

ARTSLANT

MY AVATAR AND ME: AN INTERVIEW WITH JACOLBY SATTERWHITE

BY STEPHANIE BERZON



Jacolby Satterwhite, Documentation of project, Mallorca Spain, 2013; Courtesy of the artist.

New York, Nov. 2013: The digital age is currently facing certain adaptations that bring into question the modern's faithfulness to understanding the past; texting incoherent typos being confused with Freudian slips was not considered by the original teacher and therefore could nullify the slip of the tongue theory. Psychological models in human development did not anticipate dualism in identity formation: the physical being and the digital projection of it via an online profile. Jacolby Satterwhite welcomes all to explore this colloquial shift in the virtual universe he has built.

The world of Jacolby Satterwhite looks like a woman growing a penis and ejaculating miniature, cat-suited Satterwhites in *Reifying Desire 5*. A lavender-skinned man consumes the little artists and defecates a cosmological re-birthing of Jacolby Satterwhites posing in spinning triangles. A glimpse into a family cookout in *Countryball* includes multicolored avatars dancing on a stage that is screening a family home video. The twenty-seven-year-old artist builds these 3D animated universes through rotoscoping, a technique of tracing over an animation, and green screen performance. Most of the objects, displayed in the

videos – particularly those twirling in *Matriarch's Rhapsody* – are hand-drawn replicas of his mother's sketches, which she made while battling schizophrenia during his formative years as a child. As a result of unemployment, she sketched over 14,000 Home Shopping Network-inspired inventions with glitter crayons in the hopes of achieving financial wealth.

Rather than remaining anonymous as the ghost in the machine, Satterwhite extends the digital frame to live performance. In Spain last month, Satterwhite rushed into a performance without his kneepads on and worked the inevitable flow of blood into the canvas he was performing on. A man in attendance laid in it. For research he dresses as the digital character he created of himself and performs in the streets of New York City to inspire on different encounters of his avatar with the urban space.

Satterwhite will perform during Miami Art Week for UNTITLED. fair (whose VIP vernissage will be hosted by Marina Abramovic) and a private party for Interview Magazine. In 2014 he will exhibit in the Whitney Biennial and *New Frontier* Sundance Film Festival and has a solo show at Capitol Skyline Hotel in Washington D.C. In November he presented the latest installment of his series *Reifying Desire* for his solo show at Mallorca Landings Gallery in Spain and was announced as one of three artists added to OHWOW Gallery family in Los Angeles.

Stephanie Berzon: Who or what are your artistic and cultural influences?

Jacolby Satterwhite: That's such a hard question. Artistic? Well I don't like to say anyone in the past twenty years because that's kind of bizarre, but there are a lot of people in the past twenty years that I like.

I love gaming culture – Legend of Zelda, Metal Gear Solid, Final Fantasy; I like that stuff that has really shaped me as a kid. Pop stars like Janet Jackson and Madonna. And Grace Jones and Dee Lite. And Björk actually – the level of obsession [with her] was beyond any person. It took me like twenty years to get over her. Finally over it.

Anyway, porn stars are amazing because I like the fact that their bodies are fleeing, resilient, rebellious, and strong – I mean they're so interesting that I am casting them in my work and I'm printing them on fabric.

Obviously I grew up thinking about Rubens, Titian, Piero della Francesca and Caravaggio. But then I ended up shifting my interest into early modern artists and dada people, like Marc Chagall. Dali was interesting to me but I didn't get that deep into it. Warhol, Nauman and Beuys – that triangle is really amazing in regards to giving me an excuse to do what I do. I love late 60's and early 70's performance artists and conceptual artists like those three. Fashion photographers like Inez & Vinoodh, Steven Klein, Nick Knight and SHOWstudio. Fashion like Gareth Pugh, McQueen, Jeremy Scott, Marc Jacobs.

