

Samuel

Levi

Jones



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Galerie Lelong & Co.,
New York and Paris

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Where We Meet
preliminary notes on “The necessary/Sew-work”¹
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*for A.J.
in memory of A.E.D.
D. & S., thank you*

There is a remarkable scene in Toni Morrison’s debut novel *The Bluest Eye* that reads like a theory of abstraction. In this scene, we find Claudia, the young black girl who is one of the novel’s narrators, discussing how she would destroy the “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” that she received for Christmas.² “I could not love it,” our narrator explains, “But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable.”³ Her reasoning is sound: if everyone sees this object as beautiful and something to be cherished, then something about it must be escaping her. So, with fierce determination, Claudia pulls out its hair, snaps off its fingers, digs out its eyes, removes its head, and shakes out the sawdust inside to find only a metallic disc that bleats. While she fails to find the source of the white baby doll’s lovability, in her act of destruction she interprets the racial order into which she was born and undoes the calculus of beauty that degrades her social worth.

This vignette from Morrison’s novel is illuminative with respect to Samuel Levi Jones’s work in a number of ways: first, it profoundly distills the link between racial embodiment and abstraction. Secondly, Claudia’s undoing of her doll is reminiscent of Jones’s deconstruction of encyclopedias, dictionaries, law books, medical literature, and even footballs in the creation of his art.

¹ See Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” in *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), 355.

² Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Random House, 1970), 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

Like Claudia, he grabs a book, presses on its inner joint, cuts at its spine from head-to-tail, dislodges its shoulder, and soaks and softens the cover in water to peel off the covers—leaving him with what he calls “skin.”⁴ From the remains, he creates exquisite abstract assemblage paintings. In a 2019 conversation with art collector Pamela Joyner, he explains how his practice of abstraction has developed over the years “from using the full cover of the book to cutting it up to now pulping it to where it is completely not recognizable as a book and may almost appear as paint.”⁵ Sometimes, he stitches the book’s skin onto the canvas. Sometimes, he first grafts a portion of the book’s skin from, perhaps, the spine area, and sutures it to other pieces. Sometimes, he reduces the skin to a fibrous substance that coagulates after he applies it to the surface of the painting. He further explains to his mentor, black abstract artist Mark Bradford, how this un/re-making is tied to a collaborative dimension of his work: “My process consists of breaking down the source material then reconstructing it into something visually interesting in order to generate dialogue about the original material itself.”⁶ It is apparent in Jones’s work over the past decade (2012–2021) that we cannot regard his artworks as merely the site of his artistic expression.

Jones moves in a black radical aesthetic tradition that emanates from Claudia’s decapitated doll. Claudia, Morrison writes, “did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object.”⁷ Through her act of destruction, Claudia subverts the framework of value—a framework ordered by abstract ideas of beauty and possession that discount her very existence—which she feels in

4 See Antwaun Sargent, “Striking Deconstructed Book Paintings Challenge American History,” *Vice*, December 29, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bmyqwz/deconstructed-books-challenge-american-history>.

5 Samuel Levi Jones, interview with Pamela Joyner, “Viewpoints,” Galerie Lelong, podcast audio, October 3, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/galerie-lelong/viewpoints-podcast-4-samuel-levi-jones-pamela-joyner>.

6 Naima J. Keith and Dana Liss, “Artist x Artist: Mark Bradford and Samuel Levi Jones,” *Studio: The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine*, January 2015, 49.

7 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 21.



Fig. 1 Samuel Levi Jones
Tar Baby, 2014
Deconstructed encyclopedias on canvas
62 × 62 inches (157.5 × 157.5 cm)
Private Collection, Europe

the doll’s cold touch. She wants to experience a different way of being in the world: “I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.”⁸ While grown-ups in the novel interpret Claudia’s desecration of white dolls as ingratitude or defiance,

8 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 22.

she is instead creating a world modeled after the way that it feels to *be with* her grandparents. Jones and Claudia both break down objects to reassemble the social. Where many critics see only a defiant black artist, I locate a more collective endeavor—a co-conspiring in plain sight—unfolding in Samuel Levi Jones’s work.

Those familiar with Jones’s work know that Morrison is often on his mind. This is clear in works such as *Tar Baby* (2014)^[fig. 1], titled after the author’s fourth novel, and *The Wrath of Children* (2019), titled after the original and preferred title of Morrison’s last. I draw these comparisons between Jones’s art and what scholars Saidiya Hartman and Rizvana Bradley might call the “art of undoing” on the part of Morrison’s narrator to displace the way that critics often frame Jones’s aesthetic.⁹ Just as Morrison invites us to regard a young black girl dismembering white baby dolls as a practice of world-making, I want us to approach the decomposition and recomposition at the heart of Jones’s aesthetic in a somewhat similar fashion. Focusing on the surface of his artworks allows for a deeper appreciation of the wide array of technical strategies that Jones has developed throughout his career, and enables us to attend to the varieties of world-making and “compositional practices”—to borrow a concept from Denise Ferreira da Silva—that unfold in and through his art.¹⁰

Both of Jones’s works that pay homage to Morrison are emblematic of his signature mode of deconstruction in which geometric compositions comprising distressed remains stitched together coalesce. However, certain pieces strongly diverge in terms of the patterns, shapes, and colors that Jones deploys. The stark contrast of the monochromatic grid in *Tar Baby* (2014) and the improvisation of colors, angles, and geometric forms in *The Wrath of Children* (2019) is intensified by the subtle tumult and

9 Rizvana Bradley, “Regard for One Another: A Conversation between Rizvana Bradley and Saidiya Hartman,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 8, 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/regard-for-one-another-a-conversation-between-rizvana-bradley-and-saidiya-hartman/>.

