

Jacolby Satterwhite: *A Feeling of Healing*

By Alice Godwin | January 2023



Installation view of Jacolby Satterwhite's *A Feeling of Healing* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark, 2022. Photo: David Stjernholm

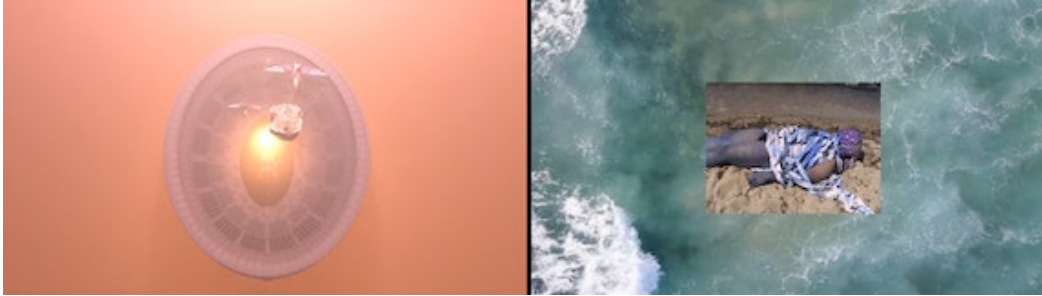
There is a chill in the air of a disused nightclub in Roskilde, about thirty kilometers outside of Copenhagen. The floors are sticky, as if the dance floor has only just been vacated. For the American artist Jacolby Satterwhite, the club is “a strange cave, where intellectuals come together when they are the most unintellectual, but [also] the most beautiful and kindred.” Satterwhite’s exhibition in Roskilde, hosted by the itinerant Museum of Contemporary Art, centers upon the healing powers of dance and the nightclub, where marginalized groups have the freedom to transgress, inhibitions are lost, artists incubate, and Satterwhite spent so much of his youth.

His digital universe is occupied by countless bodies, which gyrate, dance, and vogue to a pulsing soundscape. Satterwhite takes on the role of voyeur, observing the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, as he fuses the influences of video games, Afrofuturism, queer theory, West African spiritual tradition, and personal experience. The result is a dreamlike vision of the club that is primal and ritualistic, as if dance might have the ability to change our reality.

In the split-screen video *Moments of Silence* (2019), Satterwhite, clad in black leather, struts through the underground queer club Spectrum in New York, which was shuttered in 2019. The moving body is a crucial motif for Satterwhite, one that speaks to the loss of movement he experienced in one arm following surgery to treat childhood bone cancer. On the other screen, a cacophony of bodies dance amidst settings filled with tabloid magazines and televisions. The camera continually pulls back to reveal more of the environment, showing each body to be just one element in a hugely complex universe.

The second split-screen video work, *Birds in Paradise* (2019), focuses upon an orgiastic host of dancers in an ancient Roman colosseum, with a Black rodeo rider overhead that references the legend of the flying African. The undulating movements of the crowd possess a cathartic and transcendent quality. For Satterwhite, the colosseum is a prototype for the 360-degree viewing experience, brought to life in the virtual reality work *Shrines* (2020), which plunges the viewer into a post-apocalyptic landscape. The panoramic onslaught is enough to make heads spin. The bombardment of images echoes Satterwhite’s feelings of being overwhelmed at the height of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests in America in 2020.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Jacolby Satterwhite, *Birds in Paradise*, 2019. 2-channel HD color video and 3D animation with sound. RT: 18:20 min. © Jacolby Satterwhite; Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

In parallel, a video of Satterwhite being shrouded in fabric on the beach combines the traditions of baptism in America's Deep South and the Nigerian Yoruba ritual of the water goddess Mami Wata. The matriarch is a potent figure for Satterwhite, both in the guise of Mami Wata and the haunting presence of the artist's mother, Patricia. Satterwhite has long harnessed his mother's archive of drawings and sound works, not simply paying homage to her memory, but embedding her touch and voice within the fabric of his fantastical worlds.

Satterwhite recalls that his mother's manic depression and schizophrenia caused her to hear up to twelve different voices in her head at one time, which could be calmed through the process of writing and drawing. Here, Patricia's words from the acapella recordings on cassette tapes she left behind are transformed into digital elements that proliferate the landscape. Just as these words were used by Patricia to quiet her mind, they are harnessed by Satterwhite in the name of healing and home.



Jacolby Satterwhite, *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other*, 2020. HD color video and 3D animation with sound RT: 24:22 min. © Jacolby Satterwhite; Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

In the second part of this exhibition, hosted by The House of Art and Design in Holstebro, another powerful female force takes center stage. In the video work *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other* (2020), Black femme-bots in gold trousers and high heels vogue in the midst of a woodland Arcadia, their long plaits whipping round their heads. They obliterate the objects that assail them from all sides, as if dancing for their survival. The supermodel turned activist Bethann Hardison appears amidst the throng, dressed in regal red, along with Satterwhite, who manifests over and over again, like a spirit guide of sorts. As the camera pans back, the bots assemble around a flowerbed—a tribute to Breonna Taylor, the African American woman who was murdered by Louisville police in her home in 2020. It turns out that she was there all along: a defiant declaration of presence and agency for the Black femme body.

Satterwhite's digital universe is not simply a vision of dystopia or utopia; things are more complex than that. For Satterwhite, these works offer no didactic meaning or solution to the profound issues they raise. But at their heart, there is a message of love, acceptance, and renewal. Through the realms of fantasy and reality, dance has the power to save and protect, for the body to become a tool for redemption and protest.