



Steffani Jemison with Garrett Gray, *On Similitude*, Whitney Museum of American Art, Sept 13, 2019.  
Photo: Filip Wolak

## STEFFANI JEMISON

**Steffani Jemison** is a Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary artist working in and between video, performance, installation, drawing, and writing. Through traditional and alternative genealogies of mime and mimicry, Jemison examines black subjectivity, embodied communication, and the complexity of our fraught desire to understand. Jemison's inquiry into encoded meaning within gesture and movement reveals a depth that extends beyond spoken language.

This premier presentation of Jemison's work in Montreal takes the form of a two-part weekend event on March 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The weekend begins on Saturday the 7<sup>th</sup> with a screening of Jemison's video works *Sensus Plenior* (2017) and *Similitude* (2019), followed by a conversation between Jemison, performer Garrett Gray, and critical race scholar Philip S. S. Howard. *Sensus Plenior* features the black gospel mime practice of Reverend Susan Webb, leader of the Mime Ministry of Harlem. *Similitude* illuminates Gray's pantomime practice within the contexts of everyday experience: the public park, the private interior.

On Sunday the 8<sup>th</sup>, Jemison and Gray perform *On Similitude* (2019- ), both a lecture and live companion piece to Jemison's video works. *On Similitude*, is structured like a rehearsal, investigating internal experiences of preparation, self-reflection, and conveying meaning. Experimental in nature, the discursive live performance asks the audience to reflect on the body, speech, and the possibilities of performative practices within and outside of Western histories.

The intimacy of Jemison's work is situated within an interiority that also serves as a political strategy. How does embodied quietude within black American culture uncover alternative ways of communicating history and generating dialogue? What are the possibilities of wordlessness as a means of engendering nuanced understanding? Are there unexplored strategies for silence and movement in relation to the socio-political positioning of black bodies?

### WORKS

*Sensus Plenior*, 2017, HD video: 34 min. 36 sec.

*Similitude*, 2019, HD video: 35 min. 42 sec.

*On Similitude*, 2019, performance with Garrett Gray

# STEFFANI JEMISON

**PROJECTION: SENSUS PLENIOR & SIMILITUDE  
CONVERSATION: STEFFANI JEMISON,  
GARRETT GRAY & PHILIP S.S. HOWARD**

MARCH 7, 2020, 4 PM – 6 PM

J.A DE SÈVE CINEMA, 1400 BOUL. DE MAISONNEUVE O.

**PERFORMANCE: ON SIMILITUDE**

MARCH 8, 2020, 4 PM – 6 PM

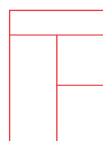
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## INTERVIEW

### ASHLEY RAGHUBIR

*Sensus plenior* is Latin for ‘fuller meaning,’ and you further contextualized your use of the term within its meaning in Catholicism by asking us to consider ways of thinking that go beyond a simple reading of biblical text. How do you see black gospel mime and the practice of Reverend Susan Webb, leader of the Master Mime Ministry of Harlem, extend or amplify understanding?

### STEFFANI JEMISON

The Latin phrase *sensus plenior* emerges from an intellectual context—Biblical hermeneutics—within which understanding itself poses a problem. Why is understanding a problem? To understand something is to have power over it. Interpretation creates a subject-object relationship between two beings that is presumptuous and invasive. In his *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant described the violence of “understanding” in European thought: “In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.” He went on to propose an alternative: reserve the right to difference. Glissant used the term *relation* to describe the free encounter between beings who are irreducible, that is to say, impossible to understand, translate, or represent. This is a philosophy and poetics of difference rather than one of likeness. This is a proposal that our fundamental connection is not metaphorical or mimetic, between like and like, but rather one of relation or recognition between unlike and unlike.

