

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

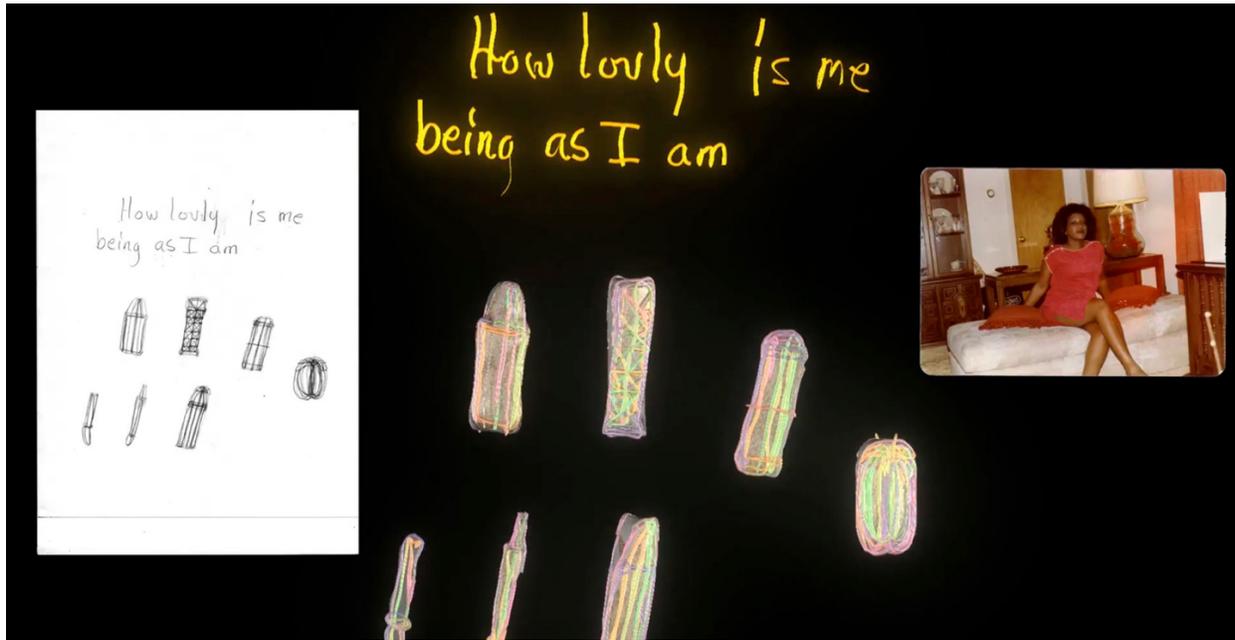
MoMA

Jacolby Satterwhite's *The Matriarch's Rhapsody*

In this exclusive two-week screening, watch the artist's poignant tribute to his mother.

Jacolby Satterwhite's *The Matriarch's Rhapsody* screened here May 11–25, 2022. The video is no longer available for streaming. Join us for the next [Hyundai Card Video Views](#) screening, beginning June 15, 2022.

May 11, 2022



Jacolby Satterwhite. *The Matriarch's Rhapsody*. 2012. Video animation (color, sound), 43:47 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Jeremiah Joseph. © 2022 Jacolby Satterwhite. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

[Jacolby Satterwhite](#)'s video [The Matriarch's Rhapsody](#) (2012) draws upon sketches created by the artist's late mother, Patricia Satterwhite, while she was contending with schizophrenia. For more than a decade, Jacolby Satterwhite has created 3D animated video works, sculptures, and immersive installations that explore themes of consumption, fantasy, and utopian desire. In works such as [Country Ball 1989-2012](#) (2012) and [Reifying Desire 5](#) (2013), Satterwhite's surreal, bacchanalian image-scapes blend influences as diverse as queer theory, voguing, performance, and video-game fantasy genres.

Patricia Satterwhite has been a key influence throughout. When she passed away in 2016, she left behind a prolific catalog of art, music, and writing that includes more than 10,000 drawings she created as a therapeutic and creative outlet. In *The Matriarch's Rhapsody*, Jacolby Satterwhite stages Patricia's diagrams of hybrid objects and household inventions alongside tender family photographs and his own CGI-animated reproductions of these drawings, constructing a touching digital archive of his mother's imagination and interior life.

