

## **Jacolby Satterwhite**

Interview with Chen Tamir

[Jacolby Satterwhite](#) is a master at generating movement-based computer-generated images. His animated video works combine drawing, performance, dance, and animation. The result are dazzling, seductive, fantastical worlds populated by jarring, queered figures and domestic materiality. These are often based on family footage or a massive collection of schematic drawings made by his mother in the 1980s and 1990s of common objects or inventions for not-yet-produced common consumer products, ranging from vaginal lipstick to shoe-shaped slide with water guns at the ends. The drawings — often using a graphic, overlapping grid system — focus on how the object can be used or theoretically physically manipulated, which extends to Satterwhite’s practice of overlaying various spatial vectors and integrating two-dimensional with three-dimensional plains.

**CT: I’ve been following your work ever since stumbling upon the Recess studio space in SoHo in 2013 where you were doing a residency. I was immediately drawn to the vibrant visual language and your virtuosic use of CGI and animation. I was also fascinated by how you incorporate language and performance in your work. All of this comes from a very personal space. Can you tell us a bit about your “raw materials” or what you’ve been using as your main source of inspiration?**

JS: My foundations are rooted in the familial. I’ve worked with my mother’s drawings and family photographs for about eight years. I’ve worked with her sound recordings more exclusively in the past year and a half. I am outsourcing from a much more public forum of ideas now. I’ve worked with a lot of performers and institutions and brands, and solicited performances from people on Fire Island. What I want to do is archive massive groups of things or ideas – whether it’s a community, language, drawings, my family, soliciting performances from passers-by on the street, or having a party with a green screen up – and find logic and language around them.

**CT: When we met briefly in 2013 you showed me footage from a family get together that was the basis of [“Country Ball”](#) (2013). It’s rare to see such a direct window onto an artist’s cultural development at a young age that so clearly influences their work. It’s all there - leisure and consumer culture in 1990s middle America, dance and performance as socially formative, family and blackness a cultural background, even the socialization of gender. How do you think about the way you weave your own personal story into a publicly relevant artwork?**

JS: “Country Ball” was a very important piece for me. When I grew older I found that as I age the video began revealing things to me. I began to have a dialogue with that relic and to re-introduce my familial archive in the same way that a corporation would re-issue an album years later. Like a re-mastering 23 years later. That’s how I treated my camcorder video footage. I have a removed relationship from my personal archive and my mother’s works. It’s

very inventive. I don't like to "romanticize" it even though that's naturally going to happen. I like treating it like a foundation class exercise, as material that speaks to my contemporaries as familiar. Like if you use something from your journal there is a certain romance or bias that goes into doing anything with it. For me it's more like a Surrealist artwork.

**CT: What do you think other people see in it?**

JS: I think the way I work with my materials it gets crystalized and fragmented so densely that people just see abstraction. A lot of people don't even see my resources. When it dissolves, I feel like I'm succeeding. Some people do see it, but it's not necessarily important. My background and the platforms that I use, whether there is a public language or a private language, is just like a gesso to a canvas. My family archive and my personal background or the people I solicit to make performances — they are the gesso, they are the palette. And I want to make something that dissolves that.

**CT: How is your relationship with your mother now? What does she think about your work?**

JS: She loves the album. I'm making an album of her raw recordings that's going to be the score for a CGI film. My mother made 160 songs between 1994 and 1999. They're *a cappella* on cassette tape. She recorded them in her home and at her mental institution. I subtly worked with them in the past, but I wanted to work with a producer and synthesizers and I was fortunate enough to meet someone who is now a good friend of mine, Nick Weiss. He's a band member of Teengirl Fantasy, an amazing international electronic duo. We've produced about 15 or 16 tracks so far. Two of the tracks debuted at the Berlin Biennial. [Pitchfork covered "Birds in Paradise,"](#) the single. I think it's more shocking for my mother to see personal technology used like this because in the 80s, 90s, and 00s making an album was so expensive.

**CT: What I was looking through your work, the motif of birth reoccurs throughout your work, and I was thinking about the relationship to your mother, but also ...**

JS: Gestation is a concept that a lot of animators gravitate to initially. That was a concept that triggered "Reifying Desire," I don't know if the new series has much gestation or birth in it. "Reifying Desire" had a lot of that because it's a default for animators to do life cycles or death cycles. Like when beginner animators do a flipbook, a linear description of a plant growing and plant dying, sun rising and setting. I felt like using those clichés and something more poignant. Also because of the matrilineal relationship to the works. Sometimes when you're working it's really good to choose the most obvious thing, a pivot, to make something more complicated. By the time I got to "Reifying Desire Six" I was thinking of more complicated, controversial concepts behind work, so I was working with a porn-star who is known for bareback sex. And at the time I was working on that, Truvada was introduced to the gay community. There was a lot of politics around it, a lot of

controversy. Antonio Biaggi the model in the video, his background and public mythology is an information databank for me to use — I treat personal mythology as a palette to use to create. I had him have sex with me in the video and then produce a baby. It was a queer gestation cycle and it introduced a politic in my work that generated many conversations in magazines and interviews and I think it was good to build a dialogue in a much more open-ended way.

**CT: I was thinking about it as a metaphor for the creative process.**

JS: It was! It's a metanarrative. It has seven different tiers. It was literal, political, creative process. Using metanarrative concepts is how I work best: Everything has seven tiers. That's when I'm happiest, when I can find an idea that has seven footnotes to what I'm thinking about at the time.

**CT: Your work lacks narrative in the traditional sense as having a beginning, climax, and end. It's more about creating image worlds. Manipulating the body in ways that only the digital has made possible. I'm sure you're inspired by video games and voguing, and I've heard you talk in the past about queering the body. Can you talk about what that says to a world so radically shaped by technology?**

JS: Video games are an inspiration for me. Films are an inspiration to me. Voguing is the least inspirational to me, but the language does go into my work. The physical gesture references voguing and modern dance, but I think those defaults just come from being black and gay. But that culture is not interesting to me at all, though it lends itself to a better composition. I like Piero della Francesca, Peter Paul Rubens, Marlene Dumas, and Peter Doig. I'm interested in composition in pictorial space, and when it comes to the figure, there are certain movements that build better images. Voguing can lead to better images. Modern dance can do that. Because they're all diagonals and just make better pictures.

I'm interested in video games. Have played them since I was two years old. I love the language and strategy of gaming and the pictorial space that a lot of Japanese game designers work with, the axial perspective. All those things influence the aesthetic of my work. The Internet. The disposability of language — I love it all.

**CT: Beyond your own technical mastery, how do you think your work has evolved in the past few years? And where do you think you're headed as an artist?**

JS: I've gotten more autonomy around the subject matter and I'm feeling less apologetic. It's more difficult now because it's expanded so densely. The archives have become enormous. It's much more of a public thing. The private archive, my mother Patricia, the family, my performances, dance — gave me the foundation to grow and introduce things that I'm familiar with. I don't dance as much in my work, the work has become more abstract. I think

it will continue to expand. I'm more interested in two-dimensional images, in the physical space the work's producing, sculpture, and extending the frame as much as possible. However, I'm interested in paring things down as much as possible, as well. It's such a strange thing that's happening in the work. I've been working in many disciplines using digital media. I've been experimenting with large format photographic media, virtual reality, cgi film, and sculpture. I think the older I get the more experimental I become, and less figurative. I rely less on my past and focus on the future. I don't need lot of the anchors that gave me confidence to make images as much as I did in the past, which is great. Now I'm developing my own lexicon that's not referencing things that happened before as much.