

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Solange's otherworldly animator for 'When I Get Home' has his first solo museum show. In Philly, not Brooklyn.

by Thomas Hine, Updated: September 19, 2019



FABRIC WORKSHOP AND MUSEUM

Jacolby Satterwhite has described his current exhibition at Fabric Workshop and Museum as “a dream come true.” You should know that Satterwhite has very strange dreams.

For the last decade, he has been conjuring up complex digital visions that seem at first to be silly and ebullient, like big old-fashioned movie musicals, though with aggressively homoerotic imagery. Naked men fly through the sky on winged horses above realms that change in a flash from fairy-tale candylands to urban hellscape.

Once you have become accustomed to their sheer visual seductiveness, other reactions emerge. Are all the men in chains on treadmills just working out, or are they slaves? And if they are, what does it mean? The images are sexual, a reminder that domination and submission define an entire erotic realm. Should his videos make us feel ashamed, turned on, or, awkwardly, both at the same time?

“Jacolby Satterwhite: Room for Living,” on view through Jan. 19, is the first museum show devoted entirely to the artist’s works, something many young artists might dream about. Brooklyn-based Satterwhite, who was born in 1986 in South Carolina and trained at Maryland Institute College of Arts and at the University of Pennsylvania, is unquestionably an up-and-comer.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

He has been in prestigious group shows, including the Whitney Biennial, [recently animated a high-profile segment of Solange's video for the album *When I Get Home*](#), and has a lot of ambitious projects in the works.

Just about all the works he has shown up to now have been videos he created on his computer. He even describes himself as a “hard-drive artist” who designs and repurposes the digital files on his computer to create new works that are typically seen on a video screen or through virtual-reality goggles.

This show, on which Satterwhite has been working with FWM's in-house artists for the last two years, brings Satterwhite's digital visions into the analog world. Video elements are present in nearly all the works that are on display, and there is one knockout virtual-reality work that allows viewers to look up and down and around at the strange beauty of the worlds Satterwhite conjures.

Essentially, though, this is an exhibition of sculpture. Nearly all of it is figurative. Satterwhite designed it all on his computer, and some of the smaller figures were produced on the 3-D printer, although others were made to Satterwhite's specifications at FWM. Most have the look of ceramic, although they are made of foam, resin, and a panoply of faux materials.



CARLOS AVENDANO

Jacolby Satterwhite's "Room for Levitating Beds" (2019), at the Fabric Workshop and Museum.

Many of them take their inspiration from major works of art, mostly paintings. The centerpiece of *Room for Cleansing*, for example, is a sculptural group based loosely on Picasso's *Les Desmoiselles*

d'Avignon. A Satterwhite video plays on a screen above. And the platform on which they are standing, a phallic form on wheels, is based on one of thousands of drawings his mother, Patricia Satterwhite, made when Jacolby was a child.

She was mentally ill, and Satterwhite said she made the drawings, all day, every day, in hopes of being discovered and becoming rich on the Home Shopping Network. Helping her, he says, was the beginning of his career as an artist.

Once you recognize her loopy, scribbly, vaguely Celtic style, you see it everywhere in the show. One work, *The Remote Control for Cocks on Wheels*, consists of more than a dozen small sculptures based on her drawings, placed on three swooping platforms behind which a quotation from her is shown in LED tube lighting that resembles neon.

A new doubting Thomas

Satterwhite's videos show the same delight in movement, dynamism, and control to be found in baroque architecture and art, so it is not surprising that he turned to Caravaggio as the inspiration for the show's largest sculpture, *Room for Doubt*. It consists of four larger-than-life men in a pose based on the painting, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (ca. 1602). In the original, the doubting apostle is pointing his finger to touch the body and wounds of the resurrected Jesus.

In this version, all the figures have video screens embedded in their bodies. On the screens are a video of a naked Satterwhite writhing on a paint-covered floor. Fingers are pointing everywhere, and so are very large penises. All the faces are dull-eyed versions of Satterwhite's own. They stand on a floor whose pattern looks like flayed skin.

Susan Lubowsky Talbott, FWM's executive director, compares this grouping to Rodin's monumental and heroic *The Burghers of Calais*, and the scale is similar. But the figures really do seem to have appeared from cyberspace, emotionally blank and without individuality, telling a story that is not clear. With their implanted videos, they come across as little more than muscular Teletubbies.

Satterwhite explains his move into the real world as an attempt to create work that is more permanent. Video and what has become known as time-based art have been embraced by museums, but they tend to be segregated from the collection and not on permanent display. By embedding his video in sculptures and installations, Satterwhite increases the possibility that collectors and institutions will purchase his works and actually display them.

This show contains one work that suggests how Satterwhite might succeed in integrating his otherworldly vision with something that looks good in a gallery. *Room for Ascension* consists of four plinths on which 3-D-printed, classically derived figures are standing in a circle. The plinths stand

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

on a circular, mirrored platform, and there are two video screens above showing video of arenas and other circular constructions, which are reflected in the mirror below.

Room for Ascension has a presence in the gallery, but more important, it creates a virtual world that is both above and below the sculptural figures. Satterwhite clearly loves male bodies, but his greatest skill is as a virtual architect exploring otherworldly geometries. *Room for Ascension* integrates its columnar form with the concentric circles of the video and gives the gallerygoer a glimpse of something beyond.