

Ulysses Jenkins' *Without Your Interpretation*

Exhibition Review by Amy Crum

The recent exhibition *Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation*, hosted by the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, offered the first ever retrospective of Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Ulysses Jenkins. Co-curated by Erin Cristovale and Meg Onli with assistance from Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi, the exhibition showcased the nearly 50 years of Jenkins' long-standing intermedial experimentation with painting, video, poetry, dance, and performance. This wide range of material served to tactfully illustrate Jenkins' assumption of the West African griot as a conceptual and theoretical device for historicizing, storytelling, and truth making. Jenkins' use of the griot or his self-described doggerel (doggerel) aesthetic is underscored by his critique of the lack of affirming representations of Black culture within mass media, and the widespread exclusion of artists of color from prestigious arts institutions. The title of the exhibition, borrowed from one of Jenkins' most well-known works *Without Your Interpretation*, unapologetically suggests that Jenkins' work successfully and intentionally operates beyond the limits of mainstream interpretative possibility and legibility.

Jenkins was born in 1946 in Southern California where he spent the majority of his career. As a young man in the late 1960s, he attended Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where he was forced to grapple with rising racial tensions when the KKK burned a cross on his campus after the university had hosted a group of civil rights leaders. This experience galvanized Jenkins' interest in creating work that could openly contend with racist histories and tropes while also reimagining the social possibilities of multicultural cooperation. The exhibition begins with a reflection on this moment of Jenkins' early activism, as captured by a photo of Jenkins and his fellow students blocking the entrance to SU's campus after several students were harmed by a campus guard officer during an earlier protest. The individual to his right holds a sign that reads, "Protest is a part of education.

It means you have observed, evaluated and found a situation that needs changing and art taking steps to bring about that change.”

After graduating in 1969, Jenkins returned to California where he became interested in the collaborative approaches to painting being undertaken by muralists in East Los Angeles. Eventually, Jenkins joined the mural project for the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* spearheaded by Chicana artist Judith F. Baca in the Tujunga river basin, which sought to commemorate the repressed histories of marginalized peoples in California while employing “at-risk” youth as collaborators on the mural. During this period, Jenkins worked on several murals that focused on collaborations with young Black and Brown people in Gardena, Inglewood, Lawndale, and Leimert Park.

Shortly after his tenure as a muralist, Jenkins pursued a graduate degree at Otis Arts College where he was advised by faculty members Charles White, Betye Saar, and Chris Burden in the Intermedia department where he began to experiment with video and film. His early preoccupation with site-specificity as a muralist would inform his early video works, such as in *Remnants of the Watts Festival*. In *Remnants* (begun in 1972 and finished in 1980), Jenkins aimed to capture the spirit and history of the festival as an important venue to celebrate, honor, and commemorate Black culture bearers in South East Los Angeles. For Jenkins this footage countered the warnings issued by local news organizations around the festival which mischaracterized the congregation as potentially dangerous or threatening. This early video work gets at the heart of what drew Jenkins to video in the first place as a type of “anti-medium, anti-institution” because it offered critical insight into the ways in which mass media has been used to misrepresent and silence Black voices in favor of upholding white supremacy.

In 1983, Jenkins began the Othervisions studio to facilitate multicultural collaboration amongst a number of artists of color who had been largely overlooked or excluded by mainstream arts organizations. Functioning as part studio/part band/part video production, Othervisions was amorphous and experimental in nature. Featured prominently projected in the back corner of one of the first galleries, *Without your Interpretation* (1984), produced as an Othervisions outgrowth, shows viewers the details of the art/music/performance hybrid work that came to define Jenkins’ characteristic intermedial style. Lit by the headlights of cars who

attended the event, dancers with faces painted by Patssi Valdez move along the wall in precise movements while the video cuts to a group of musicians playing on the street. Choreographer Rudy Perez's notes are framed on an adjacent wall and advertisements as well as other ephemera appear under vitrines, demonstrating the extent to which Jenkins' mode of working was deeply enmeshed in a broad network of collaboration. Of the same period with a more international sensibility, *Peace and Anwar Sadat* (1985) pays tribute to the assassinated Egyptian leader; it features Jenkins and two other musicians performing against a backdrop of sarcophagi and hieroglyphics which appear to herald Sadat's peace activism on a pharaonic level.

The exhibition is organized according to Jenkins' doggerel (doggerel) aesthetic, with many works displayed in small rhythmic groupings without any visible uniformity. Some videos play in their own dedicated galleries while others appear in tv boxes as objects in and of themselves. As Jenkins was openly critical of traditional arts spaces (so much so that he created his own), the galleries of the exhibition and the catalog stray from the white cube model in favor of deep fuchsia purple and vibrant teal which, in juxtaposition to the occasional white wall, almost creates the sense of being inside an old RGB color television. Walking through the exhibition, you imagine that you are moving through edited splices of Jenkins' career with some clips appearing longer than others.

The catalog created for the exhibition features a few short-format essays written by the curatorial team, a collection of reflections, and a scholarly roundtable. Upon reflecting on the exhibition, Jenkins—who is now a seasoned professor at University of California Irvine—reiterates how it provided an opportunity for him to thank the many people that he has worked with over the years. His sense of collegiality is reflected in the tender memories recounted within the catalog by some of his most prominent colleagues and collaborators, namely: art historian Kellie Jones, fellow artists Maren Hessinger, May Sun, Senga Negudi, Kerry James Marshall, Cauleen Smith, David Hammons, and Ian White. Despite the difficulty of capturing video in print, the catalog reproduces a number of glossy plates including archival photographs and film stills of some of Jenkins' most important works which collectively offer a visual biography of Jenkins' career. In addition

to the analyses provided by the essays, roundtable, and reflections, the catalog also features an extensive chronology detailing Jenkins' long list of exhibitions and collaborations for his almost 50 year career. As the first retrospective of the artist, the exhibition and catalog provide a necessary wealth of information that will undoubtedly serve future scholars interested in Jenkins' work and his contributions to the broader landscape of performance, experimental video, and conceptual art.

