ICA is Awarded $360,000 Project Grant from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage for the first major retrospective on the work of pioneering video/performance artist Ulysses Jenkins

_Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation_ Opens September 2021

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The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania is pleased to announce it has been awarded a Project Grant from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage for _Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation_, the first major retrospective on the work of pioneering video/performance artist Ulysses Jenkins, on view at ICA fall 2021. The exhibition is co-curated by ICA Andrea B. Laporte Associate Curator Meg Onli and Associate Curator Erin Christovale, Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, where the exhibition will travel in winter 2022.

A pivotal influence on contemporary art for over 50 years, Ulysses Jenkins (b.1946 Los Angeles, lives Los Angeles) is a pioneering video artist who emerged in the late-1970s. His video and media work is remarkable for its fusion of forms to conjure vibrant expressions of how image, sound and cultural iconography inform representation. Using archival footage, photographs, image processing, and elegiac soundtracks Jenkins pulls together various strands of
thought to construct an “other” history that consistently interrogates questions of race and gender as they relate to ritual, history, and the power of the state.

Beginning as a painter and muralist, Jenkins was introduced to video just as the first consumer cameras were made available to individuals, and he quickly seized upon the television technology as a means to broadcast alternative and critical depictions of multiculturalism—citing the catalyst of Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) and its call to Black filmmakers to control their subject-hood by controlling the media depicting them. Adopting the role of a “video griot,” Jenkins draws upon the inspiration of oral traditions in videos that are often structured around music and poetic recitation, as well as dynamic performances.

From Jenkins’s work with Video Venice News, an L.A. media collective he founded in the early 1970s, to his involvement with the artist group Studio Z (alongside David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, and Maren Hassinger), to his individual video and performance works with Othervisions Studio, Jenkins explicitly comments on how white supremacy is embedded in popular culture and its effects on subjectivity. Throughout his career, Jenkins studied under Charles White, Chris Burden, and Betye Saar, and he has worked collaboratively with a plethora of artists including Kerry James Marshall, who performed in Jenkins’s influential video *Two-Zone Transfer* (1979); Hammons, who was the subject of the documentary film *King David* (1978); and Nengudi and Hassinger, both of whom appeared in Jenkins’s video *Dream City* (1981).

Requiring three years of intensive research by the curators involving studio visits, digitizing a sprawling archive, and conversations with Jenkins and his collaborators, the exhibition, which has been organized closely with the artist, will encompass a broad range of Jenkins’s video pieces, collaborative works, mural paintings, photography, and performances highlighting the scope of Jenkins’s practice.

"From Jenkins’s critique of racial stereotypes in Hollywood to his use of cutting-edge technology, Jenkins’s remarkable body of work is as relevant today as it was over 40 years ago," said Meg Onli, Andrea B. Lapore Associate Curator. "With this incredible support from Pew we are able to realize a comprehensive survey of this underrecognized artist and spark a rediscovery of the work by this seminal figure in contemporary art.”
Among the many video works included in the exhibition is *Mass of Images* (1978), a groundbreaking video art piece considered one of the first works in the genre by a Black artist. In the video, Jenkins critiques the media’s role in perpetuating racist and harmful images of Black people in America. This and many other video works and performances included in the exhibition are grounded in the issues at the heart of conversations happening now regarding inequality and environmental devastation amplified by unchecked capitalism, governmental oppression, and systemic racism’s impact on Black cultural production.

Technology’s role in building community is a primary concern across Jenkins’s work. Just as he innovatively used nascent technology to address pressing issues of his day, the exhibition will utilize current technology to capture the artist’s original intent to foster international collaboration, increase access to shared experiences, and provide a platform for marginalized voices.

Many emerging Black video artists who came of age in the 1990s and early-2000s, cite Jenkins as a major influence in their work. Jenkins’s ground-breaking and prescient work is only now being revisited by scholars, curators, and other artists. The political and social commentary present in Jenkins’s work make it particularly relevant in today’s context, such as the importance of Native American cultural production in *Being Witness: The Haida Project* (1990), interrogations of Black stereotypes in the American entertainment industry in *Mass of Images* (1978) and *Two Zone Transfer* (1979), and calls to protect the rights of indigenous groups and champion environmental conservation in *Bay Window* (1991) and *Talking Hut* (1994).

**RELATED PROGRAMMING**

Public programming will provide another layer of interpretation to Jenkins’s work and will allow audiences the opportunity to consider and debate key underlying themes, including the power of racist and stereotypical imagery, systemic models of oppression, and the transmission of knowledge through new technological advancements. Plans include a restaging of two of Jenkins’s seminal works, *Dream City* (1981) and *Columbus Day: A Doggereal* (1981), among others.
The exhibition will be accompanied by the first publication devoted to the artist’s work, jointly produced by ICA and the Hammer, and designed by LA-based design studio Ella. The publication will feature contributions by exhibition curators Erin Christovale and Meg Onli, as well as by Jacqueline Stewart, professor of cinema studies, University of Chicago. Also included will be a reprint of “Written and Bitten: Ulysses Jenkins and the Non-Ontology of Blackness” by the scholar and artist Aria Dean and reflections by the artists Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi and the art historian and curator Kellie Jones.

