

### Jacolby Satterwhite Focuses on Queer Love

MFAH showcases the New York artist's immersive multimedia exhibit.

Olivia Flores Alvarez | June 3, 2024



Jacolby Satterwhite (Photo by Frank Hernandez)

Queer love takes center stage in a big way at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) with Jacolby Satterwhite: *A Metta Prayer*, now on view through November.

The exhibit features huge looped-video projections on the walls of Cullinan Hall, one of the museum's most expansive galleries.

"I can't lay claim to bringing this project to Houston," says Alison de Lima Greene, the curator of modern and contemporary art at MFAH. "All of that credit goes to museum director Gary Tinterow. The moment he saw the Satterwhite exhibit in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, he said, "*A Metta Prayer* has to come to Houston. And Jacolby was incredibly generous. He had just come off of a busy time and we were asking him to do another big project."

The word *metta* is an ancient Pali term that means loving-kindness, goodwill, and an active interest in others. In Buddhism, metta prayers begin with the words *May I, May you, May we, May your*. The purpose is to allow and affirm an idea or activity rather than to limit it.

Satterwhite paired his images—which include two men tenderly kissing, individuals dancing, and figures based on motion-captured movement—with hypnotic music. Text is superimposed on some of the images, such as "I know men. You know men. We know men."

Originally from South Carolina and now based in Brooklyn, Satterwhite employs a visual language in his recent works that comes out of gaming. This use of gaming images seems natural; at 11 years old, he was diagnosed with

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cancer and he played a lot of video games while in the hospital. Later, he added a steady diet of music videos—Janet Jackson was a favorite—to his viewing habits.



*Jacolby Satterwhite, A Metta Prayer, 2023 (Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Jacolby Satterwhite)*

The running-man trope often seen in video games—where a character runs through an endless landscape, often fighting enemies or overcoming obstacles—figures heavily in the digital images that Satterwhite created for his Houston exhibition.

“I’ve never played a video game beyond Pong—not even Pac-Man,” laughs Greene. “Now we have a whole generation of artists who got their visual education from video games. Jacolby inserted himself into the typical runner video and turned it from ‘Let’s shoot everything we can’ into a celebration not of violence, but of love.”

Satterwhite’s exhibit opened on May 18, a day when hundreds of thousands of Houstonians were without electrical power following a vicious storm. Downed trees and piles of debris lined many of the city’s streets. Still, hundreds of viewers crowded into Cullinan Hall to watch Satterwhite in an opening-night performance that echoed images seen in the videos. He danced, chanted, and vogued to live music by a cellist while projections were seen overhead on the gallery’s immense walls. Many of those in attendance would be returning to homes without electricity.

Add to that the fact that LGBTQ communities and communities of color are under increasing attack by certain political factions as the presidential election nears—and that the Supreme Court is seemingly veering off course—and it’s a challenging and uncertain time for many people.

We asked Greene if art becomes more important during a time of adversity.

“I think it does,” she says. “Especially with Jacolby Satterwhite’s message of accepting love. In a hard time, art is all the more important.”

Coming from New York, a deeply blue state, to Texas, an emphatically red state, Satterwhite was aware of the social tension that exists throughout the country. He had worked in Houston before, with exhibits at both the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the University of Houston’s Blaffer Art Museum.

“Still, there’s been so much escalating,” says Greene.

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Satterwhite admitted he was apprehensive when he came to Houston to begin work at MFAH. That feeling was lessened a bit when he and Greene encountered a multi-ethnic, multicultural group of school children visiting the museum.

“Everything that we mean when we say Houston is a diverse city, it was standing right there in front of him,” she says, smiling. “I could see him release breath.”



*Jacolby Satterwhite's live performance at the MFAH for the opening of the Metta Prayer exhibition.*

MFAH staff, Greene, and Satterwhite know there will be some visitors who object to *the Metta Prayer* exhibit. “Every time someone walks into an exhibit, I say, ‘Give it time,’” says Greene. “There will be people who take offense at images of queer love. I’m not here to point a finger. I just hope that people say, ‘This is my personal view. I will let others express their own views.’ Art cannot do social change; art can create a meeting ground out of which social change may come.

“We’ve often thought about what this museum can mean to our city,” continues Greene. “Different galleries address different audiences. There’s the Islamic gallery where people can see that heritage and perhaps overcome Islamophobia. And now we have Jacolby Satterwhite in Cullinan Hall centering on queer subject matter.”

And perhaps offering an opportunity to overcome homophobia.