

California African American Museum

Enunciated Life

Allie McGhee

Big Me, Little Me, 2012

Acrylic on paper

Black Hole, 2012

Acrylic on paper

Grey Spinner, 2007

Acrylic on paper

Courtesy the artist

Allie McGhee has worked in abstraction for several decades, using it as a device to explore mysticism, cosmology, and ancestral connection. Science informs much of his longing for a world beyond what we know. While referencing cosmological discoveries, such as those made by the Hubble telescope, McGhee has also created his own language of drawing forms, which include elliptical spheres, crescent-moon shapes, and series of vertical and horizontal lines. Through the repetition of these simple visual forms, McGhee seeks to illustrate how certain symbols can reference multiple things.

And while he employs these signs repetitively in his drawings and paintings, each repeated mark is distinct from the one preceding it. Inspired by improvisational jazz forms, McGhee commits to the practice of riffing, such that each work changes course throughout its making. For the artist, this perpetual mark making is a type of religion, a daily gesture that allows him to imagine otherworldly sanctuaries. *Big Me, Little Me* represents a dual self that is both spiritual and physical, and *Black Hole* and *Grey Spinner* also evoke contrasts between physical and spiritual embodiment. Together they remind us of the rhythm and repetition required in most spiritual practices, and how each reiterated gesture might be slightly different than the one before.

Allie McGhee

Wind Walkers, 2019

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy the artist

In *Wind Walkers*, lined black figures traverse through elements that appear to be water and land. To make this work, the artist Allie McGhee stood over the canvas pouring and directing paint across its surface with a paint stick. McGhee has used this tool for

decades to work at a large scale and to apply paint in broad, wide strokes for which regular paint brushes quickly became insufficient. This way of working requires the movement of his whole body, and in *Wind Walkers*, McGhee's gestures can be imagined and traced. The vertical black linear figures suggest people entering a body of water in a processional. Something like a baptism occurs, as the figures move across a representational landscape that depicts water and sky.

Allie McGhee
Evening Shadow, 2014
Acrylic on canvas

Allie McGhee
Flyer, 2014
Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy the artist

Created after a visit to Japan in 2008, *Flyer* and *Evening Shadow* depict symbols common throughout Allie McGhee's body of work—broad ellipses and curvilinear lines. In making these works, he was inspired by traditional Nobori signs he saw displayed throughout Japanese cities. Hung outside of restaurants, displayed during festivals and ceremonies, and sometimes even worn by people, the narrow banner flags are ubiquitous throughout Japan's material and cultural history. McGhee was moved by the ways in which the wind affected the banners that flowed freely in the busy streets he visited. Back in his Detroit studio, he prepared narrow, unbound canvases to paint. McGhee sought a similar freedom of movement for his works, an effect he views as the canvas adopting its own spirit.

Ashon Crawley
dancing in one spot (number 6), 2017
Mixed media on paper

Ashon Crawley
dancing in one spot (number 8), 2018
Mixed media on paper

Courtesy the artist

The artist and scholar Ashon Crawley has taken up a practice of what he calls "Blackpentecostalism," a discipline and form of relation drawn from Black spiritual sites that could be applied to every aspect of living. In these two works, the artist materializes the "praise break"—a moment during church worship when the congregation is encouraged to dance and testify their faith through their bodies. As a gay man, Crawley

explores the viability of this ecstatic performance outside the church space, which has historically marginalized or outright rejected queerness. By placing powdered pigment and acrylic paint on parts of his body, while shouting, whooping, and gasping, Crawley impresses upon paper the evidence of this particular aspect of spiritual longing that is endemic as a queer person marginalized out of traditional church spaces. Toward the images' borders are footprints, and nearing the center the pigment becomes thick and full; little space is left untouched by Crawley's body. Through this mark making, we can imagine all the possible routes of praise and joy that made each impression. The repetition of steps constitute a congregation of fellowship, made possible by one body.

Steffani Jemison

***Sensus Plenior*, 2017**

HD video, black and white, sound, 34:36 min.

