

# STEFFANI JEMISON

# **MATRIX 196**



FEBRUARY 7 - AUGUST 3, 2025



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

*"I have made a mark, and I do not know whether I am drawing or writing. I am thinking about marks and how they collect on a surface. I have accumulated marks, and I believe that this accumulation is at once a drawing, a text, and an archive. I am thinking, as I am so often thinking, about the proximity of writing to drawing. I am also thinking about how archives are always already oriented toward the future. What is the archive but that which awaits activation? I am wondering about the ways in which drawings are active, are records of activity, are anticipatory. I am wondering about the difference between acting, recording action, and awaiting activation."*

—Steffani Jemison, 2019<sup>1</sup>

Moving freely between mediums, Steffani Jemison explores how the human body absorbs and communicates knowledge. Both extending and challenging the precepts of conceptualism, Jemison works with drawing, sound, text, video, movement, and sculpture, often creating installations and performances that draw on these diverse disciplines and activate them in combination. She cites inspiration from a wide range of figures in the black radical tradition, including musicians, poets, performers, and activists, whom she researches extensively and whose legacy she could be said to continue with her own experimental practice. Among Jemison's principal aims is to surface the different codes, languages, and gestures invented throughout history by black people, particularly black Americans, to communicate outside of the white-dominated and Western-centric mainstream. Rather than didactic presentations of research, she creates elegantly spare, resolutely formalist works that offer ambiguity, abstraction, and opacity as tools of resistance and liberation, acknowledging the possibility that different meanings might only be legible to certain viewers or exceed legibility altogether. As she says: "My work has something to do with the relationship between description and representation, with the tension between what can be read, what can be intuited, and what refuses to give up its secrets."<sup>2</sup>

Drawing is an important medium for Jemison, and she has developed an expansive practice that distills her discoveries of alternative languages into restrained compositions on unexpected materials. The *Same Time* series (2015–) consists of calligraphy-like drawings in black acrylic on transparent polyester film, which are often displayed in unconventional ways, such as spilling out from the wall, propped up on stands, or laid horizontally on pedestals or the floor. The elegant, mysterious marks are transposed from what Jemison describes as the "private script" of hieroglyphics invented by James Hampton, a visionary black artist and custodian who was inspired



by religious visions to develop his own written language in the mid-20th century, which remains undeciphered today. These drawings look familiar and almost legible, but their content lies in perpetual wait of translation. In a similar vein, Jemison's *WLD* series (2018-) comprises texts printed on glass, whose letters and words come from coded notes that were found in the pocket of Ricky McCormick, a presumed-illiterate man from Missouri, at the time of his murder in 1999. The untranslated texts remain an open FBI case. Both series attest to Jemison's interest in the slippages between drawing and writing, encouraging us to imagine the resistant potential of remaking or misusing language. What differentiates a handwritten word from a drawing if we cannot read it? What would it mean to read a drawing that, to most viewers, appears abstract? Through her choice of transparent or reflective mediums and unconventional display methods that complicate the possibility of a singular viewing perspective, Jemison encourages us to "read" with our bodies as much as our eyes and minds.

Jemison gained early recognition for videos, many of which transformed existing forms to address contemporary experiences of black Americans, and moving image remains an important medium for the artist. In the videos *Maniac Chase* (2008-09) and *Escaped Lunatic* (2010-11), for example, she reimagined the slapstick chase scene trope of early cinema using a cast of black parkour practitioners. Jemison filmed the videos in the outskirts of Houston, capturing the highly trained athletes hurtling through gates



and sprinting along highways in scenes that are both deadpan and inevitably evocative of fugitives fleeing police violence and persecution. More recent videos demonstrate the artistry of individual black performers who have mastered specialized techniques of communicating with their bodies. *Sensus Plenior* (2017) features a choreographed performance by a reverend from the Master Mime Ministry of Harlem, who translates her church's gospel into pantomime. In *Similitude* (2019), an actor trained in physical theater recreates the actions of unsuspecting people in public settings.

