

Press kit

Steffani Jemison

Tumblers

**June 8 – September 8,
2024**

**Opening:
Friday June 7, 2024,
6 pm**

**Curated by
Andrea Bellini**



**Centre
d'Art
Contemporain
Genève**

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Press release

The Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève is pleased to announce *Tumblers*, the first solo exhibition in Switzerland of New York-based artist Steffani Jemison. *Tumblers* spans fifteen years of Jemison's work across media and marks the debut of a new live performance, which will take place within the exhibition space on its opening weekend, June 7–8, 2024.

Bodies in motion have long propelled Steffani Jemison's expansive practice, which concerns itself with how we shoulder the weight of both physical and social forces. Her exhibition of new and existing works unfurls the narrative potential of acts of falling and floating, suspension and support. Spanning video, drawing, kinetic sculpture, and live performance, the show traces legacies of flight in Black cultural traditions in a broad range of material forms.

The precisely choreographed installation begins with *Jemison's Bound* (2024), a video framed against a found theatrical backdrop that suggests a patch of sky. On screen, acrobats from a storied Chicago tumbling troupe vault into the air. The leap is shown, but never the landing, and the video's imagery is largely abstract—the view through the mesh of a trampoline's yielding surface or the cloudless blue above. Jemison's visuals are often overlaid with the word "Skybound"—a leading brand of trampoline that is rich with lexical possibility, implying constraint and that which evades it.

The exhibition marks the first presentation of Jemison's largest sculpture to date: a standalone work that provides the armature for intermittent live performances. This pipe-and-fitting structure recalls a cage or an outdoor jungle gym, its modular forms disrupted by a set of drawings on glass hinged to its crossbars. A new performance, *In Succession (Means)*, considers live performers themselves as means rather than ends, simultaneously supporting and supported. Approaching the sculpture as a scaffold, prosthesis, ladder, pole, playground, and web, performers reflect on social and physical isolation and connection, evoking both the irreducible "I" and the provisional "we."

Bodies and architecture are similarly aligned in Jemison's earlier video *In Succession* (2019), in which four men climb and balance atop one another in tenuous structures of mutual support. Both the performance and related video are loosely inspired by historical anecdotes of ordinary people who spontaneously formed human pyramids, temporarily overcoming imposed limitations through extraordinary physical feats. Shot during a series of movement workshops that Jemison conducted with street performers, *In Succession's* split-screen footage flips and rotates the tightly cropped figures to further entwine them. The men's improvised formations of hoisted bodyweight require extreme stamina and reciprocal trust—and an acceptance of risk as foundational to any formation of solidarity.

The precarity of *In Succession's* acrobatics is further distilled in *Broken Fall (Organic)* (2008), in which Jemison adopts the premise of Bas Jan Ader's work of the same name. Here, as in the 1970s-era film, a young man clings to a tree branch for a long minute before falling out of the frame, and the cycle repeats. Jemison looks to the heyday of the moving image in Conceptual art as a template to expand and reclaim, shifting the particular gravities at work by recasting the scene with a Black protagonist.

Cyclical repetition of a different kind propels a group of motorized sculptures. These are made from functioning rock tumblers that use continuous motion to turn rough edges smooth. Over the course of the exhibition, the works build friction from water and grit to transform found materials: stones, coins, scrap metal, and shards of glass dredged from the bed of Lake Geneva, some of which are arrayed throughout the exhibition space. The real-time whirl of the *Tumblers* denatures even as it hones and polishes, re-reflecting the themes of agitation and turning that run through the exhibition.

Additional programming

During the run of *Tumblers*, the Centre will host a program of screenings in the Cinema Dynamo featuring additional video works by Jemison that touch on questions of fugitivity, translation, and embodied knowledge.

To mark the close of the exhibition, the Centre will present a reading of the work in progress *Flight Theater*, a collaboration between Jemison and writer Quincy Flowers. Two voices narrate a dialogue that details escapes and near-misses, both personal and atmospheric. Drawing on sources that range from avant-garde dance to the "flying African" myth in diasporic folklore, *Flight Theater* is an interdisciplinary meditation on untethering oneself from the earth.

Performance

In Succession (Means)

Friday June 7, at 7pm &

Saturday June 8, at 4pm

To mark the opening of Steffani Jemison's solo exhibition, *Tumblers*, the Centre will debut a live performance conceived and scored by the artist, held in its galleries on June 7 and 8.

In Succession (Means) (2024) is a new performance that activates Steffani Jemison's *Untitled (Projection)* (2024), the artist's most ambitiously scaled sculpture to date.

This pipe-and-fitting structure is comprised of modular metal parts, assembled at right-angles to form a pyramid-shaped armature that recalls a cage or a jungle gym.

The performance juxtaposes the sculpture's stark geometries with the movements and dialogue of two performers, who "partner" with this inanimate object the way one might dance with another person. Working from Jemison's original score, the two complete a series of tasks on, around, and through the sculpture, which functions variously as scaffold, prosthesis, ladder, pole, playground, and web. The accompanying narration is inspired by a historical episode in which incarcerated people sought temporary release by building a human pyramid—a tenuous structure of mutual support.

In Succession (Means) considers live performers themselves as means rather than ends, evoking moments of social and physical isolation and connection—both the irreducible "I" and the provisional "we." The work thus poses questions about the liberatory power that might be found interdependency. How do we find freedom with, rather than freedom from, one another? Can everyday movements—the kinds that pass directly from one body to the next—help us learn to be of service to one another in the future? And what forms might that "service" take?

Concept, composition, direction: Steffani Jemison

Performed by: Nimia Gracious, Tschannen Lorenand and Steffani Jemison

Researched with: Jaleel Porcha, Ke'ron Jamaul

Special thanks: Amanda Aponte

In Succession (Means) is made possible with support from Creative Capital

About the artist

Steffani Jemison (b. 1981) lives and works in New York City. Recent solo exhibitions, screenings, and performances of her work have been held at Greene Naftali, New York (2024, 2021); JOAN, Los Angeles (2022); Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam (2022, 2020); Galeria Madragoa, Lisbon (2021); the Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, Ohio (2021); Kai Matsumiya, New York (2019); the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2019); Lincoln Center, New York (2018); Jeu de Paume, Paris (2017); CAPC Bordeaux (2017); MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts (2017); Nottingham Contemporary (2017); RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island (2015); and The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (2015). Notable group exhibitions include *Counterpublic, St. Louis* (2023); *A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration*, organized by the Mississippi Museum of Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art (traveling 2022–24); *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York (2021); *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*, organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem and the American Federation for Arts (travelled 2019–21); and the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019). Jemison is associate professor of art and design at Rutgers University; her first novel, *A Rock, A River, A Street*, was published by Primary Information in 2022.

Her work is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Brooklyn Museum, New York; the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.

For further information or images, please contact our press office:

presse@centre.ch
+41 22 329 18 42

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