Mime ministers are tasked with activating understanding as a nonviolent, nonhierarchical, nonteleological practice. To minister as a mime is to model a state of absolute receptivity. I think of understanding as a form of study that is necessarily unresolved and ongoing. Rev. Webb’s work unfolds as a state and practice of knowing. How do you know what you know? You only know it at the moment of calling it to the mind and body. The concept of “understanding” is another way of talking about desire—the desire to resolve the uncollapsible difference between self and other. An ethical approach to understanding requires something like opening yourself to receive, opening yourself to be moved and to move others.

### AR

Mime and mimicry are key elements within *Sensus Plenior* (2017) and *Similitude* (2019), as well as past performances of *On Similitude*. The movements and gestures are performed in silence. The physical expression is, however, in response to verbal direction, guided positioning, gospel lyrics, a mime partner, reflection, or projected image. How does silence and responsiveness (including self-responsiveness) function within your practice?

### SJ

Although mime appears responsive, modernist mime is remarkably self-contained as excavation and expression of the fundamental truths of the body and the relationship between the body and the world. Performances by Marcel Marceau and Étienne Decroux were structured like parables. I test this structure in *On Similitude*; the spectator is invited to think about the dramas that unfold in front of them as self-contained, even as they are always reminded of the specificity of the performer’s body and the relationship between that body and the story it tells.

In the context of black American culture, I am interested in forms of quiet and withdrawal as political strategies. I am not alone in believing that the “resistance” model of political expression may have been exhausted. There are rich and complex genealogies of black material practice and activities of meaning-making that cannot be reduced to “a position against oppression,” genealogies that instead have to do with the self and interior life, community-building, and form.

Garrett, the actor with whom I work in *Similitude* and *On Similitude*, was trained as a clown. I have been thinking recently about both restlessness as a political conditions and recklessness as a political tool. I have been very curious about the relationship between recklessness and foolishness. I cannot help but notice that the words *minister* and *minstrel* share a lineage: both are concerned with servitude. Jesters and clowns inhabit positions that are intimate and distant in their relation to power, their relationship to speech characterized by excess (as in the figure of the court jester or fool) or lack. I find this troubled relationship to language to be generative. How are you supposed to write, how are you supposed to read, how are you supposed to speak, what is unreadable, what is unwritable, what is unspeakable?

### AR

Relatedly, there is an intentional quieting of spoken language in your work, and yet you also incorporate musical scores that are at times frenetic, noisy, and improvisational. Could you expand on the unheard spoken voice, the visibility of speaking, and accompanying sound as they relate to your practice?

### SJ

In the videos *Similitude* and *Sensus Plenior*, there are several moments in which a figure onscreen is speaking, but the spoken voice cannot be heard or understood. I am interested in drawing the viewer’s attention to the vast distance between the often intimate profilmic space depicted in the work and the very different context within which the work is viewed. In my videos as well as my drawings, I often refer to language in ways that point to its mysteries. By creating an experience of desire in the viewer, the work draws attention to the complexities of community and communication—the ways that language is often private or coded, the (often political) feelings produced by our desire to understand, etc.

### AR

Rehearsal features as a strong motif in your practice. *Sensus Plenior* shows Reverend Susan Webb preparing behind-the-scenes and *Similitude* begins with Garrett Gray, collaborator and performer, practicing in front a home mirror. As a performance, *On Similitude* is also structured as a rehearsal and involves a stage, mirror, screen, video projector, and sound system. What is made possible through explorations of rehearsal?

### SJ

I am interested in alternative genealogies for moving and being moved that are not limited to European histories of proscenium theater. I have studied non-European approaches to mimicry and mask making and vernacular, non-theatrical histories of the masquerade, the mimetic dance, and the mimetic ritual, that offer an uneasy connection between European theatrical history and anticolonial mimicry. I also think about dancing, about private movement practices, about public experiences in which the whole world is implicated or potentially implicated in the work (as in the *Similitude* scenes in a public park), physical games, and spaces of practice, ministry, or study. I often use pedagogy as a context for my public work because it offers a familiar non-theatrical framework for thinking about how to spend time together with heightened attention to our bodies, our minds, and our willingness to be moved.

