

# Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Summer/Fall 2013



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**albertz benda**

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## Catching Up with the Artists in Residence

Organized by Jamillah James,  
Communications Coordinator

The Studio Museum's 2012–13 artists in residence, Steffani Jemison, Jennifer Packer and Cullen Washington Jr., took time from their busy schedules and preparation for their summer 2013 exhibition, *Things in Themselves*, to have an informal conversation with Communications Coordinator Jamillah James. They spoke about their year on 125th Street in Harlem, what's influencing them and their respective artistic practices.

**Jamillah James:** Before you became artists in residence here at the Studio Museum, what had your relationship to the Museum been?

**Cullen Washington Jr.:** I've been an admirer of the Studio Museum for some time. I first became aware of it in 2005 as a graduate student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. From the first visit, I was engaged with the exhibited work and believed it to be some of the best I had ever seen. The creativity, concept and intelligence behind the work moved me. Immediately, I knew I wanted to be a part of this institution.

**Steffani Jemison:** I had been familiar with the Studio Museum for many years. I came to the Museum often as an undergraduate. In 2011, I was invited to join the Museum for a micro-residency. At the time, I was in the second year of an artist-in-residence program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. I was invited by [former Associate Curator] Naomi Beckwith to be at the Museum for a week. That was a really lovely introduction to the curatorial staff here. Then, last year, I was included in *The Bearden Project*.

**Jennifer Packer:** The first time I came here was for the Lynette Yiadom-Boakye show, *Any Number of Preoccupations* in 2011.

**JJ:** Which other residencies have you participated in, if any? What have the differences been? Were there challenges with working here?

**CW:** I don't know if there have been any challenges but there are differences in this program compared with others I have participated in. I think what stands out in any program is the kind of support that is given. For me, the Studio Museum provides a gateway to the art world, substantial financial allowance and the freedom to make the best work I can possibly make. It's really a holistic approach to support the artist. Even though the residency is for a year, the benefits last well beyond.

**SJ:** I've been fortunate to benefit from a few residencies in New York and elsewhere. This residency at the Studio Museum offers, by far, the most financial support. I like that the Museum respects the different ways we work, whereas some residencies play a more hands-on role in providing feedback or support. All of the current artists in residence were included in *Fore*, so as we were working here in the studio, our work was also on view in a museum in New York. This created an additional set of opportunities. It really shaped my experience of the residency and encouraged an interaction with the curatorial staff that we might not have had otherwise.

**JP:** I love the feeling of independence, that it's hands-off, if I want it that way. In looking at other residencies, I feel like this is a really extraordinary experience—the financial support and studio are great and I feel really thankful for it.

**Opposite:**  
The Studio Museum in Harlem's 2012–13 artists in residence (from left): Cullen Washington Jr., Steffani Jemison and Jennifer Packer  
**Photo:** Paul Mpagi Sepuya





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**JJ:** What are you currently reading? How do these readings relate to your work, if at all?

**JP:** I was reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, until I felt it became problematic. And I'm reading Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Barthes talks about photography, and how its relationship to painting is so strong, particularly the way in which painting has tried to take the place of photography in its attitude and presentation of information. The book feels applicable to a painter's studio, which surprised me for a man talking about photography forty years ago. It's really on point.

**CW:** I am currently reading about the artists of the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements. And I'm looking to get my hands on a copy of [Vasily] Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," a manifesto on the theory of abstraction. What intrigued me about the writings are the ideas of dissolving distinctions between design, painting, craft and sculpture. However, what drew me initially was the use of geometric forms as a visual language. Reading their thoughts affirmed my own ways of thinking about abstraction, my process and the impetus for making my work. The similarity lies in the use of formalist visual communication. For me, pure subjectivity creates infinite objectivity. This is why I have drastically reduced the evidence of representation in my work. The use of lines, squares, circles, and neutral primary colors becomes the basic building blocks that communicate my ideas onto canvas.

**JP:** Who's in this group?

**CW:** There were multiple groups with similar qualities that influenced one another. The Dutch artist Piet Mondrian was a part of the De Stijl movement. Paul Klee, Kandinsky and Josef Albers were affiliated with the Bauhaus and Kazimir Malevich with the Suprematists. There are similarities in all of their work that seeks to show a sense of spiritual or psychological purity.

**JP:** I'm interested in representations of purity in your work—the found object as it relates to the notion of purity.

**CW:** In my current work, I'm not as dependent on the "found object." I found myself not wanting to be at the mercy of my environment to supply me with materials. Instead, I wanted more creative agency over the materials. I construct and deconstruct the painting and reuse the materials that once served as a means of support. For example, laying down tape aids in painting straight lines, but then I use the tape to become line. In a way, this is a more pure sense of objectness; it's almost as if the painting creates itself.

**JP:** When I think about you in the studio, I think about how you are without burden. Considering that purity and how you often speak about the urban space as influential, I feel like they come from two different places. Like maybe the spiritual and natural?