We wish you and yours a happy Mother's Day. Join us in June for the next installment in the [Hyundai Card Video Views](#) series, which considers artists' engagement with a technology that has become central to our daily lives.

—Gee Wesley, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance

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Gee Wesley: Jacolby, was your mother the first person who encouraged you to pursue work as an artist, or did you have a more circuitous pathway?

Jacolby Satterwhite: She was the first major influence on me to pursue creating things. When I was a kid, she was the first person I saw have a prolific practice that had meaning for her. I watched her determination and her consistency and how it was rewarded.

When my mother's mental health began declining, she couldn't work and was also experiencing a lot of physical pain, so my father was the person who kept the house afloat. He would bring home a lot of amazing arts and crafts materials for her like Glitter Crayons, Crayolas, and color pencils. As a kid, I wanted to use them, but she was afraid I would break them or waste them. So, in order for me to use our drawing utilities, I had to learn how to draw. I would draw *Street Fighter* and comics and anything I could get my hands on to prove to her that I had the skills to use her materials responsibly. I sort of became her apprentice until I was nine or 10. My mother had this feverish intention to turn her architectural blueprints and sketches into patents for paid programs that were soliciting Americans to submit their drawings. She sent these drawings to the Home Shopping Network and QVC, hoping that they would get our financial situation back to where it used to be. Eventually, I realized that this was a delusion of grandeur and that it wasn't necessarily going to happen, and I channeled myself into my own practice in my bedroom making paintings and drawings and playing video games feverishly. So, yes, she did inspire me to become an artist.

You speak so lucidly about the role of the tool in art-making, whether it's the process of painting or the craft involved in 3D graphics software like Autodesk Maya.

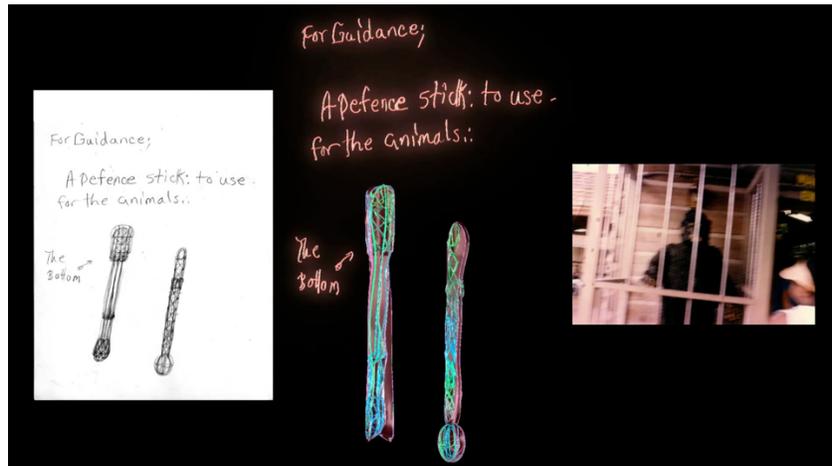
I come from a very rigorous drawing and painting background, which stretched from childhood to boarding school to my undergrad major in painting and drawing. I had to learn about making videos after graduate school, when I was no longer able to take classes. And the only way I knew to teach myself how to make a film and to work in animation was through the vernacular that I acquired from 15 or 16 years of studying painting and drawing. So, in a way, having made hundreds of paintings and drawings before ever touching a digital technology gave me a foundation to treat everything I do with a certain kind of delicacy and tactility and understanding of the power of color, the power of light, the power of perspective and composition and how much that can narratively create a crescendo that moves the viewer.

Autodesk Maya software, for me, really aligns with painting. What I liked about Maya is that I was able to examine all the things that I was curious about as a painter in a much quicker and safer way, without the toxic chemicals. In a way, working in digital media is a similar practice to what [Joseph Albers](#) and [Johannes Itten](#) and the other color theorists engaged in when they made squares for years.

Going back to your training in painting, the diagrams in *The Matriarch's Rhapsody* are very notational and offer a look into your mother's imagination and thinking process. I was curious if you have a similar kind of sketching

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practice that underlines the immersive installations that you've created, and how your mother's drawings connect to your work today or in the past.