Live performance has also gained prominence in Jemison's practice; it is something like a form of research, allowing her to explore in real time different modes of improvisation, iteration, and collaboration. Working with trained performers—such as actors, dancers, musicians, and acrobats—Jemison produces experimental live work in response to institutional prompts or to activate her own exhibitions. In her ongoing *Recitatif* series (2017–), for example, Jemison explores ideas of public and private language, inspired by her longstanding interest in Nat Turner, an enslaved man who received divine instructions to lead his people to liberation via coded signs “written” in leaves and trees that were only legible to him. The unfolding body of sound works is composed using Solresol, a universal language invented by French composer François Sudre in 1817 in which words are spelled with distinct sequences of pitches. Jemison's music-like compositions translate excerpts from influential black



poets and films into Solresol scores, which she performs in collaboration with black vocalists and instrumentalists, inviting audiences to experience language as music or vice versa. As in much of her work, Jemison is more interested in posing questions with these performances than providing answers. If the audience cannot decode the communication, what meaning can they still glean from it? Why do attempts to create universal languages usually fail?



The exhibition “Bound”, presented in early 2024 at Greene Naftali, New York, blended Jemison’s familiar concerns with new references and materials. The presentation centered on an eponymous video, which the artist made in collaboration with members of a black youth gymnastics troupe in Chicago. Most of this slow, meditative video shows a blue sky superimposed with the skywritten word SkyBound, a brand of trampolines, while two young acrobats imagine taking flight in a voiceover dialogue. Eventually, the viewpoint changes and some gymnasts are shown bouncing on a trampoline in front of the Chicago skyline but never landing. As is typical for the artist, the new body of work was animated by references that were palpable despite an absence of literal representation: in this case, the “flying African,” an African American myth imagining escape from slavery, and the Greek mythological figure of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun, melted the wings his father made him, and plunged to his death. In a series of accompanying drawings, Jemison depicted semi-abstracted flying figures, stars, wings, and abstract glyph-like forms using acrylic paint on fragments of found, silvered glass. The drawings were installed in such a way that viewing them became a form of choreography; Jemison attached them to walls at different heights, set them on the floor, and braced them to two sculptures of steel pipes (titled *Untitled (Projection)*, 2024) that evoked something like an urban jungle gym. A large, decommissioned theater backdrop—painted with a beautiful blue scene that evoked a night sky and presented with its disordered reverse side facing forward—hung along one of the gallery’s walls, which seemingly turned the whole exhibition into a stage set. Visitors were invited to imagine what performances

UNTITLED (SAME TIME / WAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE AIR), 2024.  
ACRYLIC ON BRASS.









or narrative actions might take place on, around, or in response to the works, and perhaps even to consider themselves implicated as performers. What would it have meant to read Jemison's drawings as stage directions or a performance score?<sup>3</sup>

Jemison's *MATRIX* exhibition marks a return to Hartford for the artist, who taught at Trinity College from 2012-13 and again in 2014, and continues the impulse of her 2024 work, exploring the use of flight, air, and sky as evocative metaphors in the black political imagination. Jemison has created a new configuration of *Untitled (Projection)* to suit the oblong architecture of the *MATRIX* Gallery. It is set against another, newly sourced vintage theater backdrop, which hangs along the longest wall of the gallery, creating an effect that evokes a cyclorama and invites viewers to consider the exhibition as a stage or set for potential action. A group of new acrylic drawings on brass discs and semicircles, made during a fall 2024 residency in Paris, will be installed at various heights on the gallery walls; the imagery of these mandala-like drawings includes abstracted webs, arrows, stars, and glyphs, as well as a few pointing hands rendered in greater detail. What are viewers to make of this imagery, the reflective material, and the means of installation? Jemison's reference materials include "Hamptonese" as well as well-known cosmograms and religious symbols from various Central African and Caribbean traditions; the text-drawing hybrids could be read by trained interpreters and might even be recognized by certain visitors to the museum. For those unable to decode them literally, a cue is offered by the inclusion of three lenticular prints, which from various angles reveal suspended figures falling (or flying), abstract gestural marks, and images of the sky



excerpted from works by Gustave Courbet and James Abbott McNeill Whistler in the Wadsworth's collection. Jemison encourages visitors inside her exhibition to consider perspective and perception as both optical and embodied phenomena; in other words, to have an experience of viewing and interpreting her work that is physical, visual, and intellectual. For those who cannot “read” the drawings, she suggests, perhaps their meaning lies elsewhere. Could this resistance to broad interpretation be related to forms of resistance in other political or social spheres?