Courtesy the artist

Featuring: Rev. Susan Webb

Sound engineer: Sean T. Davis

Music performed by: Mazz Swift (violin) and Brandon Lopez (bass)

Additional recording: Steffani Jemison and Sean T. Davis

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Co-production: Jeu de Paume; Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques, Paris; and CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux

In *Sensus Plenior* (Latin for “fuller meaning”), Steffani Jemison illuminates how pantomime and movement in general might more effectively convey language and communication than sound. The film's focus is on Reverend Susan Webb, an ordained minister and the leader of the Master Mime Ministry in Harlem. Gospel mime, which Webb performs on screen, blends nonverbal theatrical movement with gospel music. It invokes movement traditions from Western Africa, 20th-century French theater, and early silent film—specifically the work of African American director-producer Oscar Micheaux (1884–1951). In its silence, gospel mime subverts traditional forms of Black worship that are often loud and boisterous, and through nonverbal expression, it produces sensations and meanings that are not limited by verbal language. As Jemison documents Webb's preparations and performance in *Sensus Plenior*, she mutes all aspects of audible voice, which further amplifies the communicative gestures of the body. Webb's performance is deeply redolent of personal testimony and spiritual transcendence.

Steffani Jemison

Unto the Third and Forth, 2018
Acrylic paint on velvet
Courtesy the artist

Throughout her interdisciplinary practice, Steffani Jemison has examined the benefits of coded language and the slippages in meaning made possible by text and enunciation. Her rigorous research explores the elasticity of language and a lineage of literary inventiveness, primarily by Black figures. In *Unto the Third and Forth*, Jemison incorporates a set of words derived from the Bible, spelled differently by the artist James Hampton (1909–1964) in his script practice. Instead of stating the “fourth” (found in the original biblical text), one letter has been omitted to create “forth,” which subsequently changes the phrase’s meaning. This omission creates a ripple effect, charting an entirely new possibility for the once-definitive text. The change from “fourth” to “forth” also allows for the phrase to transition from a specified quantity to a meditation on what is to come—looking forward to an indefinite yielding. The acrylic painted on velvet enhances this concept of slippage as the work installed on the wall spills onto the floor. At the top of the piece, situated on the wall, the velvet is vibrant gold; the color then transitions from gold to muted grey to a soft purple as it encounters the floor.

Steffani Jemison
Same Time, 2016–17
Acrylic on clear polyester film
Courtesy the artist

Through in-depth research, Steffani Jemison has located a lineage of linguistic transgressions, carried out mostly by people of African descent, that aim to subvert Westernized standards of communication and understandings of legibility. In *Same Time*, the artist uses as points of departure invented scripts found in the work of the artist James Hampton (1909–1964), who quietly labored in his studio to create a massive installation, discovered only after his death, entitled *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* (1950–64). Within Hampton’s installation, a notebook was found that included words invented by the author, now referred to as Hamptonese. A language that has yet to be deciphered, Hamptonese is often thought to be the written equivalent to speaking in tongues—the often indecipherable verbal expression carried out by those possessed by the Holy Spirit. In her work, Jemison has made marks inspired by Hampton’s notebook, applying acrylic on strips of linear acetate. Through this rendering, Jemison conflates the meaning of drawing, writing, and archival markings to consider future encounters with later legibility.

Allison Janae Hamilton
FLORIDALAND, 2017–18
Four-channel video, color, sound, 7:46 min.
Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

Allison Janae Hamilton's practice is informed by her experience growing up in Northern Florida. Her works regularly engage the history of this land and document, through deep explorative dives, the landscape in the American South. Hamilton's immersive video installation, *FLORIDALAND*, unearths narratives buried within nature—specifically, in this case, a landscape of Turpentine trees in Florida, which completely surrounds the viewer. In the video, a chorus of work songs swells and lilts as a masked figure in a white gown traverses the scenery on a white horse. By embedding the viewer in a container of Florida land, along with songs and video of elders who inhabited the land, the artist suggests that the spirits of such inhabitants are present, and perhaps exist throughout nature. In one scene, kaleidoscope images of swampland appear as an unseen narrator laments, through poetic prose, a connection to orchards, insects, animals, and mortality. In Hamilton's melding of sound and imagery, she encourages us to ask what lives and deaths this land has been witness to. So palpable in *FLORIDALAND* and across Hamilton's work is a pervasive mystery; a presence of the unseen.

Allison Janae Hamilton

***Wakulla Cathedral*, 2019**

Single-channel video, black and white, 3:26 min.

Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

Shot with a Super 8mm camera, Allison Janae Hamilton's *Wakulla Cathedral* blends personal narrative, familial lore, and environmental history of the very landscape where Hamilton grew up—Northern Florida. *Wakulla Cathedral* was filmed in the Cathedral of Palms, a popular trail of massively tall palm trees whose pointed arches appear to touch the sky, evoking grand gothic cathedral architecture. In the silent film, the camera follows two young girls as they traverse the Wakulla forest, passing over narrow bridges and through seemingly unending trails. Their wayward movement and all-white attire suggest a playful innocence. Distorted images of a wolf also appear in tandem with the roaming children. Through these contrasting depictions, we are met with the freedom of wandering throughout natural landscapes, but also the potential threats undermining that freedom.

Ja'Tovia Gary

***An Ecstatic Experience*, 2015**

Video, color, sound, 6 min.

Courtesy the artist

Ja'Tovia Gary's commitment to visual archives is motivated by her desire to liberate histories from the suppressed contexts in which they may reside. She seeks to add nuance to and reimagine historical narratives, particularly as they relate to interior emotions and experiences of Black people. In *An Ecstatic Experience*, Gary captures a stirring film clip of the late actor Ruby Dee, who narrates the oral history of Fannie

Moore, a woman born into slavery. Moore recounts a moment as a child when she witnessed what appeared to be a random outburst by her mother in the field. With great joy she began singing and shouting, as if she was possessed. Unprovoked, Moore's mother exclaimed that she and her children would no longer be subjugated to bondage. Their enslaver lashed her for the testimony. She was quiet, then afterwards she returned to the field to announce: "I'm free." Dee's tears and enduring smile activate the chilling aspect of the historical account.

As in many of her works, Gary alters the video through animated marks she makes atop the original film of Dee. A portal forms between the living and the dead, and as did Moore's mother, Dee appears to experience a type of incarnation in her reenactment of the story. At one point, Gary creates a mitosis of Dee, quadrupling the frame of her head. *An Ecstatic Experience* also incorporates archival media of Alice Coltrane playing the harp, an interview with Assata Shakur, and footage of a protest in Baltimore in response to the killing of Freddie Gray. Gary demonstrates the perpetual ritual of grieving that seems to be inherent to Black being. There is also a distinct focus on routes toward freedom, a freedom making that is specifically dictated and defined on the terms of Black women.

Shikeith

Sermon for a Longing in Blue, 2020

Wood, blue light, curtain, soil and sound

Courtesy the artist

Sermon for a Longing in Blue is a work by the filmmaker and sculptor Shikeith. The lifesize arched wooden structure evokes many Black church interiors that are fabricated with dark mahogany, vibrantly colored carpet and drapes, and accents of blue—a color proven in psychological studies to provide a sense of calm and serenity. In addition to a velvet-like curtain, Shikeith engages the color through a deep, alluring blue light often associated with basement parties and dimly lit clubs. Musician Corey Staggars offers a saxophone rendition of "If Only for One Night" by Luther Vandross, slowing down the original track. In marrying church and house party aesthetics with a sensual R&B song, Shikeith draws parallels between the desire for spiritual possession and physical intimacy. The lines between sacred, secular, and sexual blur as the artist considers the impermanence of satisfying both forms of desire. Soil, a material often used by the artist, is scattered within the structure in an effort to retain moisture. This produces a subtle humidity within the structure to suggest sweat. Ultimately, Shikeith brings to mind the range of ecstatic pleasures that accompany our longing to be held, carried, and full.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden

I. MELISMATA, 2020

Black and silver cloth, sound beam speaker, and wall mount

Courtesy the artist

Melismatic singing is when multiple notes are sung to a single syllable of text. Melismata is “the run,” which has its roots in religious chants but is more popularly associated with gospel and R&B virtuosity. In *I. MELISMATA* (2020), Tiona Nekkia McClodden has conducted a meticulous process in which she has separated vocals from music in over sixty gospel songs (most of which are live performances) to isolate the runs. The collection of vocals were then arranged in a long-form continuous vocal run. The singing featured in the piece are recordings from the early twentieth century to the present, codifying an enduring archive of vocal stamina. The work recalls the artist’s experience growing up in a devout church environment; during her childhood, McClodden often found sanctuary in listening to gospel cassette tapes on her personal Sony Walkman stereo player. Her meditation on the run also invokes the fugitivity and ephemerality of this particular singing style. Runs can be improvisational, altering course midway through the riff, and they align with many of the expressive movements and sound-based gestures in the Black church that are spontaneous, unplanned, and distinct.