10 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “In the Raw,” *e-flux*, no. 93, September 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>.

texture of the thick, tufted surfaces of pieces like *Interconnectivity* (2019) or *48 Portraits (Underexposed)* (2012)^[fig. 2]. Composed of a fibrous substance that results from reducing entire books into a pulp, these latter works invite us to think about the surface as not only the site where the artist’s agency manifests in the arrangement of sewn together skins, but also as where he removes his hand and allows the material to organically settle into hard edges that reorganize the relation between artist and artwork. Meanwhile, in several of his pieces that pay homage to victims of police brutality, such as *Joshua* (2016), the noticeable absence of the black figure—who is often seen as an index of state-sanctioned violence—further complicates how we see these compositions.¹¹ These works invite us to engage with the surface as a collaborative space where we co-conspire with the artist in transforming loss into counternarratives that honor the dead and deride a murderous American legal system. The surfaces of his artworks illuminate the entanglements that define social existence and operate as venues for novel configurations of practice and relation to emerge. The surface itself is a site of experimentation that generates conditions for anomalous social formations to take shape and offers a glimpse of the possibilities that we might salvage from the ruin of this world.

Race (2019) activates the social forces at play in the visual encounter. Fragments of blue-plaid and purple fabric are interspersed among the skins of Ohio State law books, some which are framed by traces of white adhesive tape. The faded white lines against the chestnut skins with gray overlays create an irregular grid that struggles to maintain the order it hopes to impose on the rest of the composition. A few brittle, oxidized pages add to the spectrum of rust colors and draw attention to the thickness of the source materials layered on top of each other. Pages from the law books peek out from underneath this palimpsestic field of

11 The absence of the black figure recalls an earlier photographic work of migrant worker camps where Jones deploys a similar technique as no people enter the frame.



Fig. 2 Samuel Levi Jones
48 Portraits (Underexposed), 2012
Suite of 48 inkjet prints on recycled Encyclopedia Britannica paper
Each: 24 ½ × 22 inches (62.2 × 55.9 cm)
Framed, each: 26 ¼ × 23 ¾ × 1 ½ inches (66.7 × 60.3 × 3.8 cm)
Overall: 96 × 273 inches (243.84 × 693.42 cm)
Edition 1 of 2 with 1 AP
Jeff A. Menashe Trust

colors and invite us to approach the canvas to try and decipher its text. This shuttling between passive observation and interpretive reading draws attention back to the title of the piece, with which Jones begs the question: “How does one ‘see’ race?” The visual encounter with this piece simultaneously evokes two foundational theories of racialization: Frantz Fanon’s understanding of race as an “epidermal schema,” and Hortense Spillers’s “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” that describes the legacies of slavery and its commodification of the black body which are historically transmitted and affixed to certain persons and things.¹² Both encourage us to conceptualize race not as something to be deciphered, but rather as a process—call this racialization—that takes place at the interplay of seeing and being seen. Further, the delicate layering in *Race* invites us to take up different modes of perception, to not only look or read the surface of the canvas, but to also consider its thickness and sense the mustiness of the yellowed pages and the taste of rust that signal the ancientness of this modern invention.¹³ The blotches of red pigment that appear against the pages and skins, the deep purple sporadically-placed fabric, and the scraps of cloth with an uncanny verisimilitude of clothing disturbingly evoke the history of terror and brutality imprinted on the flesh of black bodies.

When I encounter this work, the fabric and faint blood red stains combined with the brown skin of law books trigger my early memories of the historic lynching photographs that the principal of my Afrocentric elementary school shared with my fifth-grade class following the shooting death of Nicholas Naquan Heyward, Jr.

¹² Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112; Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 67. See also Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹³ For more on theory of surface, sensation, and touch, as well as Uri McMillan’s formulation of surface as an “instrument of multisensory perception,” see Rizvana Bradley, “Introduction: Other Sensualities,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 24, no 2-3 (2014) and Uri McMillan, “Introduction: Skin, Surface, Sensorium,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 28, no. 1 (2018).

by a New York City Housing Authority police officer in 1994. The lynching photographs that she shared come to mind not because of what I see in the abstract painting. Instead the memory reveals already existing entanglements: how the artist’s family history is already bound up in the story of my own becoming; how my body carries the memory of first encountering the photograph of Jones’s great-uncle, Abraham S. Smith, in 1994, on the occasion of the murder of a thirteen-year-old black boy, while I am currently writing in the immediate aftermath of the shootings of another thirteen-year-old Latino boy by the police in Chicago and a sixteen-year-old black girl by Columbus police in Ohio.¹⁴ In 1995, Jones also encountered at school the same photograph, taken by Lawrence Beitler, of Smith and J. Thomas Shipp hanging from a tree and surrounded by a white mob in Marion, Indiana. Upon returning home and recounting this to his family, Jones learned that one of the men, Abraham S. Smith, was his great-uncle. The photograph initially sold in the thousands to white Americans as a keepsake and gained even more notoriety after it was appropriated by activists and used in anti-lynching campaigns. Leaving its indelible mark on those it encounters, the image’s circulation across space and time tracks the weave of black memory. And while the scene of racial terror it captures continues to blur with the unending spectacular displays of anti-black violence that follow, the photograph continues to generate a space of mourning where individuals become intimate strangers.¹⁵ We find each other

¹⁴ Abraham S. Smith, d. August 7, 1930, was one of two men murdered in Marion, Indiana. See Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Cynthia Carr, *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006). Nicholas Naquan Heyward, Jr. was fatally shot on September 24, 1994 by New York City Housing Authority police officer Brian George in the Gowanus Housing Projects after his toy gun was mistaken for a real weapon. On March 29, 2021, thirteen-year-old Adam Toledo was fatally shot by a Chicago police officer, ending a chase that has been ruled an “armed altercation.” Bodycam footage of the encounter was released by city of Chicago on April 15, 2021. On April 20, 2021, sixteen-year-old Ma’Khia Bryant was murdered by an Ohio officer responding to a 911 call about a disturbance that resulted from an argument about a messy house.

¹⁵ See Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).