A microsite will host digital content from the exhibition, such as printed matter and archival material to a virtual curator-led tour of the exhibition. Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation is organized by ICA’s Andrea B. Laporte Associate Curator Meg Onli and the Hammer Museum’s Associate Curator Erin Christovale.

The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage awards Project grants that support exceptional cultural programs and experiences presented by Philadelphia-area organizations for a wide range of audiences.

For a full list of grant recipients, visit pewcenterarts.org/2020grants.

Major support for Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

ABOUT ULYSSES JENKINS

Ulysses Jenkins (b.1945 Los Angeles, lives Los Angeles) is a video/performance artist who explicitly comments on how white supremacy is embedded in popular culture and its effects on subjectivity. Jenkins studied under Charles White, Chris Burden, and Betye Saar while at Otis College of Art and Design. Throughout his career,
Jenkins has worked collaboratively with a plethora of artists including Kerry James Marshall, who performed in Jenkins’ seminal video Two-Zone Transfer (1979); David Hammons, who was the subject of the documentary film King David (1978); and Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger, both of whom appeared in Jenkins’s video Dream City (1981). Recent works include Bequest (2002), a project reacting to the treatment of women in Afghanistan during the aftermath of 9/11. Jenkins completed the video Planet X (2006) for the alumni exhibition Otis-LA: 9 Decades of Los Angeles Art at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. He also contributed to SIDE by SIDE Part II, a collaboration with Hassinger, Nengudi, Hammons, and Franklin Parker for the exhibition Les Soirées Nomades, cycle Nuits Noires, at Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain in Paris (2006).

ABOUT ERIN CHRISTOVALE

Erin Christovale is Associate Curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. She is also the curator of Black Radical Imagination with Amir George, which has screened both nationally and internationally in spaces such as MoMA PS1, MOCA Los Angeles, and the Museo Taller José Clemente Orozco.


ABOUT MEG ONLI

Meg Onli is the Andrea B. Laporte Associate Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, where she has curated the exhibitions Speech/Acts (2017) and Colored People Time (2019).
Onli is the recipient of a 2012 Creative Capital / Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant; a 2014 Graham Foundation Grant; and a 2019 Transformation Award from the Leeway Foundation. She is currently a Warhol Foundation Curatorial Fellow. In the summer of 2020, she founded the initiative Art for Philadelphia, which raised more than $100,000 for community-led abolitionist organizations. Onli is currently working on the solo exhibition Jessica Vaughn: Our Primary Focus Is to Be Successful (2021) and is a visiting professor at Williams College.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART | UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, PHILADELPHIA

The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania is a non-collecting institution presenting exhibitions at the forefront of contemporary practice and culture that provoke our multiple audiences to think in new ways. ICA is free for all to engage and connect with the art of our time. Since our inception in 1963, we have welcomed the challenge of the current moment to continually evolve as a responsive institution. We are committed to and advocate for the artists, research, and dialogues that resonate today.

Over our 50 year history, ICA has worked collaboratively with artists on the production of urgent and important contemporary art. Beginning with our inaugural show of paintings by Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still, milestones in our exhibition history include—in addition to the first museum show of works by Andy Warhol in 1965—Laurie Anderson, Richard Artschwager, Vija Celmins, Glenn Ligon, Robert Mapplethorpe, Agnes Martin, and Paul Thek. In recent years, ICA curators have worked with artists including Deborah Anzinger, Alex Da Corte, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Suki Seokyeong Kang, Barbara Kasten, Carolyn Lazard, Rodney McMillian, Ree Morton, Sondra Perry, and Cauleen Smith.

ABOUT THE HAMMER MUSEUM | UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

The Hammer Museum at UCLA believes in the promise of art and ideas to illuminate our lives and build a more just world. The Hammer opened in 1990, and in 1994, it became one of three public arts institutions of the School of the Arts and Architecture at UCLA. The Hammer champions the
art and artists who challenge us to see the world in a new light, to experience the unexpected, to ignite our imaginations, and inspire change through such projects as Adrian Piper: Concepts and Intuitions, 1965-2016 (2018), Hammer Projects: Jamilah Sabur (2019), Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence (2019), Hammer Projects: Tschabalala Self (2019), and Hammer Projects: Ja’Tovia Gary (2020), curated by Erin Christovale. Christovale and then-senior curator Anne Ellegood also organized Made in L.A. 2018 that addressed changing representations of gender, race, and class in L.A.’s cultural landscape through the voices of 30+ underrepresented artists.