



Fembots Are Here to Save 2020

Still from "We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other," 2020; © Jacolby Satterwhite; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

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Former Solange collaborator Jacolby Satterwhite shares a special edit of his new film, an homage to Breonna Taylor in which cyber matriarchs fight oppressive orbs. The artist talks to Playboy about surviving 2020 and concluding his queer utopian trilogy.

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“Slice, remix and generate!” Artist Jacolby Satterwhite crafts his work in front of a green screen inside his Brooklyn studio. Wearing a skin-tight bodysuit designed to digitally capture his movements, he cuts through thin air and shuffles his limbs like a dancer. On the walls of the studio, drawings by his late mother surround and inspire him. “I animate my films similar to an abstract painter, constantly erasing and making marks with my choreography,” he says. His moves are outlandishly flamboyant and precisely nuanced, and each one translates into a gesture of resilience in his

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neon-washed virtual queer utopias. Music echoes, bodies levitate, epic challenges are made and met.



Still from *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other*, 2020; © Jacolby Satterwhite; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other is Satterwhite's newest fireball: an animated 24-minute spiral into a universe of topless Black fembots in gold pants and high-heel boots, vogueing for their lives. "The film is a mirror for our spirit now," he says, ruminating on a year that parallels the chaos of his artistic creation. "Unrest has gone haywire, with paranoia and the elite gaining more control over the masses—I had to pare down my feelings and build up a utopia for Black survival." In the film, fembots fight their way through what Satterwhite calls "an obstacle course." A constant rain of pastel-colored cellular orbs challenges their superpowers, "but, hey—they're thriving!"



Still from *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other*, 2020; © Jacolby Satterwhite; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

The fembots' resemblance to Grace Jones is intentional, as is every detail with which the artist builds his realm of beauty and brutality. Various versions of model-activist Bethann Hardison sit on thrones wearing long, red dresses; multiple Jacolby Satterwhites appear dancing or hanging from slings; a clone army consists of musician Dev Hynes decked out in a dapper suit, holding a light in front of his belly. Meanwhile, a fembot kills another orb with her twirling hair. Footage from recent Black Lives Matter protests and Ku Klux Klan brawls crowd the video background, but where peril meanders, there awaits fighters too. The fembots dance to resist, controlled by the digital strings of tech-era puppeteer Satterwhite, who calls the film “a simulacra experience of 2020.” The film’s climactic shot telescopes out to a bird’s-eye view of Breonna Taylor’s name and image rendered in pink and purple flowers.



Still from *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other*, 2020; © Jacolby Satterwhite; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Before he ever created heroic pixel dolls or shot a music video for Solange’s 2019 visual album, *When I Get Home*, Satterwhite was a queer kid growing up in South Carolina, and self-expression was a dream on hold. “I would be thrilled to open McDonald’s Happy Meal boxes, so I could maybe play with the dolls,” he says. His mother, Patricia, who lived with schizophrenia, made art and recorded music, and she hoped for success that never came in her lifetime. Her work is now embedded in her son’s visual and audio universe, filtered through his life as a gay Black man in America.



Still from *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other*, 2020; © Jacolby Satterwhite; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Today, an art connoisseur can sit on a swiveling chair, put on a pair of VR goggles, and dive deep into Satterwhite's visions in an exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery in New York. The new film is the last installment in a trilogy that radiates resilient joy. He started the trilogy, and an accompanying album in collaboration with Teengirl Fantasy's Nick Weiss, two years ago as a love letter to Patricia. The 20-minute-long first film, *Blessed Avenue*, premiered at Gavin Brown's gallery in New York's Chinatown in 2018. There were glow sticks available at the opening, and the film featured cameos from cool downtown kids: Juliana Huxtable as a dominatrix; gay porn star Antonio Biaggi as a slave; a break-dancer played by Madonna's daughter Lourdes Leon.

Last year, Brooklyn's Pioneer Works exhibited Satterwhite's follow-up, *Birds in Paradise*, which further expanded his vision of a queer utopia and its people: still leathered, resilient and mischievous. Next to the film's projection was a listening station for Weiss and Satterwhite's double LP, *Love Will Find a Way Home*, which remixed Patricia's voice into electronic beats.

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Satterwhite is a self-proclaimed former social butterfly, and fingerprints of that identity are evident in his earlier films. “My work is so labor intensive that I had to find a way to combine work and play, so I would carry my green screen to the parties and shoot my eclectic community of rich queers,” he recalls, then adds, “Not in terms of money, but rich in spirit!” Once he hosted a party for Grindr at the Standard Hotel and filmed nonstop for eight hours; another time, he brought his camera to a party on Fire Island. “Sex workers, trans party kids and museum curators all came together—the parties were a part of the work.”



Installation view of *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; © Jacolby Satterwhite; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; photo: Dan Bradica

Although his community has long been a source of material, his latest work is a reaction to a very different moment: now. “Sexuality was always there to help me build a climate of tension, but this time, it’s not sexual,” the 34-year-old says, referring to recent months of political unrest and mandatory

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isolation. His inclusion of Hardison and Hynes captures a moment of creative activism amid social turmoil, portraying a landscape in which Black females bloom, “and they’re immune to any danger, illness or civil threats.”



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The past few months of isolation have occasioned a new contemplation of Satterwhite’s queer experience too. Talking to potential dates on Grindr for months without meeting in person has given him another perspective on intimacy—one that seems to permeate the new film. “I’ve really gotten to know people through texting or DMing without an end plan,” he admits. “When there’s so much risk involved with physical intimacy, you have to value this sacred experience.”



We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other, 2020; neon; 7 5/8 by 90 by 2 1/4 inches; Mitchell-Innes & Nash

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For Satterwhite, life and work have always been about orbiting within a queer solar system—and, as with all circularities, motion is a constant. Sometimes movement happens in the flesh, sometimes it's digital; sometimes the gesture of an arm or the sound of a mother singing is all it takes to be transported to a better world.