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I am a collector and archivist. I collect a lot of things off of Google. I take lots of photos with my iPhone, and I work and sketch in Maya animation software a lot. I kind of think like an architect, where I spend my off-time thinking of what the potentialities of space and architecture can be in animation software. And that influences how I go about archiving and creating performance systems that allow me to solicit people to perform my videos on a green screen or for a live-action camera. I make drawings sometimes, but I haven't been doing that recently because of conceptual reasons. I've refrained from using my own drawings in the process of filmmaking so far. A lot of my newer projects focus more on social practice in regards to soliciting drawings from people in specific neighborhoods or countries, or world leaders making drawings.

But underneath that is data or a [Fluxus](#) prompt. For instance, I'll ask 105 Black people in the Fairfax neighborhood in Cleveland to make a drawing that demonstrates what their prospect of utopia is. That's all they have to do. And I can get a wider range of responses. Some of the drawings will be city structures, some will be Cadillacs and Rolexes, and some will be existential quotes that are really highbrow and heady. I categorize them and they become the architects of a new world that I create, and I create a monument for that. And I can use the assets to create a video game. So it's evolved into this, looking more outward from my personal archive and less inward.

As you mentioned, your childhood drawing and painting practice emerged from an interest in popular culture narratives that involved imaginative world building. In these fantasy and speculative-fiction genres, there is often an act of projection in which the reader or user participates in a form of wish fulfillment and a utopian imagination, which shows through in your current work.

I used to play those games to find myself in characters I could never be, as a lot of gay people do. That is probably the reason why my work allows me to cosplay different potentialities and also to speak and revive things from the past that were unsung.

Today, I don't look as closely to gaming and comics and science fiction as I did when I was a teenager and a younger adult. I'm leaning toward returning to those spaces, but it's funny. I feel like I would get a lot of rich ideas if I did, but what inspires me now is equally strange, like David Lynch films and people who build worlds around the mundane and the ordinary. Now everything that has the least magic on the surface appeals to me, and I respond to that as the inspiration.

But the tools that I communicate with most efficiently tend to operate in a way that overlaps with science fiction and gaming aesthetics. And it's probably because that is what I consumed during the first quarter of my life. It's a second

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language. But now what I'm interpreting is the ordinary, the mundane, and the political. I look at the news more than anything.



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You describe *The Matriarch's Rhapsody* as a codex. Could you speak a little bit more about what you mean by that?

It relates to my relationship with roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Star Ocean*. In those games the characters have statistics, and some characters are able to use certain kinds of weaponry and certain kinds of magic, and they all come from places of their own. They are just really rich with subtext that helps make the narrative believable. I consider my mother's drawings to operate as a codex or a menu for the roleplaying game that I was choosing to spend 10 years building between *Reifying Desire* and *Birds in Paradise*. My work uses the language of the roleplaying game. And so the codex functions like an index card menu at a library, so you can understand the language.

When I'm beginning to make a film, I want to find objects from that database that I can create a narrative with. When I harmonize them in one scene, I join disparate, inconvenient objects that don't really belong together. And I find a way to write a narrative that strings them together and the tension of that yields the innovation. The real art is the surprises that occur in between trying to make those things form a narrative and a language.

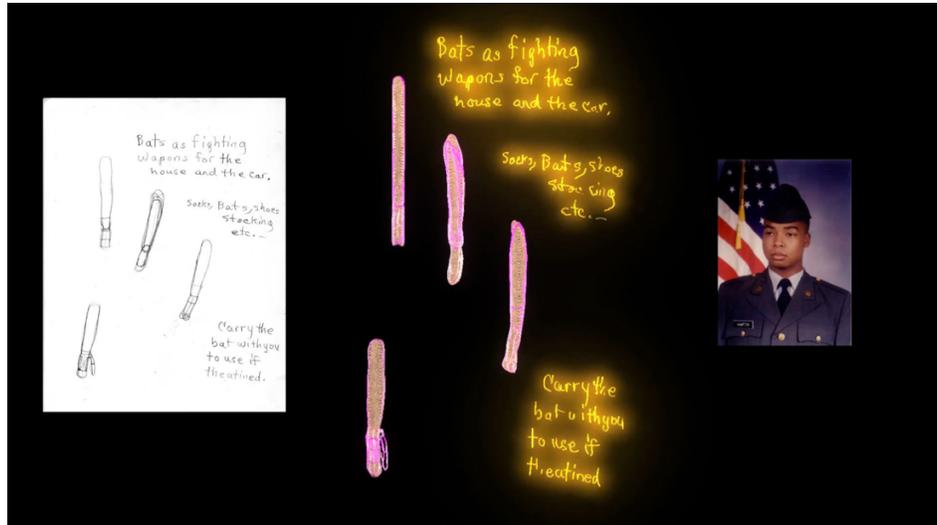
I'm curious about the kind of therapeutic role that drawing played for your mother while she was facing mental illness, and whether a creative practice has ever played a similar role for you.