In a cultural moment where artists are increasingly asked to offer easily digestible representations of their identities or experiences, or speak directly to “current issues”, Jemison’s use of irresolution and open-ended abstraction to explore the legacy of black radicalism can be seen as a powerful gesture. She encourages us to accept multiplicity and complexity rather than engage in literal or binary thinking; to be comfortable with uncertainty and to accept that a mark or a movement may offer different meanings to different people—a lesson we might be well suited to apply to other art forms that might, at face value, appear more legible. As Jemison herself writes: “I am thinking about technologies of representation and transcription as symbolic systems from which we are periodically compelled to escape. [...] I am looking for—no, I am looking at—a path to drawing that is a labor and performance of freedom. I am thinking about the relationship between freedom and withdrawal.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Jared Quinton**

Emily Hall Tremain Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

# STEFFANI JEMISON

Steffani Jemison lives and works in New York. Solo exhibitions, screenings, and performances of her work have been held at venues including Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (2024); Greene Naftali, New York (2024, 2021); JOAN, Los Angeles (2022); Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam (2022, 2020); Galeria Madragoa, Lisbon (2021); Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati (2021); Kai Matsumiya, New York (2019); 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, 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 Baltimore Museum of Art (travelling 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 & 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; Baltimore Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin, Italy; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. Born in 1981 in Berkeley, CA, Jemison received her BA from Columbia University and her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

*Black Utopia (Hand Line)*, 2017  
UV inkjet print on mirrored acrylic  
27 x 96 in.

*Untitled (Same Time / How Else will I)*, 2025  
UV inkjet print on mirrored acrylic  
68 x 26 in.

*Untitled (Same Time / How Else will I)*, 2025  
UV inkjet print on mirrored acrylic  
68 x 26 in.

*Untitled (Same Time / way in the middle of the air)*, 2025  
Acrylic on brass  
23.6 x 11.8 in.

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*Untitled (Same Time / way in the middle of the air)*, 2025  
Acrylic on brass  
17.7 in. diameter

Born 1981 in Berkeley, CA  
Lives and works in New York, NY

## ARTIST TALK

Steffani Jemison in conversation with  
Jared Quinton

Thursday, February 6, 5pm gallery viewing;  
6pm conversation

Additional programs to be announced.  
Visit [thewadsworth.org/matrix196](https://thewadsworth.org/matrix196) for  
updated information.



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM  
MUSEUM OF ART

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Contemporary Coalition and the Wadsworth Exhibition Fund,  
supported by the Estate of James Lyon. Additional support  
provided by the Howard Fromson Fund

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION (CONT.)

*Untitled (Same Time / way in the middle of the air)*,  
2025

Acrylic on brass  
17.7 in. diameter

*Untitled (Icarus Projection)*, 2024

Acrylic on silvered glass, mounting hardware  
12 x 16 in.

*Untitled (Projection)*, 2024

Galvanized steel, brass pole, fittings, paint  
Variable dimensions

*Untitled (Projection)*, 2024

Acrylic on silvered glass  
Two parts, 23 x 29 x 12 in. each

*Untitled (Same Time)*, 2025

Retired theater curtain  
18 x 40 ft.

All works courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali,  
New York; Annet Gelink, Amsterdam; and Madragoa,  
Lisbon

<sup>1</sup> Steffani Jemison, "Drafts", *Artforum*. April 2019, vol. 57, no. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> In an exhibition in Geneva later in 2024, Jemison choreographed  
acrobatic performances that took place on the same jungle gym-like  
sculpture.

<sup>4</sup> Jemison, "Drafts".