Fig. 3 Romare Bearden; Crovatto Mosaics, Inc.; G. Trivisanutto
Quilting Time, 1986
 Mosaic tesserae mounted on plywood
 Overall: 113 3/4 × 167 1/2 × 1 1/4 inches (288.9 × 425.45 × 3.2 cm)

in the wound that is history. Grieving is the thread that binds us together—the stitches and sutures in a social composition that registers to me as a kind of kinship when I look at *Race*. The surface draws us to each other. It is this that Jones is pursuing when he articulates his aesthetic as a “way of slowing down and capturing someone’s attention to have some sort of conversation and create a different way of thinking and existence.”¹⁶

Jones is at constant quarrel with history. *48 Portraits (Underexposed)* (2012), one of his earliest experiments in deconstructing books and making skins, responds directly to the German abstract artist Gerhard Richter’s *48 Portraits* (1972). He recreates Richter’s monumental grid by pulping pages from the 1972 edition of the

¹⁶ Samuel Levi Jones, interview with Pamela Joyner, “Viewpoints,” Galerie Lelong.

Encyclopedia Britannica and uses the fibrous substance to make large panels on which he prints the faces of twenty-four iconic black women and twenty-four iconic black men including Bessie Smith, Malcolm X, Nina Simone, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks. (Richter’s forty-eight were of exclusively white men.) The low contrast between the printed faces and dark background is at tension with the work’s large-scale arrangement. From afar, the monumental character of this minimalist grid allows for an appreciation of the simple order that emerges from the correspondence of what looks like black rectangles. But by moving closer and breaking with the tranquility afforded by distance, the viewer can discern the features and outlines of each face. This spectral effect brings the viewer to the edge of visibility to then push them over as the faces of the black figures crowd the surface of each panel and spill out of the visual plane.¹⁷ The visual surplus beckons us to peer into the empty spaces between each panel and behold the absent presences that fall outside of the grid of intelligibility which orders modern historiography and Richter reproduces in his work. Jones’s pulped encyclopedias are ingredients for a séance and a meeting place where we linger with those who constantly escape the capture of history’s bright light.

Jones’s gesture to black women in history extends to his engagement with the quilting motif on the surface of his compositions. We can draw comparisons between this gesture and the veneration of black women’s labors in modernist Romare Bearden’s *Quilting Time* (1986) [fig. 3]. In this collage, the quilting practice of two black female figures finds its corollary in the social composition indexed by the family members gathering around them. Here, the creative capacities of black women are revered as essential, stitching the fabric of black social life. Similarly, Jones’s *Quilt of Reality* (2019) [fig. 4] is a reference to the Gee’s Bend quiltmakers and the motif of quilting more generally.

¹⁷ Fittingly, *48 Portraits (Underexposed)* (2012) was featured in *Edge of Visibility*, an exhibition curated by Susan Tallman at International Print Center, New York, in 2018.

Poet and critic Elizabeth Alexander describes how quilt pieces “refer to their uses in places in other’s lives; the life of the quilt is the aggregate of those pieces, and the work then becomes a referential discussion of both past and present at once.”¹⁸ Vertically aligned bands of red, brown, beige, and off-white made from deconstructed print portfolios lay on each side of a single white band in the center of the composition. What appears to be a meditation on colorism is modified by the horizontal lines that mark where the artist stitched skins together to create each vertical band. The placement of the horizontal lines resembles the differentiating levels in a bar graph, drawing a link between the racist epistemologies that equate beauty with skin tone, the art institutions that utilize these print portfolios, and the diagrammatic methods through which the social sciences measure and visually represent social problems. In this instance, the same quilting craft that gestures toward the creative capacities of black women also references the various means through which their labors have been perpetually devalued and debased. In *Quilt of Reality*, the aggregate effect of both quilting and collage highlights how black women historically inhabit “a position that is revered and reviled, essential to the endurance of black social life and, at the same time, blamed for its destruction,” as described by Hartman.¹⁹

As with the one he levied on Richter’s willful blindness to the history of blackness, Jones’s critiques are formidable and extend to American systems of education, healthcare, and law. But critics tend to latch on to the critical edge of his aesthetic at a disservice to the social entanglements and formations that his art brings forth, which is part of a familiar and unfortunate trend in

18 Elizabeth Alexander, “The Genius of Romare Bearden,” in *The Romare Bearden Reader*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (Durham: Duke University Press 2019), 189. For more reflections on Jones’s aesthetic in relation to quilting, see Ashon Crawley, “I Dream Feeling, Otherwise,” *ArtsEverywhere*, <https://artseverywhere.ca/i-dream-feeling-otherwise/>.

19 Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016), 171. See also Amelia Peck, “Quilt/Art: Deconstructing the Gee’s Bend Quilt Phenomenon,” in *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018).



Fig. 4 Samuel Levi Jones
Quilt of Reality, 2019
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
60 × 70 inches (152.4 × 177.8 cm)

contemporary art criticism to fix black artists within narratives of identity and resistance that obscure the complex dynamics of time, history, and material presence that inform racial embodiment.²⁰ *Psychosocial* (2018) poses a profound challenge for this mode of analysis and its over-determined investment in the political agency of black artists. Here we find a dynamic color field comprising the skins of medical books. A dramatic contrast starts at

20 See, for instance, Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007).

the outer edge with the progression from gray to muted blue, red to light gray, rose to blue, peach to purple, creating a movement that frames the rest of the composition. However, from there, order seems to break down as the rest of the skins begin to bump, obscure, and break each other's boundaries. The overlapping and encroaching movements continue until the activity initiated at the outer edge turns into a swarm converging on a small blue rectangle just off-center of the canvas that bears the words "The Psychosocial Development of Minority Group Children" embossed in gold. The language of mental health and childhood development, and their constructions of deviance and disorder, are a vital part of the history of racism, sexism, poverty and neglect that still haunts American medicine. The unruly composition of *Psychosocial* calls to mind the disorganization, maladjustments, and unfit behaviors that the clinical field of psychology seeks to regulate and control. Yet, the anarchic arrangement that unfolds on the surface verges on a kind of self-organizing assemblage that is impossible to reduce to the defiant actions of a singular being. The figure of the radically defiant black artist—which is not unlike the male creative genius classical to modern art—is a fantastical byproduct that obscures the radical potentials of collaboration as a means of disordering the given social order. Jones's improvisation of color and movement is a point of convergence at which the gesture of coming together animates his aesthetic and bleeds into his curatorial practice.²¹

