

GREENE NAFTALI

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Steffani Jemison
Broken Fall

November 4 – December 4, 2021
Ground Floor

Steffani Jemison forges new links between Conceptual and Black vernacular traditions, applying an elegant spareness of execution to culturally situated critique. Her debut solo presentation at Greene Naftali is a focused selection of works from 2008-19, including rarely exhibited early videos and a pair of prints culled from a range of sources. Anchored in deep research and the untapped contents of the archive, the works on view attend to the seam between historical documents and the embodied stakes of lived experience.

Perhaps best known for her lush video portrayals of highly skilled performers, Jemison has spent her career mining questions of language and its evasion, often relying on gesture and physical exploits as agents of wordless communication. In *Escaped Lunatic*, identically dressed male figures dart across the screen, sprinting and leaping as though on the run from some unseen pursuer. Jemison's 2011 video borrows its chase sequence and kinetic pacing from tropes of silent cinema, recast with parkour practitioners and set against a low-slung urban landscape. Here a format lifted from early 20th century film plays host to a sequence of movements by turns ominous and freeing—and newly fraught with present-day intimations of what it means to flee. Themes of repetition, improvisation and fugitivity also propel *In Succession* (2019), in which four men climb and balance atop one another in tenuous structures of mutual support. The video is the first in a planned trilogy of works loosely inspired by real events, in which the acrobat has served, as Jemison notes, "as a figure of physical and architectural transgression." The split-screen footage is her riff on a *New York Times* report from 1931, describing a group of Black men who happened upon a burning house and saved its white female occupant, forming a human pyramid to reach and rescue her. The tightly choreographed formations of hoisted bodyweight require extreme stamina, trust, and interdependency—and acceptance of risk as foundational to any formation of solidarity.

The precarity of *In Succession's* acrobatics is further distilled in *Broken Fall (Organic)* (2008), in which Jemison adopts and refashions the premise of Bas Jan Ader's work of the same name. As in the 1970s-era video, a young man clings to a tree branch for a long minute before ultimately falling out of the frame. Jemison's remake honors the original's investment in what she calls "the tension between labor, play, and the laws of physics," but in her hands that material takes up "the complex demands of the performance of masculinity for Black men." A final media work—*The Meaning of Various Photographs to Tyrand Needham* (2009-10)—is premised on spoken language but leaves crucial things unsaid, restaging another canonic work of early video art (this time by John Baldessari) with Black protagonists. Jemison's complex (and often archly funny) appropriations peg the racial and affective blind spots of that first generation of Conceptual practice, always attuned to the fact that "one person's neutral vessel is another person's politically freighted, irreducibly marked load."

Marks of another kind—both more and less legible—appear in a set of photographic prints on bronze-colored grounds, channeling the sepia tones of the medium's 19th century origins and its early ties to Black emancipation. The works lift textual and graphic details from the cover of William and Jane Pease's

1963 book *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, which traces the rise and fall of organized settlements of African Americans on the social margins of the antebellum South. Utopia for Jemison refers not to a place but an engine, a tool for imagining that things could be otherwise. Her backward glance tends to fix on charged moments that are somehow angled toward the future, replacing facile notions of “progress” with more nuanced glimmers of possibility.

Steffani Jemison (b. 1981) lives and works in New York. Her work is currently on view in Greater New York at MoMA PS1 through April 18. Recent solo exhibitions include Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati (2021); Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam (2020); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2019); Kai Matsumiya, New York (2019); Lincoln Center, New York (2018); Jeu de Paume, Paris (2017); CAPC Bordeaux (2017); MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts (2017); Nottingham Contemporary (2017); RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island (2015); and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015). A professor of Art & Design at Rutgers University, Jemison’s first novel will be published by Primary Information in 2022.

Her work is in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.