

EDUCATOR GUIDE



Steffani Jemison

March 5, 2021 – August 8, 2021



Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are delighted for you join us as the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) brings you the work of Steffani Jemison from March 5, 2021-August 8, 2021.

Jemison brings together video, drawing and sculpture to examine frameworks of interpretation and narration. Her practice is much like that of a scientist, working through research and experimentation. In this collection of works, Jemison focuses on the word *tumble* or "to turn." As Jemison considers the expression "to *turn* something over in one's mind," she will have us doing the same.

We invite you to explore, create, immerse yourselves, and discover what stories, connections and lessons can be found within this exhibition.

Enjoy!

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Steffani Jemison

- Born in Berkeley, California, 1981. Grew up in Cincinnati.
- She recalls visiting her grandparents in Pittsburgh and going to the Carnegie Museum of Art as a child.
- Many of Jemison’s works frame reading as a communal and political act. “It was one of my favorite parts of church when I went to church services as a child—reading aloud from a shared book together, or listening to a leader encounter a text as if for the first time.”
- Studied at Columbia University and the School of the Art Institute Chicago.
- Works as an assistant professor in the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.
- She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2020.
- Jemison has exhibited her work across the world. Notable solo exhibitions were shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New Museum and MASS MoCA. She has also participated in the Whitney Biennial and group shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Brooklyn Museum and Institute of Contemporary Art, London.
- Her work is held in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, Museum of Modern Art and Brooklyn Museum.



About Jemison’s work

- Jemison works in a variety of mediums, including video, sculpture, installation, and printmaking.
- Many of her recent works are videos that draw on the structure of early filmmaking. Rather than show linear narrative or plot, the works often present repeated scenes, spliced from multiple angles. This use of repetition challenges traditional ideas of progress and the view that society is always improving.
- Jemison also confronts the consequences of communicative or political failure. When making videos “I was working backward, thinking about what happens if political progress or development fails,” she says. These ideas relate to her interest in

untraditional narrative and repetition. She wonders: "How do we understand or make that failure legible within the conventions of storytelling? [...] How do we explain what has happened and what it means for things to change if they're not measured against a specific end?"

- Much of Jemison's work deals with themes of communication and language. Specifically, she considers how Black Americans have crafted alternative communication systems to push for political change. As one example, she created acetate scrolls with gestural strokes. The symbols took inspiration from the story of Nat Turner, who received a sign to lead an uprising on a Virginia plantation after seeing "hieroglyphic characters" and other signs from god.
- Jemison thinks of her practice as having radical political and liberatory ends, but through subtle and quiet means. Rather than show loud, frenzied videos, her works often have little to no sound. This is meant to provoke reflection and emphasize the inner thoughts of the Black actors she features.
- Jemison performs with Justin Hicks under the group name "Mikrokosmos." The two stage experimental performances, starting with work from Black musicians like Louis Armstrong and Gil Scott-Heron and layering their own chords and rhythms. The resulting music unfolds and repeats on stage, creating an immersive, alternative set of sounds.
- Jemison explores racial and socioeconomic exclusion in the art world. "The discourse of contemporary art relies upon the fantasy of a free and open exchange of ideas among equal, liberal subjects" which privileges white audiences, she states. Jemison's work underscores how Black artists are often restricted from or marginalized in artistic spaces.
- In recognition of the racialization of the art world, Jemison often speculates about alternative spaces and considers the possibility of utopia, which she views as "a promise that incentivizes the activity of the present by reminding it of a range of possible futures."

Quotes

"In my conversations with young people in particular, we talked about the many ways that utopia has served and can continue to serve a very practical political purpose, reminding us that our political imagination is not only responsive and reactive, but can and must also be visionary, surreal – beyond-real."

- Steffani Jemison

"Instead of psychologically rich characters, [early] films present inscrutable bodies; instead of narrative development, they trace a sequence of similar scenes; and instead of describing epiphany and growth, they are haunted by logics of recursion and repetition. My videos work

within the logic of these early films.”

- Steffani Jemison

“Black Americans have a long history of creating and sustaining private and culturally specific languages and codes. For obvious political reasons, it has been necessary from slavery to the present day to communicate secretly. [...] I’m interested in all of these.”

- Steffani Jemison

“Contemporary art connoisseurship is predicated upon the idea that spectators are neutral figures who have unmitigated access to the work, its ideas, and its economy. My work seeks to demonstrate in one among many ways that nonwhite artists are restricted from fully participating in this world.”