Adama Delphine Fawundu

She Caught the Holy Ghost, 2020

Video, sound, 6:47 min.

I look like this Hymn 1 & 2, 2020

Handmade book and pedestal

Courtesy the artist

For the interdisciplinary artist Adama Delphine Fawundu, water is the most sacred medium of memory and a site of rebirth and reengagement with omnipresent spirits. Her video *She Caught the Holy Ghost*, which includes footage of waters along the Ivory Coast, the Mexican Gulf, and other locations, codifies the geographic, diasporic touchpoints of African spiritual heritage. A masked figure in blue is seated outside of a white brick building in Argentina. In other scenes, the forests in Pujehun, Sierra Leone, recall for the artist the atmosphere of the Sea Island coast of Savannah and Gullah Geechee culture. A warped version of Mahalia Jackson’s song, *Come Sunday*, is combined with sounds of a pentecostal service that the artist collected in Brooklyn, New York, where she lives. Throughout this work, Fawundu identifies the routes of forced migration and makes clear the spiritual residue of those movements along areas of the Middle Passage and beyond.

In *I look like this Hymn*, Fawundu has created a material self-portrait through the form of a book. This hymnal however is bound without text, and instead offers a series of images captured by the artist of bodies of water throughout different coasts of the Atlantic ocean. Strains of fiber that resemble hair bring together pages in this small

book. Traditionally, a hymn uses poetry to express adoration of a divine figure. In Fawundu's hymn, she presents oceanic bodies of water as the holy figure. For the artist, water is a force that contains and shares memory—a force that has codified connections between forebearers and their progeny.

Naudline Pierre

For a Little While Longer, 2020

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

In *For a Little While Longer*, Naudline Pierre invokes the pentecostal saying “to lay hands” or to share “anointing hands”—colloquial phrases offered in Black churches that welcome spiritual possession. The painting's main figure, rendered in white, experiences touch by multiple other figures who appear to suspend and float in space and time. Tender hands rest on the main figure's face, while another hand attached to an invisible body interlocks with its own. Pierre infuses the scene with a softness and ceremonial intimacy, as well as a subtle eroticism marked in these encounters between figures that appear to be something other than just human. Faceless beings appear to illuminate and glide over each aspect of the composition, alluding to a mystic ecstasy and bodily dispossession.

John Sesrie-Goff

Faith of Our Mothers, 2016

Television, table, candy dish, lace tablecloth, and picture frame

Courtesy the artist

Faith of Our Mothers was created during a casual visit in 2015 to the artist's father's church, which is located on an outer island near Charleston, South Carolina. During the service, John Sesrie-Goff happened to sit behind an elder woman adorned all in red with a dramatic ruffle-brimmed hat. The artist became enamored with the view of the woman's head and its motions, which in Sesrie-Goff's video oscillate between affirmative nods and rhythmic sways. For the artist, this church visitor and her movement marked a way of keeping time. Through this video and installation, Sesrie-Goff suspends this moment in time and gives the viewer the vantage point of a small child who may not be able to see beyond the large hat of the woman seated before them. A bowl of candy, reminiscent of the sweet offerings made to children to soothe their unrest during long church services, is installed near the television monitor displaying the image of the rocking elder woman. For a child, the woman's elaborate hat, warm sway, and sweet purse candies may be the highlights of church and worship. The artist also infers in *Faith of Our Mothers* that religion is often passed down through family matriarchs through these small acts of movement, offering, and care.

Carrie Mae Weems

Works from the Sea Islands Series, 1991–92

Birthing and Babies, 1991–92

Text panel

Box Spring in Tree, 1992

Gelatin silver print

Woman in White/Pan of Water, 1992

Gelatin silver prints and text panels

Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

These three works belong to a series of photographs that Carrie Mae Weems captured over forty years ago and one has only recently been printed. Weems's mysterious photographs are accompanied by text that alludes to superstition, ritual, gestation, and omnipresent spirit. During the early 1990s, the artist became entranced by the Sea Islands on the Atlantic coast of the southeastern United States and its connection, in turn, to the West African Ivory Coast. These works are also inspired by the Gullah Geechee people in the Lowcountry region, who have maintained a rich cultural history of language and song preserved for centuries by descendants of Africans brought to the area. Weems maintains that these images are captured from an outsider's point of view. Her longing to spend time in this region was prompted by an intuitive call to visit and learn from its landscapes. Her images and accompanying text represent a deep curiosity about place and a commitment to imagining the many historical narratives that are bound to the land.

