

ARTFORUM

Jacolby Satterwhite



View of "Jacolby Satterwhite," 2013.

Many times when we say collaboration, we actually *mean* task-based audience participation, or even, simply, appropriation. Think, for example, of how "collaborative" processes such as workshopping and inviting audience contributions often result in a single-authored artwork—the artist has annexed others' efforts as his own. Jacolby Satterwhite literally dances amid these semantic distinctions, producing a body of work that mines the slippery word for all it's worth. To create his fantastical videos, the artist makes CGI renderings of speculative consumer products drawn by his mother, and pairs these animated digital graphics with footage of his own performing body. In his current show, he also solicits actions from members of the public that later become part of the works. His practice is rooted in a personal history that, to some, would sound particularly fraught. Previous projects have dealt not only with his experience as an African American growing up gay but also with his childhood battles with cancer (at age seventeen he went into remission after several rounds of chemotherapy), and in this exhibition, his mother's schizophrenia was the organizing theme.

But like the feel-good vibe of rhetorics of collaboration that may ultimately veil asymmetrical power dynamics, Satterwhite's use of his mother's drawings in the current body of work is complicated, and in many ways enriched, by her diagnosed mental illness, symptoms of which involve a compulsion to create diagrams for improbable inventions. The devices are sometimes tweaks of existing products—a "carocell," for example, is a rotating complex of reclining lounge-chairs, and a shoe roller-coaster helps organize closets—while some stray into the realm of the bizarre, freighted with sexual connotations. One sketch proposes various flavors of a "lipstick" for "between the legs," while a "whiskey flasher" apparatus with "diamond cocks" can be attached to the tops of liquor bottles. These items are rendered with a feverish pencil latticing that looks remarkably similar to the trusswork of radio towers or the faceted polyhedrons of geodesic domes. Satterwhite inserts digitized versions of the drawn objects into his videos as props for outlandish dances, for which he wears shiny, skintight jumpsuits and preposterous headdresses fitted with glowing screens while voguing on street corners, subway platforms, and other highly trafficked urban areas.

Papered floor to ceiling with taped-up grids of the drawings, the gallery walls presented a disorienting and repetitive agglomeration of designs by Satterwhite's mother. At the center of the space, the artist set up an ad hoc video-recording studio, where audience members were invited to select a drawing from the 260 on display and mime interacting with the depicted item in front of a green screen. Satterwhite was on hand to record these actions, and throughout the course of the show he combined the resultant footage with that of his own performances. On display on a nearby monitor were Satterwhite's earlier works and parts of the videos-in-progress that involve fantasias of penis-like tiered cakes spewing miniature versions of writhing Jacobys, or of a leaf-blower-like tool (described by his mother as a way to help "turn the smell of pussy off") manipulated by the artist among a crew of mannequins strapped with flaming merkins.

Satterwhite has said that "the blurring of the authorship" in the work is important; he aspires to make "the most personal thing[s] in my life my work." And here is the crux of his form of collaboration: Satterwhite, in his role as artist, is able to organize and reenergize the rituals of therapeutic imagemaking to which his mother, part of a tight-knit family, repeatedly returns, while simultaneously inviting the wider public to engage, possibly empathetically, with the moments of eccentric creativity in her obsessions. In spite of his mother's fluctuating mental health, Satterwhite admires the way she's managed to sublimate her condition into drawings that also serve as creative fodder for his work. In order to effect what he has called a queering of art, Satterwhite tests conventions of race, power, propriety within the family, sexuality, and behavior in public space, and troubles those codes as they relate to others surrounding authorship and originality.

—*Eva Díaz*