### AR

As a performance, *On Similitude* is an accompaniment to both *Sensus Plenior* and *Similitude*. You have described the performance as discursive. What does this specific form of performance enable for exploring expressions of African American culture?

### SJ

Well, I have found that simply saying what you mean can be a very helpful way of sharing your ideas. This is the case for “African Americans” as well as everyone else. Fortunately, all forms of performance are available to everyone. Like many black artists, I devote a certain amount of energy to explaining my work to white audiences. The lecture-performance as form is a natural extension of that ongoing work. Just kidding! (I think...)

My practice grows out of my deep and ongoing, often speculative engagement with our world, past and present (in other words, “research”). Sometimes this work unfolds with and through bodies. The work that Garrett and I did together last year included interviewing, teaching, failing, falling, listening, describing, playing, mediating, channelling, imagining, watching, traveling, writing, etc. Sparks emerged from the friction between language and gesture, and these led to the performance *On Similitude*: a continuous work for me, Garrett, my speech, and our movement that constellates and connects a vast range of historical moments, images, and projects.

### AR

In your work there is a calling of attention to the camera and the cameraperson/s. The camera’s movement, framing, and editing are all emphasized. Can you speak more about the structural elements of filmmaking, video-making and your decision-making as it relates to both?

### SJ

I am influenced by the whole history of cinema. I am especially interested in early cinema—in fact, I think my earliest ideas about silence, gesture, and the body grew from my reflections about the influence of mime on the acting conventions of silent film. I sometimes use music to invite viewers to make a connection to early cinema. My approach to video also reflects my training, which sought to construct a video art canon shaped by the earliest sculptors, performers, and conceptual artists who used video cameras as tools. I have thought particularly about the search for a neutral body that is present in the work of artists like Bruce Nauman.

I often shoot large amounts of footage in intimate environments—generally the crew just includes myself, or perhaps myself and one assistant or additional camera operator. Mixing real time direction with post-production manipulation, I use speed, direction, narrative continuity, and composition to structure the work and guide the viewer’s experience. Sound also plays an important role. For both *Sensus Plenior* and *Similitude*, I worked closely with musicians to develop scores that extend my ideas about voice, time, and repetition.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Steffani Jemison** uses time-based, photographic, and discursive platforms to examine «progress» and its alternatives. Jemison’s work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. Solo exhibitions and commissions include: MASS MoCA, Jeu de Paume, CAPC Bordeaux, and the Museum of Modern Art. Group exhibitions include the Whitney Biennial 2019, the Studio Museum in Harlem, The Drawing Center, and others. Collaborative exhibitions include Western Front and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and solo screenings include Lincoln Center and Gene Siskel Film Center. Her work is in the public collections of the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Kadist Foundation and private collections.

**Garrett Gray** is an actor, educator, and mime from Savannah, GA who currently resides in New York City. He grew up with a love for classical theatre and clowning, which led him to the American Mime Theatre founded by Paul J. Curtis in 1952. Under the direction of the Theatre’s Artistic Director, Jean Barbour, he was introduced to this beautiful art form and has been hooked ever since. His favorite theatre credits include: Ariel in the *Tempest* (Columbia Stages), Bob in *American Buffalo* (Kenny Leon’s True Colors Theatre), and his time as a company member with the American Mime Theatre. TV & film credits include: *Bolden!*, USA’s *Necessary Roughness*, CBS’s *BULL*, and Hulu’s *Wu-Tang: An American Saga*. He would like to thank Steffani Jemison for her diligence, collaborative spirit, and her trust in his work.

**Philip S.S. Howard** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, Faculty of Education at McGill University. His research interests are in the social formations, pedagogical processes, and epistemological frames that mediate the ways we come to know ourselves, create community, and exercise agency for social and racial justice.

**Ashley Raghbir** is the Winter 2020 Curatorial Intern at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery. She is an MA student in the Department of Art History at Concordia University in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. Ashley’s research interests are Afrofuturism in contemporary art, public programming as research and pedagogy, and critical curating based in social justice and activism.