My mother suffered from manic depression and schizophrenia. With her schizophrenia, she had six to 12 voices speaking in her head at the same time and sometimes through her. She would speak in different tongues and accents. And sometimes the chaos was really overwhelming for her and she would cry. She just wanted it all to stop. She couldn't go shopping or do anything in public because these voices would be speaking. But as soon as the graphite hit the paper, the voices begin to synthesize into one. Silence finally happened. And so the drawings became a cathartic way to control and focus. It was like a meditation. That's why she had to draw from six in the morning to midnight, because it was the only way to stay off medication, which had its own horrible effects.

So for my mother drawing was therapeutic and it was necessary. That's why I felt it was important for me to use this archive. Because coming from a Western painting background and learning academic art, you forget that art can come from a place of necessity and not from a place of critique. If I didn't have art, I probably would have ended up just like her. I survived cancer twice. I am disabled. I can't really do manual labor like other people. I can't move my right arm. I have limited facilities for survival and for participating in the world fully. And making art was a form of escapism that helped me find confidence and strength. Because of my limits, I see the world differently because I have to make art differently from other people. I can't sculpt things like a traditional sculptor and I can't really make paintings like a traditional painter.

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So these limits made me pare down my options and made me have more of an innovative pipeline for thinking about how I make things. And that ultimately gave me purpose. I felt like I had something to protect and take care of. In order to keep up an art practice, you have to keep up and sustain everything else in your life. So my love of art makes me love myself. Because if I don't love myself, I can't love my art.



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That also makes me think about how your mother sent her drawings to QVC, and brings to mind the entrepreneurial nature that's a part of your own work, how your ventures span music and video production, contemporary art, and collaborating with people who are dynamic voices in other forms of culture. I am curious to hear more about how you see these ventures feeding back into the work you make for exhibition spaces.

My mother made entrepreneurial sketches that could be patents because she wanted to have a Patricia Satterwhite franchise, kind of like Walmart. And so for me there was an unconsciously tongue-in-cheek aspect to always producing a shop adjacent to my exhibition that had the objects presented as consumer items. And because I worked with animation or CGI and her music, which made me utilize the music video vernacular and medium, her practice spawned a [Pop art](#) way of looking at everything as high art. I grew up loving music videos and video games and also loving paintings and drawings and sculptures. I grew up also loving pop stars and [\[Andy\] Warhol](#). I never thought about high and low. I always thought about them all on the same level. So conflating them in my practice is second nature.

This makes me capable of working with people like Solange and Perfume Genius and Dev Hynes, and working with Bethany Hardison as a model for a political piece. I think that the blessing of working this way is that I have a limitless elasticity of genres that I'm able to produce in. I think art and commerce and pop culture and consumerism are our current site—artists are known to mirror the world and society. It's natural for me to work this way because this is the landscape that fuels and forms us.

This work was made 10 years ago. I am curious how your understanding of the work evolved in the past decade, especially thinking about how the drawings and photographs and 3D-printed objects that you illustrate in the codex have figured into other works and series and projects.

No pun intended, but 10 years ago I didn't know it was going to be the mother that would birth a major social practice over the following decade. I didn't know that it would give me a language that actually goes beyond her. I didn't know that it would end up being a system so fruitful that it would allow me to do everything from making albums to making sculptures and paintings. What was really surprising is how the work created the assets for video games and virtual reality games that I'm making and things that could metaverse architecture. I didn't know that it would be a precursor to so many things happening now that are dominating the globe.