- Steffani Jemison

About the Project

In this exhibition two of Jemison’s video pieces will be shown. The newest of these two videos follows a gymnast as she performs a series of tasked-based actions. *Escaped Lunatic* (2010-2011) will also be on display. This video shows people performing parkour in an urban setting, pulling from the repetitive nature of chase films from early cinema. The idea of cyclical time or loop will also be present in Jemison’s rock tumblers. The rock tumblers will contain debris from around Cincinnati such as rocks, coins, and glass. These kinetic sculptures are an exploration into the word *tumble*.

Vocabulary/Key words

Vernacular	Revolution	Parkour
Transformation	Stereotype	Transparency

Themes

Language/Symbols: Jemison thinks of reading as a radical act, capable of provoking social change. The glass panel paintings can represent choreography, a coded language (think Nat Turner’s hieroglyphics), a diagram, or a simple gesture related to the artist’s hand.

Transformation/Adaptation: Can be found in the obvious change of the rocks and debris inside the tumbler and the actions of the people in the films, but thinking about it harder—what happens during transformation? Is change always good? What is lost in transformation?

Think about how the artist uses the play on revolution—as in to turn, and as in a Revolution. How about to turn something over in your thoughts? This is more of a philosophical question. There is no one answer, but Jemison doubts the possibility of linear progress. In fact, many of her works emphasize repetition, and one of her films is even shown in reverse. These artistic choices force the audience to consider if society really goes forward, in terms of reaching racial equality, economic empowerment, and other social goals.

Stereotypes: Jemison considers the stereotype of trouble-making young Black males in *Escaped Lunatic*. As they run, you're forced to ask yourself why you assume they're running from the police or from trouble. They're actually parkour athletes.

PRE-VISIT DISCUSSIONS

ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, "Why not starting something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I'll help you."

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised \$5000 (about \$93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their "office" consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, "the best new building since the Cold War."

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to "open their minds" to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building—first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC's 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid's first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman. Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC's former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis. Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine's "100 Most Powerful Women," and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World," and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.

RULES AND GUIDELINES

- Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
- We require that must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.

- No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
- Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
- Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
- Walk throughout all galleries- no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

- Our facility is ADA compliant and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
- Hearing protection is available upon request.
- Fidgets are available upon request.
- Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
- Large text is available upon request.
- Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and the Contemplation Room.
- For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org

ARTWORK DISCUSSIONS

These discussions can occur prior to, during and after viewing.

- As you watch the video, how do you feel? Is it calm, soothing? Is it disorienting? Why? Does this feeling change the longer you watch the video?
- The narrator explains what she's doing as she juggles and tosses different everyday objects. Can you imagine what it's like to handle these materials?
- How do you think the tumblers and the video relate to one another? Why do we turn objects to look them from different perspectives?

- The rock tumblers take rough, found, and precious objects and rotate them—transforming them all into something that is smooth and polished. What do you think Jemison is saying about transformation? Why do most people prefer things that are smooth and continuous? What might be lost from this refinement?
- The narrator talks about the adjustments she has to make to accommodate each object. How might this symbolize the adjustments you have to make when different obstacles come your way in daily life?

LESSON PLAN IDEAS

Rock Tumblers

- In this body of work Jemison uses rock tumblers to discuss transformation. Bringing the magic of rock tumblers to the classroom is a fun and interactive way to discuss science, art, and transformation with your students. <https://sciencestruck.com/make-rock-tumbler-at-home> has a simple rock tumbling guide that is classroom friendly. Using rocks, sand, water, and a jar student will create their own rock tumblers. In addition to this hands-on project below is an observational survey for students to complete before and after they use their rock tumblers. This will help students identify the changes that happen to their rocks. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1N8Lxjrlyj6fl52AiiLZH6YHErrvuapelR-72Fr6J6n8/view>

Hieroglyphs

Acetate and India Ink

- In Jemison’s work she uses a variety materials and modes of expression. Using acrylic on polyester film Jemison draws and writes simultaneously creating her own “private script.” Jemison uses this work to discuss interpretation and Using acetate and a black media such as tempera, acrylic, ink, etc.

ARTWORK AND WALL TEXT INFORMATION

Artworks and Wall Text in the Exhibition

Introductory Wall Text

For nearly a decade, Cincinnati-raised, Brooklyn-based artist Steffani Jemison has been deeply invested in examining the ways knowledge is constructed and legitimized. This interest stems from a fascination with interpretation and narration, critical theory, as well as vernacular traditions, including street acrobatics and vaudeville. She explores these concepts through a practice that encompasses sculpture, video, installation, sound, and fiction writing. This exhibition brings together two videos, alongside a new suite of kinetic sculptural objects and conceptual drawings on glass that unfold as a series of experiments, reflecting Jemison's interest in performance and the politics of embodiment. The exhibition centers around a new video, *Toss*, that captures a gymnast performing a series of task-based actions informed by rhythmic gymnastics and tumbling. Attentive to the origins of the word tumble, which derives from the German term for "to turn" or "reel," Jemison invites a slippage between the double meaning of a single rotation, or revolution. The work also refers to the expression, "to turn something over in one's mind," or the process of pondering.