**CW:** That's an interesting point.

There's definitely a paradox in terms of material being the means to express something that's immaterial. I guess I'm forced to operate within that realm, which is a good place to be because I like to tear things up. [Laughs.] If I'm tearing up canvas, I'm having fun, you know what I mean? Urban space definitely plays a role in how the work looks. The dirt and grit of the streets and sidewalks is reflected in the neutral black tones and rugged surfaces of my work. The environment informs the work but a spiritual and intuitive nature directs the assembly of information. This reminds me of some of the conversations that we've had about abstraction and figuration. Would you say that you search for purity in figuration?

**JP:** I don't know if there is any. I don't know what it would be, and I don't know that I actually believe in the idea of purity in [artistic] practice—unless we talk about integrity in the studio.

**CW:** What about you, Steffani? What are the different ways you consider objects or objecthood in your work?

**SJ:** I'm still thinking a little bit about the relationship between purity and integrity, particularly in some of the conceptual practices that influence my work or, as you said, that shape the landscape in which I work. [Conceptual artist] Charles Gaines has written and spoken in really interesting ways about an expected symmetry of labor in the intellectual



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Jennifer Packer's studio  
Photo: Marc Bernier



economy of fine art. When thinking about the effort you put into making a work of art, and the energy required to behold, interpret or approach that work, the idea that those two activities should be parallel or symmetrical is an integral part of conceptual practice. He's identified and challenged this impulse in ways that are really interesting to me.

I read a lot of fiction in addition to nonfiction or theoretical texts. I return to the same books over and over again—one of those is *Painting as Model* by Yve-Alain Bois. A chapter entitled "Painting as Model" has been especially interesting to me recently as I think about the relationships

between what it means for a work to exist as a diagram, or an abstraction, or a model, and the different ways those representations fail.

**JJ:** How has it been working with 125th Street right outside the studios? What are your favorite things about working in Harlem? Has it influenced your work since you've been here?

**JP:** It's great. I love to keep my windows open and watch whatever's going on downstairs. I have binoculars.

**CW:** The specificity of being in an urban environment is pertinent to

my practice. The amount of stimulation, vibration, all the different noises, sounds and sights help inform the work and make it non-static. I moved to Harlem initially out of convenience, but since I've been here, I've come to really like Harlem and New York.

**SJ:** On one hand, I would say that much of what I've done since I've been here is an extension of what I was already thinking and doing. One of the nice things about working in a distinct environment and community is that it provides a brand-new context for thinking about the work you've already been making, and how the works are transformed by new

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Cullen Washington Jr.'s studio

Photo: Marc Bernier



sights and sounds. On the other hand, I also think concretely about the view from the studio and the visibility of the studio from the street—the ways in which we are secluded from 125th Street but at the same time open to it. All of that has worked its way into my studio work.

**JP:** I love Harlem. It's always humming. I came to Harlem for convenience as well, and I didn't really know what to expect. Now I'm really invested in Harlem. [James] Baldwin is one of my favorite writers and his investment in Harlem was so strong. It's nice to experience some of the things he was talking about. I can still

read him and feel his presence here. You know, there's something else about Harlem, too—how eye contact and the level of engagement differ. I like to make eye contact with a lot of people all throughout Manhattan, but in Harlem, it sometimes results in an automatic conversation.

**CW:** I agree!

**JP:** It's like people are always ready to engage you.

**CW:** Yeah, that's true. I like the sounds. You know there are all these different conversations you hear in

passing. The snippets of conversations you hear—it's almost like flipping through channels on the television. You know, like "free cell phone," "I gotta get these new kicks," "would you like a *Final Call* newspaper," "Newports! Newports!" and so forth. I get a chance to be an anonymous observer and slice through the crowd. I don't think other streets have that same buzz—I think it's just 125th.

**SJ:** Yeah, 125th is special.

**CW:** What do you like about it?

**SJ:** I live in Brooklyn now, but have lived in Harlem at different times.



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Steffani Jemison's studio  
Photo: Marc Bernier



I lived a couple of blocks from the Museum from 2002 to 2004. I learned about the diverse ways of being a black person in New York from living in Harlem. Many of the images and ideas that come through in my work come from that. Cullen, you mentioned the sounds coming from 125th Street—the idea that the facade of this building is a permeable membrane is really fascinating. The distinction between inside and outside becomes so tenuous. What happens then is you end up not having control over your own body or experience, or you have your experiences shaped by the people around you or every-

thing you encounter. The sounds are really important.

I think one time we were talking about the street vendors and how intrusive they can be. But there's also something about them that's so specific to this neighborhood and community. You know that if you want shea butter, you can come up here and get it, and you can take your pick of tables. Or if you want the latest "The Cartel" novel [from the series by Ashley and JaQuavis], or faux Calvin Klein essential oils, you can get them here.

**JP:** And it will say Beyoncé on the bottle.

**SJ:** Beyoncé in a bottle. Dolce & Gabbana in a bottle. It's like a bazaar.

**CW:** Yes, definitely.

**SJ:** It's so amazing. It's immersive for all of the senses—sound, sight, smell. I think it's safe to say 125th Street definitely has a unique scent, a combination of . . .

**CW:** Incense.

**SJ:** . . . incense, exactly, and . . .

**CW:** Fried fish. What is the name of that place? The Catchers of Men? The Fishers of Men?