SB: The video stills from Reifying Desire adhere beautifully to artistic formalities. How has your academic background in fine arts

and other unorthodox disciplines crossed over to your current creations in 3D animation and live performance art?

JS: When I was painting I was pursuing a certain type of narrative – figure-ground, kind of abstract. I was pursuing a certain image and I just could never resolve it because what was getting in the way is the weight of 400 years of painting and how it's so rooted in history; and like the Census Bureau, it calculates everything about your body and gender in relationship to the style that you're choosing to use. It's almost like chemistry: if you're black and male and gay and making an Impressionist painting, a Rococo-style painting, alla prima, plein air – like everything has a certain postmodernist, political agenda. And that was just so annoying to me because I just wanted to be a creative person. I felt that my own private history was far more interesting than 400 years of painting history. That's such an extreme thing to say – but, no, it's true. Everyone's own background is far more interesting than that crazy, white male, chauvinist, racist thing. That's slavery, and it's like, who wants to be a part of that?

But... I do have a romantic obsession with it as well. I really love the tactility and viscosity of the paint. I like pushing it around on the surface. I like the erotic pleasures from making a painting. But I had to quit because of the politics.

I did study how making a good painting shifted every century – the perfect ratios model in a Piero della Francesca painting, the golden ratio of Milo or how Baroque has certain sfumato techniques. All that old classical stuff is so interesting to me. I love the perfect composition, I love the Bauhaus and the way they were thinking about shapes, color, line. I love the stupid Kandinsky books that were full of shit-talking about music and shapes. I love when painters get theoretical and talk about speed or height – see a skyscraper for the first time and making a Barnett Newman painting. I love the way that painting has the most romantic relationship with observation. I like how Courbet got in trouble for painting the *Burial at Ornans* because he painted regular people; and that's another political thing that was fascinating – how could you get in trouble for painting and that was the dawn of modernism? I like it – I'm all over the place with answering this question.

The way it relates to me now is that when I quit I decided to use my own personal institution, which is my mother's drawing and its practice. My formalist grid would be used as a platform to make me smarter, more autonomous, a confident artist. That was my institution – my reaction. When I make an image using her drawings, I build it in 3D and use all the same principles in painting that I learned through the rigorous study of it. I had the freedom because this new media, performance, virtuous space is such a gumbo that I kind of neutralize and... it's kind of a safety-proof artistic exploration. I don't even think I answered that question at all, which sucks. I am trying to answer it, but I'm just talking to you like you were in a living room. It's very sincere what I'm saying because like..

SB: This does make perfect sense to drop one thing and then begin another...

JS: Well when I stopped I was just doing boring, banal performances with a Walmart digital camera that cost fifty bucks. It was in the woods and in the city

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and there was just me in costumes trying to figure out different kind of explorations. Then I got bored with that and started to teach myself After Effects and I said, 'oh I want to layer on top of this,' and I started to see paintings happen again when I started to manipulate footage. I started to discover the trial, error and failure allowed me to see that subconsciously I am going to get back to painting if I just keep fucking around with this. And then I discovered Maya and realized I can trace and build my mother's drawings in 3D. Once I learned that, I realized I could perform inside of these constructed worlds I made in 3D and I can change the colors and textures and really work in palettes and triangles, rectangles and grids. I can have my cake and eat it too. I can perform and design costumes and I can build beautiful compositions that are really large-scale; I can be more kinetic and not static. I'm not in that static frame that painting was trapping me in. I also have agency because virtualist space neutralizes my body politics because it's animation and it's spectacle and it's so much de-contextualization from the body, but I got the freedom to do actually anything that I want. I felt this solution was really smart for me because it's a place of authority for me to work in the way that I'm working – I work from a very personal and public archive and anything that's in between. I just make art and it can be about anything. It's still about all of my concerns – it's still about observation, I'm still using the body, I'm still thinking about figure and ground, but I had to figure out a way to be in the 21st century and not be locked in the post-modern jail that is painting in relationship to identity politics.



