zones in this way. If I had the means, I would make the *best* painting show, then a feature film. I would love to adapt a story because I need language to springboard off from.

I thrive on collaboration, inspiration, and muses.

All my friends are great writers. Andrew Durbin and I are always trying to work with each other; we joke about it. Actually, his poem "You Are My Ducati" (2013) launched me into the aesthetic for *Birds in Paradise*. I interpreted his writing through a series of C-prints, images that never made it into the final video. I start with imagery because everything is painting to me.

SC

You're a survivor of childhood cancer. Do you continue to face medical challenges?

JS

I'm not performing anymore because of my body. I have an artificial shoulder and need a procedure to replace a rod in my arm. I can't use my body athletically to dance anymore, so I have to think differently. This crisis shows up in the work, like in *Room for Doubt* (2019). I've been meditating on my medical history because the body is the medium I've invested so much into. My cancer has been in remission for twenty years, but its effects make me want to deal with more visceral, primal mediums. The way I make moving images is cerebral, but I'm also interested in the way my body can mark the real world now that it's in such a contingent place. I may lose my arm. That kind of stress shifts away when making things.

SC

I think the body's integrity always has a relationship to the art-making process. Conceptualism can treat art making like a purely intellectual process, where the body is just a means of carrying out the execution. But that's such a simplistic idea.

JS

I'm definitely doing things in reaction to my embodied experience, traumatic or not. I play with shapes and Rorschach tests and lines and compositions. I do so organically and instinctively, and I let it tell me what it's saying afterward. The comedian Julio Torres has a show where he creates narrations around all these shapes he has on stage [*My Favorite Shapes*]. His psychology comes from how he interprets the shapes and moves them around and tells stories about and with them; it's animism. It's like playing with toys, and that's what I'm doing too. The toys tell me what the fuck I'm thinking. Like, regeneration and resurrection are such constant themes in *Birds in Paradise*. I feel this may have to do with the fact that I escaped death many times in the past. I was shrouded in the medical system with chemotherapy and surgery, then unshrouded, leaving my gurney and taking to the streets as a healed person, in remission and with a bionic arm.