Amongst everything else, the most fascinating and curiously overlooked aspect of Jones's art making is that most if not all of the media with which he works—especially the books he deconstructs—are discarded commodities. A history of racial capitalism is held in the perspiration between the artist's racialized flesh pressed against the skins of disposable objects. A lyrical passage written by anticolonial poet and intellectual Aimé Césaire

21 In 2018, Jones curated an exhibition at Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, titled *Sidelined*, which featured works by Melvin Edwards, Derek Fordjour, Lauren Halsey, David Huffman, Samuel Levi Jones, Glenn Kaino, Patrick Martinez, and Deborah Roberts.

captures how, under the edicts of empire and as a result of capitalist extraction, the black body is not only commodified but transmuted into the excrement of production which leaves its trace on all that it touches:

And I say to myself Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool
and New York and San Francisco
not an inch of this world devoid of my fingerprint and my calcaneus on
the spines of skyscrapers and my filth in the glitter of the gems!²²

These words whisper from the rub of Jones's palm against materials that have moved through a global supply chain well before entering his hand. Today's global capitalist economy is the child of the colonial plantation economy that fed on black flesh, and Jones's art of undoing is an attempt at making sense of a world in which entire populations are consistently exploited, deemed superfluous, and then discarded. The vanishing traces of degraded existences linger on the surface of Jones's artworks, demanding that we disregard definitive longitude and latitude to embrace a set of coordinates mapped by the voids that they leave behind.

Concerned with the imprint of such losses, Jones works to abolish the racial order that synonymizes premature death and black life in America. Jones's works dedicated to victims of police brutality such as *Joshua* (2016), *Malissa* (2016), *Tarika* (2016), and *Christian* (2017) operate in line with art critic and historian Sarah Elizabeth Lewis's assertion that within the context of African diasporic art history, "abstraction is not a mode of separation from the social world but is a capacious enough strategy to comprise another means through which to address it."²³ Speaking to Jones's abstract monochromatic grids that carry the names of the dead, visual culture theorist Leigh Raiford explains how "Jones

22 Aimé Césaire, *The Original 1939 Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 21.

23 Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, "African American Abstraction," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Art History*, ed. Eddie Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2019), 160.



Fig. 5 Kerry James Marshall
The Lost Boys, 1993
 Acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas
 100 × 120 inches (254 × 304.8 cm)

draws our attention to how a system orders Black life both collectively and individually [...] But rather than reproducing images of their corpses, he offers us instead postmortems of a structure and system that is itself broken.”²⁴ For Raiford, the absence of the brutalized black body in the artworks conveys a practice of abstraction that refuses the logics that render this figure as visual evidence of white supremacist terror. Seen in

²⁴ Leigh Raiford, “Burning All Illusion, Abstraction, Black Life, and the Unmaking of White Supremacy,” *Art Journal*, 79, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 87.

this light, Jones falls in a lineage that Raiford extends back to anti-lynching activists such as Ida B. Wells and to the political aesthetics of civil rights and black power activists. Artist Kerry James Marshall’s *The Lost Boys* (1993) [fig. 5] marks a more recent innovation in visualizing black fungibility, in which Marshall paints black figures in black paint that are then set against a bullet-riddled fresco and surrounded by symbols of childhood innocence and violence. Part of a larger series that draws on the idea of *Peter Pan*’s Never Never Land (from the famous children’s book by J.M. Barrie), this painting features impastos, stamps, and gestural abstractions that evoke a range of artistic traditions such as Egyptian funerary portraits and byzantine iconography that crowd around two young black boys, playing with what the artist describes as “adult toys,” with the dates of their deaths overlaid.²⁵ Against this unified field, the black figure sheds its evidentiary status to instead stand as a composite, or archetype, of lives cut short.²⁶ Marshall’s “memorial painting to lost innocence” that depicts the children in an imaginary faraway place moves in anticipation of Jones’s abstractions insofar as they both trace the absence created by premature death while refusing to reproduce the spectacle of black suffering. To an extent, when Jones turns decades later to a similar space of loss, he is extending a project of abstraction that was already underway. His artworks echo how Marshall’s amalgamation of styles explores the ethical dimensions of seeing black suffering.

In *Joshua* (2016), Jones interrogates this act of seeing and turns us toward the necessity of bearing witness and giving testimony. He scrapes off words from the skin of Illinois State law books and spaces the remaining words and phrases across the composition. The surface transforms into a language poem, reminiscent of the pages in M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, where the reader is required to draw associations between the dispersed words to participate in

²⁵ Charles H. Rowell, “An Interview with Kerry James Marshall,” *Callaloo* 21, no. 1 (1998), 268.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

a counter narration of the non-conviction of the police officer that murdered Joshua Beal in 2016: “End / Assault and / Homicide / Criminal / Officers and Public Employees.”²⁷

Samuel Levi Jones never works alone. He casts the viewer as an accomplice in a broader project whose aim is our collective survival. The challenge that remains for us is to reflect on how we approach his art—which is to say, how we approach each other. Black art has always been a sociopoetic field of encounters. Jones reminds us that art is always produced in the encounter, no matter the form that it takes: an abstract painting, a pile of old encyclopedias, a photograph, a toy pistol, or a mangled baby doll. This is where we meet—though, such a “we” is infinitely more intimate and expansive than ourselves.

²⁷ See M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

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Off Grid, 2020
Deconstructed encyclopedias, law books, medical books, art books, and history books on canvas
Triptych; each: 52 × 72 inches (132.1 × 182.9 cm)
Private Offices, New York City







Small white label with illegible text.



Small white label with illegible text.



Small white label with illegible text.