Ulysses Jenkins: *Without Your Interpretation* ran from September 17- December 30, 2021 at the ICA Philadelphia and from February 6 - May 15, 2022 at the Hammer Museum.

***Soul Colors* by Michael Chinyamurindi**

Exhibition Review by Amy Crum

With a body of work that spans ink drawing and mixed media collage, the exhibition *Soul Colors* by Michael Chinyamurindi at Space Art+Supply in Topanga, California nimbly maneuvers between a variety of styles in an effort to explore the relational exchange between our inner selves and our outer realities. This process, according to Chinyamurindi, is essential to the role of the artist, who he sees as a type of visual translator that can utilize their own self-expression to speak to broader collective truths. Since the late 1990s, Chinyamurindi has made a name for himself within the film industry appearing in movies like *George of the Jungle* and *Congo*, as well as voice acting for popular video games like *Final Fantasy* and *Tomb Raider*. With over 50 prints made from small format pen and ink drawings, *Soul Colors* is the first showing of Chinyamurindi's work as a visual artist.

Working in a modest format that includes small notebooks, ink pens, and found materials, Chinyamurindi is agile in his process—responding to his environment wherever it may be. Underlying Chinyamurindi's chosen media and process is an acceptance of constant change (as the title of one of his drawings attests), where any given work is perpetually unfinished and

each page promises the possibility of being reworked, repurposed, or re-understood until it has reached near complete inky saturation. When approaching the massive grid of drawings hung at Space, Chinyamurindi's careful line work immediately demands closer looking; the drawings goad the viewer into attempting to discern the legibility of specific figures amongst their undulating backgrounds. With extreme precision and symmetry, he fills his pages with dizzying geometric designs that, with closer observation, reveal a panoply of characters and dream-like environments.

Chinyamurindi came of age in the wake of the violent struggle against the British settler colonial rule of the former Rhodesia by Black African Nationalists until the republic of Zimbabwe was established in 1980. As such, Chinyamurindi's works like *No. 014* with the text "Halt Death/Say Adjeu" feel reminiscent of a number of global anti-war movements from the late 1960s and 70s that he cites as critical influences for his characteristic style. Moreover, Chinyamurindi's penchant for *horror vacui*, particularly in works like *Soul Crossings* or *I've Just Kept Going* recall the colorful fractal compositions of Chicago-based AfriCOBRA artists Jeff Donaldson or Gerard Williams, whose work championed a desire for intercontinental solidarity and collectivity amongst African diasporic communities in the late 70s and 80s.

Beyond a readable association with the aesthetics of 20th-century social and cultural movements, Chinyamurindi's kaleidoscopic arrangements similarly reflect the over 20 years he has lived in Topanga. Famous for becoming an enclave for young artists and counter-cultural thinkers in the 1960s, the canyon has long drawn people in pursuit of deeper inner awareness—also easily reflected in Chinyamurindi's colorful psychedelic designs. With the repeated use of mandalas and asanas, his drawings playfully signal Topanga's now famous status as a retreat for wellness seekers in Los Angeles. In works like *No. 31*, Chinyamurindi's Black yogis embody powerful flexibility as vibrating waves of color emanate from their pose—they offer a poignant visual alternative to mainstream representations of yoga in the West that so often favor white women. Beyond the myriad of references one might find in the complex patterns that characterize Chinyamurindi's drawings, his use of color and line represent his methodical (yet very nonlinear) process of translation from inner expression to external understanding.

While some of the historical influences found in Chinyamurindi's linework speak to the artist's reflection on his past, his interest in collage grounds the work firmly in the present. As the news of our age becomes increasingly sensationalized, Chinyamurindi's carefully extracted newspaper clippings question the reality to which these headlines correspond. In works like *What is it*, where "truth" appears over twenty times interspersed with phrases like "slippery," "constitutional right," "gender equality," or "triple-vetted sources," the crazed arrangement of words speaks to our bombardment with truth claims by the media whilst openly grappling with the inherent subjectivity of truth. The *Prison Commercial Complex* centers around a figure whose face has been replaced with a barred cell gate with the text "the man inside" hovering above him. By juxtaposing this man behind bars with magazine clippings of diamond encrusted chain link bracelets, Chinyamurindi points to the aestheticization of chains by elite society and, in turn, probes the capitalist underpinnings of the American prison system. Although many of these collaged pieces appear to address more somber themes, Chinyamurindi maintains a sense of play in his work with pieces like *Laughing Matters* or *Wisdom's Cool*, reminding viewers that the process of creation can be joyful as well as critical.

The title of the exhibition, *Soul Colors*, offers poignant insight into this impressive and wide-ranging collection of works. Chinyamurindi views his life experiences as colors on his individual artistic palette from which to draw upon and paint with. His unique visual language offers up an invitation for others to be curious, to be creative, to be experimental, and to speak with their own *soul colors*.

Soul Colors was on view at Space Art + Supply from July 17, 2022 to August 15, 2022.