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Jacolby Satterwhite: ‘The Matriarch’s Rhapsody’

By KEN JOHNSON JAN. 24, 2013

Monya Rowe

504 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

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For many young artists who grew up with computers, video is a dream machine, a tool for envisioning what streaming consciousness looks like. Jacolby Satterwhite’s eight-minute video, “Reifying Desire 5,” the main attraction of his first solo show in New York, is a hallucinogenic tossed salad of different kinds of animation. In a silver jumpsuit, Mr. Satterwhite dances athletically through a vertiginous flux of abstract and representational imagery. The other principle figures are five heroically proportioned females and one male, all rendered like video-game avatars. At one point the image of Picasso’s “Demoiselles d’Avignon” drifts through the background, a clue to what the synthetic Amazons allude to: among other things, the scary Africanized women in that Picasso brothel scene. It is relevant that Mr. Satterwhite, who earned his M.F.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in 2010, is black. But identity, queer as well as African-American, is only part of his mix.

Another autobiographical element has to do with words that intermittently hover like rubbery neon signs in the video and as annotations on curious, doodlelike drawings framed and presented in tandem with snapshots of Mr. Satterwhite’s relatives. The drawings are actually photo-silkscreened copies of works made by his mother, who is schizophrenic. They describe domestic devices she has designed and hopes to market online, several of which have to do with controlling female bodily functions. It is a testament to Mr. Satterwhite’s uncommonly elastic imagination that it can range so freely from the personal to the political to the metaphysical.