ICA Presents Major Retrospective on the Work of Groundbreaking Video/Performance Artist Ulysses Jenkins, a Pivotal Influence on Contemporary Art for Over 50 years

_Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation_ Opens September 17, 2021

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The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania is pleased to present _Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation_, the first major retrospective on the work of groundbreaking video/performance artist Ulysses Jenkins, on view at ICA this fall, September 17–December 30, 2021. The exhibition is co-curated by Meg Onli, ICA Andrea B. Laporte Associate Curator and Erin Christovale, Associate Curator, Hammer Museum at UCLA, where the exhibition will travel this winter, February 6–May 15, 2022.

A pivotal influence on contemporary art for over fifty years, Ulysses Jenkins (born 1946 Los Angeles, lives Los Angeles) has produced video and media work that conjures 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 interrogate questions of race and gender as they relate to ritual, history, and the power of the state.

“Jenkins has made enormous contributions to the field of video art. Long overdue, this exhibition continues ICA’s deep commitment to supporting artists whose work and trajectories
are often lost to art historical circles and placed on the margins,” says Zoë Ryan, ICA Daniel W. Dietrich, II Director. “Jenkins defines a practice that is rooted in both a local context—Los Angeles—and a format—video—that shifted the landscape of media-based art making. This exhibition has afforded ICA the opportunity to center the full sweep of his unparalleled and inspiring oeuvre within a greater art historical context for future scholarship.”

Beginning as a painter and muralist, Jenkins was introduced to video just as the first consumer cameras were becoming available. 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 is inspired by the oral traditions in videos that are often structured around music and poetic recitation, as well as dynamic performances.

From his work with Video Venice News, a Los Angeles 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. Jenkins studied under Charles White, Gene Youngblood, Chris Burden, and Betye Saar, and has collaborated with many artists in his work, among them Kerry James Marshall, who performed in *Two-Zone Transfer* (1979); Hammons, who was the subject of *King David* (1978); and Nengudi and Hassinger, both of whom appeared in Jenkins’s video *Dream City* (1981), among other works.

Requiring three years of intensive research by the curators—including studio visits, the digitization of a sprawling archive, and conversations with Jenkins and his collaborators—the exhibition, which has been organized closely with the artist, encompasses a broad range of over twenty of Jenkins’s videos, and more than sixty works that showcase his collaborations, mural paintings, photography, and performances, highlighting the scope of the artist’s practice.

“Ulysses Jenkins is the forefather of the practices of so many young video artists working today. It feels important to look back and chart that history—especially given the way Black experimental artists have come to the forefront in both art and independent film spaces in recent years—putting forward radically different modalities of moving image making,” says Meg Onli, Andrea B. Laporte Associate Curator. “Jenkins’s work always feels vibrant and bursting at the seams. I love the textures that he’s making visually. I hope audiences will see his incredible practice and feel, as we do, there’s just something undeniable about Ulysses.”
Among the many video works included in the exhibition is *Mass of Images* (1978), an innovative video art piece considered one of the first works in the genre by a Black artist. In it, Jenkins critiques the media’s role in perpetuating racist and harmful images of Black people in the U.S. Like other works in the exhibition, it is grounded in the issues at the heart of contemporary conversations about 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 the artist has used nascent technology to address pressing issues of our time, the exhibition uses 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 groundbreaking 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 his 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).

**EXHIBITION CATALOG AND MEMOIR**

The exhibition is accompanied by the first publication devoted to Jenkins’s work, jointly produced by ICA and the Hammer, designed by Los Angeles-based design studio ELLA. The publication features essays by exhibition curators Meg Onli and Erin Christovale and exhibition curatorial assistant Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi, along with a roundtable conversation with scholars Michael Gillespie and Alessandra Raengo and curators Greg de Cuir Jr. and Chrissie Iles. Also included are reprinted articles by artists Aria Dean (“Written and Bitten: Ulysses Jenkins and the NonOntology of Blackness”) and artist Kerry James Marshall (“Higher Learning”), as well as contributions from Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Cauleen Smith, May Sun, David Hammons/Charles White Archive, and art historian and curator Kellie Jones.

A reprint of Jenkins’s memoir *Doggerel Life: Stories of a Los Angeles Griot* also accompanies the exhibition.

**RELATED PROGRAMMING**

Public programming will provide another layer of interpretation to Jenkins’s work and give 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.
September 17, 7PM: Opening Virtual Conversation with Ulysses Jenkins, Meg Onli, and Erin Christovale

September 18, 4-5PM: Curator-Led Tour

October 16, 3-4PM: In Conversation: Ulysses Jenkins, Maren, Hassinger, and Senga Nengudi

Additional programming can be found at www.icaphila.org.

Live captioning will be provided for all public programming by Caption Access.

Programming at ICA has been made possible in part by the Emily and Jerry Spiegel Fund to Support Contemporary Culture and Visual Arts and the Lise Spiegel Wilks and Jeffrey Wilks Family Foundation, and by Hilarie L. & Mitchell Morgan.

Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation is co-organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. It is co-curated by Meg Onli, Andrea B. Laporte Associate Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, and Erin Christovale, Associate Curator, Hammer Museum, with Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi, Curatorial Assistant.

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ABOUT ULYSSES JENKINS

Ulysses Jenkins (born 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 Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design). Throughout his career, Jenkins has collaborated with a plethora of artists including Kerry James Marshall, who performed in the seminal video Two-Zone Transfer (1979); David Hammons, in 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 Nengudi, Hassinger, Hammons, and Franklin Parker for the exhibition Les soirées nomades, cycle Nuits.

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 in Guadalajara, Mexico.


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 exhibition 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 recently curated the solo exhibition Jessica Vaughn: Our Primary Focus Is to Be Successful (2021) and was 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 that develops and presents exhibitions, commissions, events, publications, and special projects that champion new, experimental, and underrecognized artists and ideas. ICA is committed to developing research at the intersection of interdisciplinary artistic practice and creating impactful experiences through our projects that support audiences in having meaningful connections with art and artists and encourage an exchange of ideas on art and society. ICA centers issues of equity and inclusion and social justice as core to our mission and is committed to advocating for artists, research, and dialogues that contextualize and resonate with the socio-political conditions of our time.