Jacolby Satterwhite, 'Alpha', C-print and still from Reifying Desire-6, 53" x 30"; Courtesy of the artist.

SB: A subject that you broach often is you. In a previous interview you described your influence as 'a postmodern intersection' of your

own particular histories with being queer, painting, music video and gaming. If you are not creating art for a general audience, who is your intended audience and how has this shaped your language?

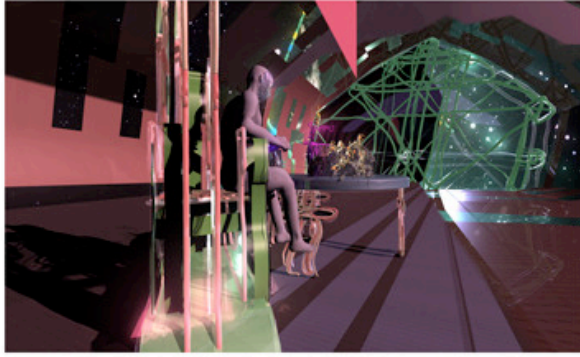
JS: Well I don't care who's my audience. I'm not trying to guide my audience. Whoever sees my work sees my work. I'm shocked anytime people like it and I'm really grateful for that. It's such a deep exploration with sincere variables set up that I am trying to solve. I am literally trying to solve problems all the time and I think that I'm so deeply absorbed in the problem-solving process and visual art that I don't have time to think about the audience. I just have genuine, passionate problems that I want to solve and they end up making things that are kind of bubbly and come from my body and come from my – this sounds so hokey – come from my soul!

SB: So it's more of an organic process for you versus something that you preemptively decided on as your viewer being, let's say, the black community, the queer community...

JS: The black and queer community do not shape my work as much as attempting to make a beautiful composition does. Queerness as a non-normative term interests me more than as a sexual term. The political content shows up as soon as my hand clicks the mouse; it's inherent because I live in my body. I don't have to be didactic.

SB: How does voguing make you feel? Why is it important for you to appropriate this dance into a digital framework?

JS: It just lends [itself] to me [by] resolving images within the infrastructure of my practice: meaning I dance with imaginary objects with the dance movement that relates to dancing with an imaginary object. Its voguing, but I don't really vogue. It's a hybrid dance move. I'm like an EDM artist, or intelligent dance music artist. I'm like Aphex Twin. I'm just a gumbo of body movement and you happen to see dips, spins, twirls and duck walks. You happen to also see weird, horrible imitations of William Forsythe. You see it all, but people pay attention to voguing because I'm black and gay and it's the easiest thing to latch on to. And it's really in style right now. But I'm doing everything.



Jacolby Satterwhite, Consumer triptych; court

SB: The storylines in your videos are structured, however react unrestrained as a fantastical stream of consciousness. How do you approach generating narrative and containing it?

Jacolby flips through images on his computer from *Matriarch's Rhapsody*.]

I'll take text from here [He points to the words surrounding a hand-drawn, animated object] – 'for bread and meat, etc, a slicing tray' – and write it in a text document. You know like how on a cereal box or those children's coloring books they have the fill-in the blank? Basically I put the text in bold letters, spaced out in a paragraph, and then I just fill in story. Then I try to execute that in animation. It's kind of a surrealist strategy or game – some total 1940's shit. That's one of the systems that breaks the ice of the creative process. So it's like, this is my vomit and I have to be loyal to it and I have to refine it and then as I begin animating and staying loyal to that I'll start to deviate from the text and end up refining, figuring out new possibilities. And lately I got sick of the codex and wanted to take it another step further and at Recess I'd have people come in and pretend that they're using the objects and the drawings and so their movement vocabulary became another system for me to find a source of inspiration and deviate from my own movement, which was becoming repetitive after a while. But looking at other people's subjective performance lends to a lot more stuff that I can write in this text document and then make a storyline from it. I haven't really begun using it yet but it definitely is going to help build a complexity in the work.