Burning all illusion, 2016
Deconstructed encyclopedias, law books, and African American reference books on canvas
40 3/4 x 47 1/4 inches (103.5 x 120 cm)
Collection of Stephanie and Tim Ingrassia



Joshua, 2016
Deconstructed Illinois law books on canvas
61 1/2 x 77 inches (156.2 x 195.6 cm)
Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin – Madison,
Chazen Museum of Art General Endowment Fund and
Alice Drews Gladfelter Memorial Endowment Fund purchase, 2018.5



Assault and

Homicide

Criminal



Tarika, 2016
Deconstructed Ohio law books on canvas
38 ½ × 43 inches (97.8 × 109.2 cm)
Collection of Roberta S. and Michael L. Joseph



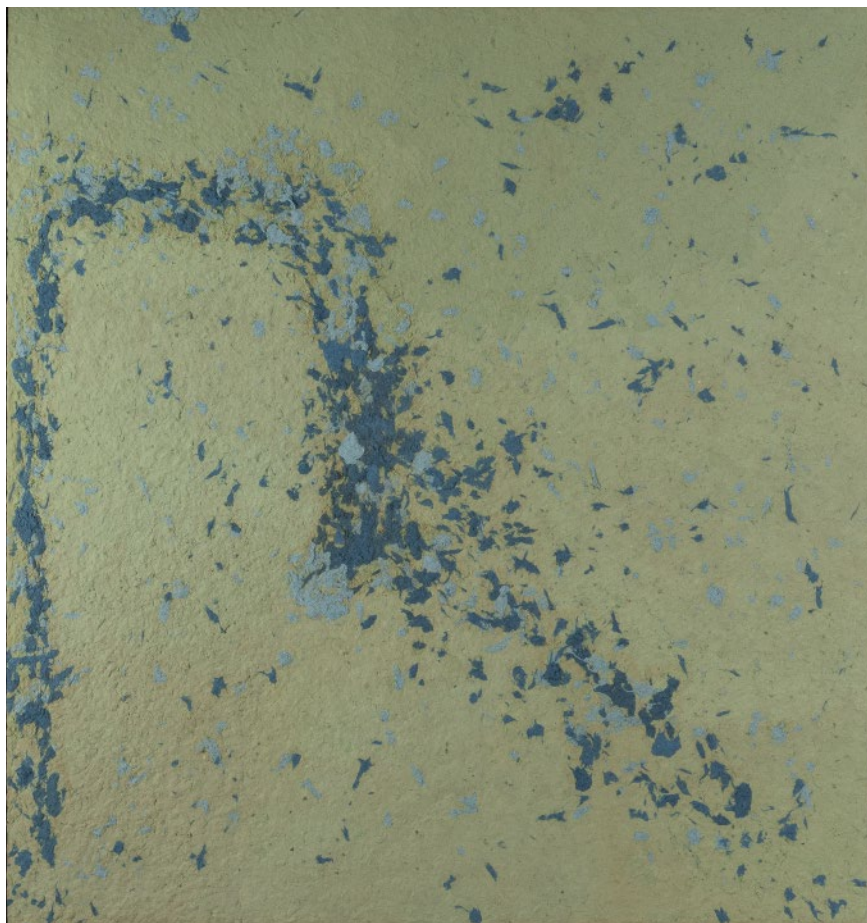
Christian, 2017
Deconstructed California law books on canvas
100 × 92 inches (254 × 233.7 cm)
Jorge M. and Darlene Pérez Collection, Miami



Red Pill, 2017
Deconstructed medical books on canvas
55 × 60 inches (139.7 × 152.4 cm)
Collection of Carol Sutton Lewis and William M. Lewis, Jr.



Porsba Rasheed, 2017
Deconstructed law books and medical books on canvas
44 × 40 inches (111.8 × 101.6 cm)
Private Collection, Scottsdale



Walls, 2018
Pulped law book covers on canvas
80 × 75 inches (203.2 × 190.5 cm)
The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection



Psychosocial, 2018
Deconstructed medical books on canvas
60 × 55 inches (152.4 × 139.7 cm)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.
Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2018.395

The image shows the front cover of a book, which is a quilted patchwork of various fabrics. The central focus is a horizontal strip of teal fabric with a pebbled texture, containing the title in gold lettering. This strip is bordered by a dark grey fabric with a zigzag stitching pattern. To the left, there is a vertical strip of light-colored, ribbed fabric. The background of the cover is a dark grey fabric with a fine, woven texture. The overall appearance is that of a handmade, artistic book cover.

*The Psychosocial Development of
Minority Group Children*



Elements, 2018
Deconstructed medical books on canvas
55 × 60 inches (139.7 × 152.4cm)
Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York,
Gift of Baroness Alphonse de Rothschild, by exchange, 2018



Intercalate, 2018
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
60 × 55 inches (152.4 × 139.7 cm)
Dallas Museum of Art,
Dallas Art Fair Foundation Acquisition Fund 2019.40



Core, 2019
Deconstructed medical books on canvas
45 × 40 inches (114.3 × 101.6 cm)
Collection of Janice Niemi and Dennis Braddock



Untitled, 2019
Deconstructed art book covers on canvas
60 × 55 inches (152.4 × 139.7 cm)
Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields,
Purchased with funds provided by the
Contemporary Art Society Fund, 2019.6







Sacred, 2019
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
45 × 40 inches (114.3 × 101.6 cm)
Private Collection, France



Bloom, 2019
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
45 × 40 inches (114.3 × 101.6 cm)
Private Collection



Race, 2019
Deconstructed Ohio law books on canvas
40 × 40 inches (101.6 × 101.6 cm)
Private collection, Saint-Cyprien (66), France



Let Us Grow, 2019
Deconstructed Indiana law books on canvas
90 × 100 inches (228.6 × 254 cm)
Collection of Mario & Constanza Pacheco



Fringe, 2019
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
60 × 65 inches (152.4 × 165.1 cm)
Collection of Noel E.D. KIRNON