Billy Mark

Transmedia Prayer: Hymnal, 2020

Three-channel video, text, sound, and sensory component

Courtesy the artist

In his poetry and visual art, Billy Mark interrogates the making of meaning and how words can be meditated upon to inspire movement. As a practitioner of the Christian faith, Mark often works to identify the various ways he might embody Biblical text. In

Transmedia Prayer: Hymnal, Mark along with members of his community, perform a series of gestures and sounds inspired by verses from the book of Isaiah that relate to selflessness, generosity, and communion. Viewers are invited to wave their hands or move their bodies in front of the sensors displayed beneath each of the monitors. Movement in front of the sensor prompts an offering of sound, text, or audio on each of the three screens. For the artist, the practice of prayer is a portal to engage others. It becomes an opportunity to study words and enact them through our bodies together.

When we think of a hymnal (if we do think of a hymnal), we think of words and music passed down from generation to generation in the form of a book. To invite the body in a composed way into the hymnal form is to question the boundaries and capacity of spiritual legacy. Our bodies are messy and yet an ongoing intergenerational record of spirit. Our bodies are alive. It is from our bodies that these words of life and melodies of the unknown break loose. And so we invite the body, the voice, and our words into a moment of mutual selfgiving. Here we bring the records of others with us, to begin in us something new: a time where what we long to worship can become our surrender. — Billy Mark, 2020

Marianetta Porter

I've been in sorrow's kitchen, 2003
Paper and wood

Life is a mist, 2003
Paper and wood

Fingers tap doubled time, 2003
Paper and wood

Woke up this morning thankful; Text: African American folk saying, 2003
Paper and wood

A southern breeze, 2003
Paper and wood

Courtesy the artist

The artist and scholar Marianetta Porter has been researching the history of Black church fans for over fifteen years. Found in the pews of most Black churches, these useful artifacts often consist of a small wooden stick—with curved edges for easy holding—stapled to a piece of paper. Through her study of archives across the country, Porter identified a range of content printed on church fans historically: Black businesses shared advertisements of their services and goods, churches reinforced scripture and church information, and anecdotes and colloquial proverbs were displayed. An

amalgamation of collective worship, economic development, and self-determination, the church fan is also a functional object: it provides cool air and eases labored breathing, which is of particular relief when a member of the congregation is enveloped by the spirit. For Porter, the church fan indicates so much about the lineage of Black church sites and the history of spirituality, so in 2003, inspired by her research, the artist created a series of her own fans that reflects much of the content she found on the historic objects.

“BLACKBERRI: Searching for My Gay Spiritual Roots”
***BLK* magazine, June 1990**

“Gospel Legend James Cleveland is Called to that Mass Choir in the Sky”
***BLK* magazine, February 1991**

Courtesy ONE Archives at the USC Libraries

Created by Alan Bell in 1988, *BLK* magazine provided coverage of the LGBTQ community in the greater Los Angeles area until its last issue in 1994. Throughout its tenure, the publication chronicled local events, fundraisers, efforts against the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and popular figures who contributed to queer cultural discourse. The two articles presented here highlight notable figures in LA’s creative community. The first features BLACKBERRI, a performer associated with filmmaker Marlon Riggs, who describes a series of epiphanies that connect his experience in Black pentecostal churches with his African spiritual practice, as well as his sexuality as a gay man. The second article eulogizes the gospel figure, James Cleveland, and includes speculation about his sexuality. Known for his pioneering work in the genre, Cleveland collaborated with Aretha Franklin, Albertina Walker, and Billy Preston. He led the gospel choir at the Grace Memorial Church of God in Christ and founded the Southern Baptist Community Choir, both based in Los Angeles.

Together these articles illuminate the tensions around fostering queerness within the Black church community. Often suppressed, and contextualized as a sin that must be exorcised, homosexuality and other forms of relation beyond heteronormativity are often not permitted in spaces of Christian worship. The writings in *BLK* track this suppression; at the same time, they paradoxically identify how queerness—not only as a sexuality, but also as a way of existing outside of the registers of the patriarchal nuclear family—shows up in the lineage of Black Christian worship, particularly in the pentecostal faith. Cleveland and BLACKBERRI, in their respective ways, have queered the traditions of the gospel, either by pairing it with other faith practices or by attending to a nuanced expression of musicality within the practice of Christian worship.