The video is situated in dialogue with *Escaped Lunatic* (2010-11)—one of Jemison's earliest projects to employ non-linear narrative frameworks—alongside several custom-built rock tumblers containing grit, stones, coins, glass, and debris collected from around Cincinnati. In the same manner that the performer manipulates her body through twisting, flipping, and inverting, the tumblers likewise rotate, slowly grinding their raw, angular contents into smooth, clean, polished materials. Together, the objects, drawings, and videos explore the symbolic, expressive, and material implications of the act of "agitation" or "turning."

Steffani Jemison was born in 1981 in Berkeley, CA and raised in Cincinnati. She received her BA from Columbia University (2003) and her MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2009). Since 2016, she has been a part of the musical collaborative, Mikrokosmos, with Justin Hicks. Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions and special projects at LAXART, Los Angeles (2013); RISD Museum, Providence (2015); Mass MoCA, North Adams, MA; Jeu de Paume, Paris (both 2017); Nottingham Contemporary (2018); and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2019), among others. She has been included in numerous group exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2012); The Drawing Center, New York, NY (2015); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; and the Whitney Biennial, New York (both 2019). Jemison currently lives and works in Brooklyn.

Artwork and Labels

Steffani Jemison (b. 1981, Berkeley, CA, lives and works in Brooklyn)

Toss, 2021

HD color video, with sound

42 min., 20. sec.

Courtesy of the artist and Kai Matsumiya, New York

In this video, a woman performs a series of actions common to rhythmic gymnastics and tumbling—a flip, a toss, a spin, a roll, a trap. However, instead of utilizing the typical props, she uses found and everyday objects including a mallet, a tripod, a branch, and a canvas wig head. Several scenes feature dizzying long-shots, where the sky and ground appear to be turning in a circular motion, overlaid with the rhythmic, hypnotic sound of a classical harp. The woman looks directly into the lens and reaches out, as if the camera is being tossed. The narration weaves between describing the qualities necessary for performing the choreography, interspersed with personal reflections and references. Movement becomes a metaphor for thinking about life and the concepts of agility, growth, balance, and resilience.

- Consider how the narrator is adapting with each object—one can talk about how we adapt with different struggles.
- The film is both mesmerizing and disorienting—what metaphors can you think of that fit the same?
- Think about everyday activities and how little effort we give toward something like washing dishes—what would it be like if we thought about each step and what it was like?

Steffani Jemison (b. 1981, Berkeley, CA, lives and works in Brooklyn)
Escaped Lunatic, 2010-11
HD color video, with sound
7 min., 41 sec.
Courtesy of the artist and Kai Matsumiya, New York



Escaped Lunatic features a similar cast of characters running through an empty, nondescript, urban terrain. The plot lacks a beginning, middle, or end—a narrative framework Jemison borrows from a genre of early cinema and its namesake, *Escaped Lunatic* (1904), one of the first motion pictures structured around a chase sequence. Filmed from a distance, Jemison's actors' movements draw from parkour, or the practice of maneuvering through an environment using creativity, strength, and agility. The looped video offers a continuous repetition of the process of traversing a given landscape, referring to cyclical time in a different way than *Toss* (2021).

- The early film *Escaped Lunatic* (1904) was an inspiration for this film. It featured an escaped prisoner who escaped the asylum and was pursued by his keepers in a series of thrilling and ludicrous chases through the mostly picturesque scenery.
- The film questions our implicit bias—what do we assume about the runners?



- It was filmed in Houston in a low-income housing project and linking the unjust conditions of urban life and representation of Blacks in media.

Steffani Jemison (b. 1981, Berkeley, CA, lives and works in Brooklyn)

Tumbler, 2021

Aluminum, electric gear motor, belt, 3D printed nylon, rubber, PET, stones, coins, glass, water, ceramic media, grit, and soap

Courtesy of the artist and Kai Matsumiya, New York

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Courtesy of the artist and Kai Matsumiya, New York

Built by Jemison using transparent plastic barrels with steel and rubber components, these rock tumblers continuously rotate, transforming the contents into smooth, clean, refined materials. Stones such as mahogany obsidian, jet, and black hematite, pennies, and glass are combined with debris sourced from the Ohio river and local industrial sites. The stone and glass seem to become more valuable through the process. However, coins and hardware are degraded and lose their function. Over the run of the exhibition, museum staff will empty the “polished” materials and add new rough contents until the full accumulation of raw materials have been processed.