Mass Awakening, 2019
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
100 × 90 inches (254 × 228.6 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,
Accessions Committee Fund purchase

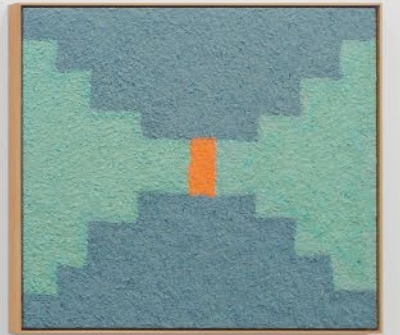


Wrath of Children, 2019
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
60 × 50 inches (152.4 × 127 cm)
Collection of Michael and Ilene Salcman, Baltimore



Trepidation, 2019
Deconstructed print portfolios on canvas
60 × 50 inches (152.4 × 127 cm)
Collection of Mike and Emily Cavanagh







Kenosis, 2019
Pulped book covers on canvas
50 × 55 inches (127 × 139.7 cm)
Private Collection



Interconnectivity, 2019
Pulped American history books on canvas
70 × 80 inches (177.8 × 203.2 cm)
Private Collection



Invisible, 2019
Deconstructed medical books on canvas
40 × 70 inches (101.6 × 177.8 cm)
Collection of Suzanne McFayden



Plain Sight, 2019
Deconstructed footballs
70 × 40 inches (177.8 × 101.6 cm)
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas;
Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2019



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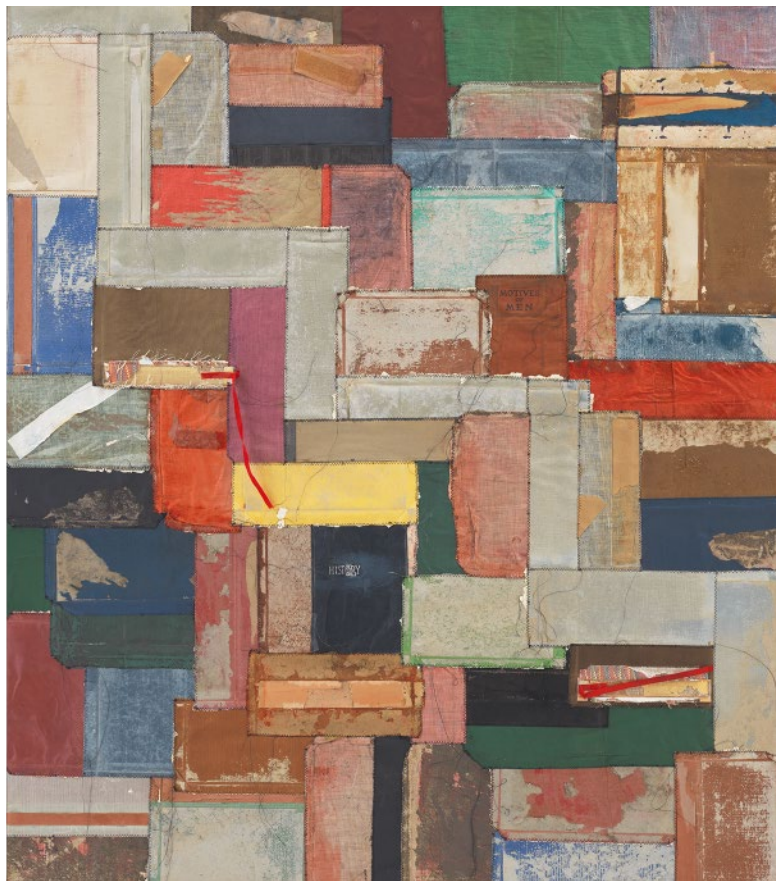
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Skewed, 2020
Deconstructed law books on canvas
40 × 40 inches (101.6 × 101.6 cm)
Collection of Joseph Berg



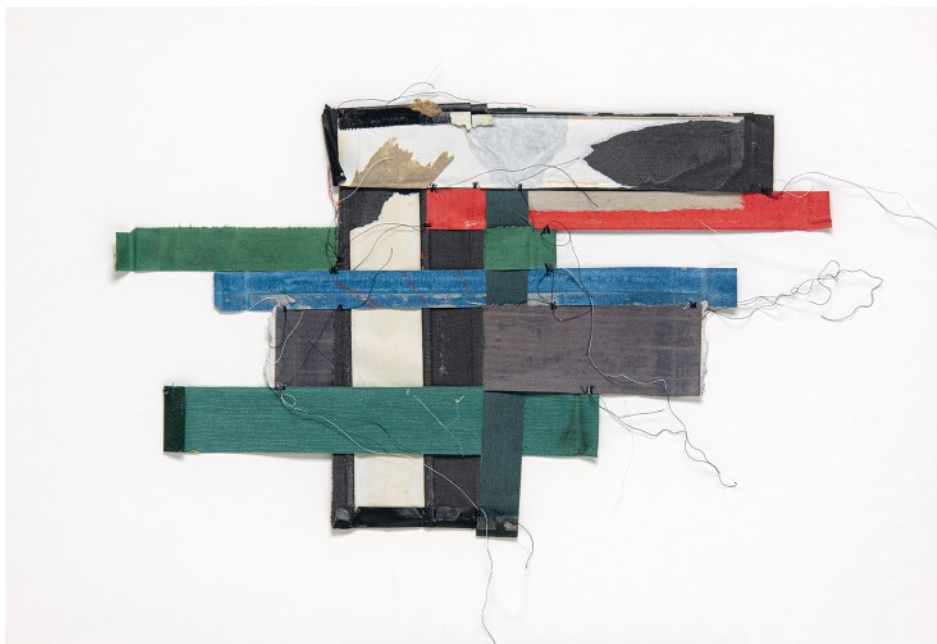
Pantaphobia, 2020
Deconstructed portfolios on canvas
50 × 50 inches (127 × 127 cm)
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris



Motives, 2020
Deconstructed history books on canvas
56 × 49 inches (142.2 × 124.5 cm)
Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA.
Museum Purchase 2020.24



Seek the Story of the Giraffe, 2020
Deconstructed law books on canvas
70 × 60 inches (177.8 × 152.4 cm)
Collection of Dr. Anita Blanchard and Martin Nesbitt



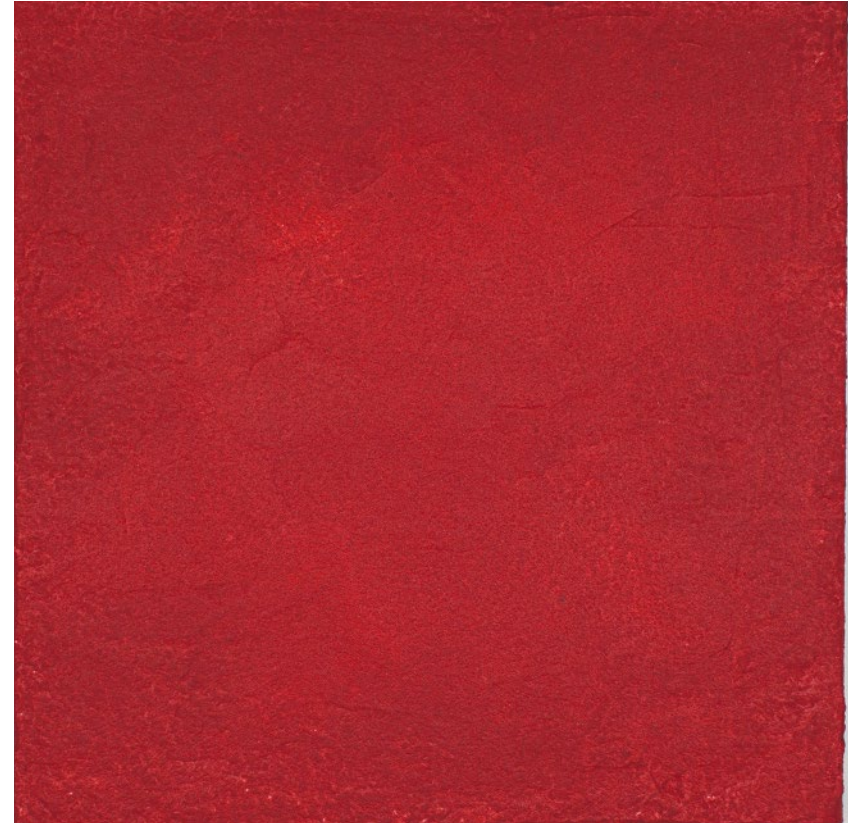
Revisionist, 2020
Deconstructed law book spines
10 ½ × 17 ¾ inches (26.67 × 45.1 cm)
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris



Backstitch, 2020
Deconstructed law book spines
19 ½ × 19 ½ inches (49.5 × 49.5 cm)
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris



Théo, 2020
Pulped law books on canvas
20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm)
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris



Rise Up, 2020
Pulped law books on canvas
20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm)
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris

Samuel Levi Jones

Born in Marion, Indiana, in 1978
Lives and works in Chicago, Illinois
and Indianapolis, Indiana

MFA, Studio Art, Mills College, Oakland, California, 2012
BFA, Fine Art in Photography, Herron School of Art
and Design, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2009
BA, Communication Studies, Taylor University, Upland,
Indiana, 2002

Solo Exhibitions

- 2021 *No color in the pages*, PATRON, Chicago, Illinois
- 2020 *Rise Up*, Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris, France
- 2020 *Third Space*, Edison School of the Arts,
Indianapolis, Indiana
- 2019 *Mass Awakening*, Galerie Lelong & Co.,
New York, New York
- No More Tokens*, Vielmetter Los Angeles,
California
- Left of Center*, Indianapolis Museum of Art at
Newfields, Indianapolis, Indiana
- Let Us Grow*, Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris,
France
- 2018 *Nexus*, PATRON, Chicago, Illinois
- 2017 *One Blood*, Vielmetter Los Angeles, California
- Samuel Levi Jones: New Etchings*, Paulson
Fontaine Press Residency, Berkeley,
California
- Remedial Suffering*, Herron School of Art and
Design, Indiana University, Indianapolis,
Indiana
- 2016 *Burning all illusion*, Galerie Lelong & Co.,
New York, New York
- Reciprocity*, PATRON, Chicago, Illinois
- Samuel Levi Jones*, The Arts Club, London,
England
- Samuel Levi Jones*, Halsey McKay, East
Hampton, New York
- 48 Portraits (Underexposed)*, EXPO Projects,
Chicago, Illinois
- 2015 *After Fred Wilson*, Indianapolis Museum of
Contemporary Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
- Talk To Me*, Pro Arts, Oakland, California
- Unbound*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New
York, New York
- 2014 *Black White Thread*, PAPIILLION ART,
Los Angeles, California
- 2013 *Delete*, Los Angeles, California
- 48 Portraits (Underexposed)*, Harrison Center for
the Arts, Indianapolis, Indiana