SB: So I'd like to turn this around to the idea of projecting identities and distinguishing you, from you [I then point at Satterwhite's computer screen to his digital self].

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JS: Oh, yes, they're blurring. I want to blur more because then I'll have a lot more fun in life. Well I have such a boring life. I just animate and rotoscope and trace. I don't go out. Actually I went out yesterday and I was hanging out with people around my age and I was just thinking about how they go out so much that certain things that come naturally to them don't come naturally to me and I'm like, 'man, I'm becoming, like, awkward.' I don't really leave the house because I work so much, but I'm blurring the two bodies more and more as I move back to New York. I was away for a while and I was by myself in Provincetown and I was more reclusive than this. Ever since I came back here I'm having this Warholian factory, where I bring the world to my work and performing a whole lot more that the two are finally colliding in a way that I think is pretty interesting... My alter ego is so bad, oh my god. And I'm so well behaved. Jacolby the performer has way more agency, more authority, more confidence and he has a psychic understanding of the people around him. Like when he is at Miami Basel he will probably have a whole lot of fun because the performance at Basel will be just dancing ambiently throughout crowded spaces. I'll show you how crazy it gets. [He plays a video of him performing live in Mallorca, Spain, where he is literally entangling himself with the audience – on the ground with a stranger who somehow is wearing Jacolby's costume headdress and in another scene pressing a monitor strapped into his harness onto some other man's genital area.]

SB: *What is it that you want us to see in the avatar and not you?*

JS: Sculpture. My physical presentation and body language right now doesn't read as sculpture, but I think you see sculpture in the mode of presentation my avatar offers because it is way more dynamic spatially and visually.



Jacolby Satterwhite, 'Trans-Session', 22"-x-28", C-Print and Video Still; Courtesy of the artist.

SB: So the following question is to help distinguish the two identities with a scenario that I would like you to answer twice as hypothetical reactions. Once as Jacolby Satterwhite, the present person and artist, and secondly as the Jacolby in digital form, the avatar as projected in your video work, being in this physical environment.

You are in a bare, white-walled room with President Obama standing in the center.

JS: That is such a weird question! What in the hell made you ask that question? If it was in a white room I'd be like, 'oh my god, can I install my new wallpaper in here?' I think if Barack Obama – I don't know – I don't really think about having an association with Barack Obama. He is SO hot. [laughs] I mean he's really attractive, but I mean I have nothing to do with that. When I saw Jay-Z – did you see that video of me and Jay-Z? I was like whatever – I was like mm-mm-mm-mm [Jacolby breaks out in a fierce dance]. Only people I think of associatively are fun pop stars like Beyonce... And Rihanna. If I saw Barack Obama I'd just – 'I pledge allegiance to the flag'; him and I have nothing to do with each other conceptually. I am science fiction, and he is real. First of all, I would ruin his reputation just by being in contact with him because my work. Performances and content can be so transgressive. Actually, he did a shoot with Terry Richardson. I just feel like there is nothing beneficial that would come out being in a room with President Barack Obama; it would end up being a scandalous party and we'd need Olivia Pope to fix everything afterwards.

SB: And what about your avatar?

JS: I wouldn't allow him in the room because the CIA would kill me flirting with him. They'd shoot me with a sniper. My avatar and Barack Obama don't belong in the same space together. It would just be the assassination of Jacolby Satterwhite because I would get too close and kiss him – you saw that video...

SB: Okay, interview over on that note!

JS: But just in case because I have a strange career – I don't understand what is happening – I might meet him one day because life is weird so I am going to do my politically correct thing... I'd say [deepens voice], 'Hi Mr. President, thank you for making me feel like I could do something with my life. I was encouraged to work really hard because of your inauguration. Thank you Obama!'

SB: Is this the avatar or you?

JS: It's both. We say it in harmony like a Destiny's Child song.