- The materials, jet, obsidian, and hematite are stones traditionally associated with healing. Some materials were sourced locally.
- Some materials—like the rocks and glass—become more precious, and others—the coins and keys—lose their purpose. Consider how this refers to the result of transition.
- Can also think about assimilation—what are the effects of assimilation?

Steffani Jemison (b. 1981, Berkeley, CA, lives and works in Brooklyn)
Untitled, 2021

Acrylic and graphite on beveled tempered glass
Courtesy of the artist and Kai Matsumiya, New York

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Acrylic and graphite on beveled tempered glass
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Untitled, 2021

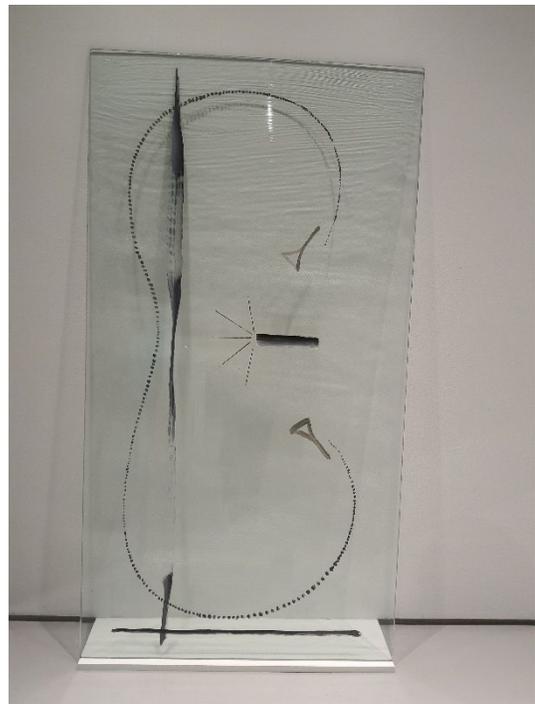
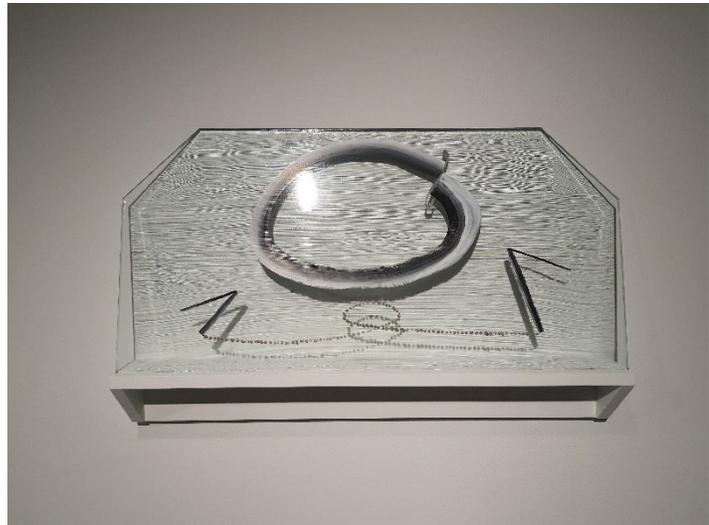
Acrylic and graphite on beveled tempered glass
Courtesy of the artist and Kai Matsumiya, New York

For these works, Jemison applied acrylic and graphite to found glass tabletops to create gestural compositions that refer to the choreography pictured in the video, *Toss* (2021). Jemison and the performer, Alexis, exchanged notes, readings, and personal anecdotes during the development of the video. The abstract composition consists of diagrammatic notations that describe paths of motion of the body and prop. These drawings build upon a body of painterly works



from 2016 to today that examine illegibility as a tool for creating safe spaces for self-reflection, new forms of knowledge, and diversities of meaning that resist being easily read.

- These reference the choreography of the woman in Toss (Alexis). Lines represent her body, dotted lines reference movement; upside-down T's reference standing.
- They are annotated with words like "start," "right," "toss," etc. in pencil.
- Consider the connection between the body and the gesture—the artist is also a dancer.
- The use of abstraction is intentionally vague, allowing for multiple meanings and reflection.



RESOURCES

<https://steffanijemison.com/Downloads>

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n75hgys1zz748v9/AAB8d0vW2QgG3pQ_etEaxeH7a?dl=0&preview=2018_Quinton_Press.pdf

LEARNING STANDARDS

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Ohio Common Core Links

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards>

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards>

Kentucky Common Core Links

<https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx>

https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf

Indiana Standards Links

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards>

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts>

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

<http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>