Group Exhibitions

- 2021 *Young, Gifted, and Black: The Lumpkin-
Bocuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary
Art*, Multiple venues, including: OSilas
Gallery at Concordia College, Bronxville,
New York (2019); Lehman College Art
Gallery, Bronx, New York (2020); Gallery
400 at the University of Illinois, Chicago;
El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas
(forthcoming)
- 2020 *A summer like no other*, Galerie Lelong & Co.,
New York (online)
- I yield my time, fuck you*, Altman Siegel,
San Francisco, California
- Paper Pavilions*, 411 Gallery, Columbus, Indiana
- Duro Olowu: Seeing Chicago*, Museum of
Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois
- Nexus: Contemporary Art from Leading Miami
Collections*, Lowe Art Museum, Coral Gables,
Florida
- Shifting Gaze: A Reconstruction of the Black and
Hispanic Body in Contemporary Art from the
Collection of Dr. Robert B. Feldman*, Virginia
Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia
Beach, Virginia
- 2019 *Resilience: African American Artists As Agents
of Change*, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts,
Kalamazoo, Michigan
- State Your Intentions: New Works in the Weisman
Art Museum Collection*, Frederick R. Weisman
Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- On Soft Ground*, Indianapolis Museum of
Contemporary Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
- Personal to Political: Celebrating the African
American Artists of Paulson Fontaine Press*,
Gallery 360, Northeastern University, Boston,
Massachusetts; Las Cruces Museum of Art,
Las Cruces, New Mexico; Museum of Arts
and Sciences, Daytona, Florida
- Solidary & Solitary: The Joyner/Guiffrida
Collection*, Smart Museum of Art at the
University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
- 2018 *The Edge of Visibility*, International Print Center,
New York, New York
- Sedimentations*, 8th Floor Gallery, The Shelley
& Donald Rubin Foundation, New York,
New York
- Sidelined*, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York,
New York (curated)
- Personal to Political: Celebrating the African
American Artists of Paulson Fontaine Press*,
Bedford Gallery, Lesher Center for the Arts,

- Walnut Creek, California; Krasl Art Center,
St. Joseph, Michigan
- 2017 *FOR FREEDOMS*, Pizzuti Collection of Columbus
Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio
- Basile Gallery*, Herron School of Art and Design,
Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana
- Excerpt*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York,
New York
- 2016 *Chicago Invites Chicago*, Galerie Lelong & Co.,
New York, New York
- Trust Issues*, Ronchini, London, United Kingdom
- A Dark Matter*, Tarble Arts Center, Eastern
Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois
- 2015 *Trashed and Treasured*, Napa Valley Museum,
Napa Valley, California
- Theory of Forms*, PATRON, Chicago, Illinois
- I Like It Like This*, S2 Sotheby's Gallery,
New York, New York
- The Silence of Ordinary Things*, The Mistake
Room, Los Angeles, California
- 2014 *The History of Technologies*, Jessica Silverman, San
Francisco, California
- OPEN*, PAPIILLION ART, Los Angeles, California
- 2013 *A Basic Measure*, Service Employees
International Union United Long Term Care
Workers, Los Angeles, California
- Transport*, Pro Arts, Oakland, California
- 2012 *X Libris*, Root Division, San Francisco,
California
- Baila Con Duende*, Watts Towers Art Center,
Los Angeles, California
- The Last Show on Earth*, Mills College, Oakland,
California

Curated Exhibitions

- 2021 *The Sum of Unity*, The Galleries at Herron,
Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana
University, Indianapolis, Indiana
- 2018 *Sidelined*, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York,
New York

Awards

- 2020 DeHaan Artist of Distinction Award,
Indianapolis, Indiana
- 2017 Sustainable Arts Foundation, San Francisco,
California
- Artist in Residence, Paulson Fontaine Press
Residency, Berkeley, California
- 2015 Artist in Residence, Pamela Joyner and Fred
Giuffrida, Sonoma, California

- 2014 Recology Residency, San Francisco, California
- Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, Studio
Museum in Harlem, New York, New York
- 2012 Vivian and Margarita Stephenson Award, Mills
College, Oakland, California
- 2010-12 Evelyn V. Staton Fellowship in Fine Arts, Mills
College, Oakland, California
- 2009 Mildred Darby Menz Award, Herron School
of Art and Design, Indiana University,
Indianapolis, Indiana
- 2008 Junior Bratton Award, Herron School of Art and
Design, Indiana University, Indianapolis,
Indiana

Public Collections

- Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
- Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin,
Texas
- Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin - Madison,
Wisconsin
- Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia
- Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas
- de Young Museum, San Francisco, California
- Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Indianapolis,
Indiana
- Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, Missouri
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles,
California
- Madison Art Collection, Harrisonburg, Virginia
- Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison,
Wisconsin
- McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas
- Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Rubell Family Collection, Miami, Florida
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco,
California
- Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Illinois
- Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, New York
- Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia
- Weisman Art Museum Collection, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York

Published in conjunction with the exhibition

Samuel Levi Jones: Rise Up
Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris
May 20 – July 13, 2021

Published by
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Design: Franklin Vandiver

Publication managers: Lindsay Danckwerth and Grace Hong

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“Where We Meet, preliminary notes on
“The necessary/ Sew-work” © Nijah Cunningham

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ISBN: 978-0-9671747-3-0

Samuel Levi Jones and Galerie Lelong would like to acknowledge
and thank Nijah Cunningham for contributing excellent and attentive
scholarship to the artist's contemporary art practice, achieved
during a period that has been globally challenging for all.
Galerie Lelong would also like to thank the many individuals who
have participated in the organizing of this catalogue including,
Liz Bower, Bianca Cabrera, April Clark, Patrice Cotensin,
François Dournes, Jean Frémon, Pamela Joyner and Fred Giuffrida,
Paula Katz, Sarah Landry, Ashley Martin, and Mycroft Zimmerman.

All photos: Christopher Burke Studio, unless otherwise noted

p. 12–13
Courtesy of PATRON, Chicago. Photo: Eric Lubrick.
Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

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Collection of the artist. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio,
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Gallery, New York.

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Installation views of *Samuel Levi Jones: Left of Center*,
March 15 – September 1, 2019, in the June M. McCormack Forefront
Galleries. Photos: Eric Lubrick and Samantha McCain Veach.
Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

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Courtesy of PATRON, Chicago. Photo: Michael Tropea.
Image courtesy of the Smart Museum of Art.

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Photo: Eric Lubrick. Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum
of Art at Newfields.

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Installation views of *Samuel Levi Jones: Let Us Grow*,
May 13 – July 13, 2020, Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris.
Photo: Fabrice Gibert.

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Photo: Fabrice Gibert.

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Installation views of *Samuel Levi Jones: Mass Awakening*,
September 5 – October 12, 2019, Galerie Lelong & Co.,
New York. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio.

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Photo: James Prinz.

