

## Isaac Julien: "12 Artists On: The Financial Crisis"

By Zoë Lescaze

July 21, 2020

*The Covid-19 virus has sent the global economy spinning into a state of profound disturbance, casting the livelihoods of individuals and small businesses into doubt and leaving entire industries devastated. The financial impact of the pandemic on local communities, as cities and states slash budgets, and on the world at large will continue to play out in the months and years to come. For the fourth installment of our series T Agitprop, we asked 12 contemporary artists, including Torkwase Dyson, Tomashi Jackson, Isaac Julien and Agnieszka Kurant, to contribute works, most of them new and created exclusively for T, in response to this global emergency. Here are their pieces and statements.*



Jennifer Bolande's "Blue Collapse/Yellow Held Aloft" (2020).

Photo: Portrait courtesy of the artist and Catherine Opie. Artwork courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, N.Y.

## Jennifer Bolande

*Born in Cleveland in 1957.*

I often take images from the media, altering and setting them into new relationships. In the blue image, a giant structure has collapsed — soldiers in blue camouflage stand by. In the yellow image, a moment of levity — something arises and takes shape, supported by unseen hands. I don't recall the recent New York Times stories that were attached to these two pictures, but I did keep the names of the press photographers, who I would like to acknowledge: Hassan Ammar of The

# JESSICA SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Associated Press took the blue image and Rebecca Conway took the yellow image for The New York Times.

For me, these pictures, changed and brought together, hold something of the precarious dynamics and ethos of the current moment. We are besieged every day with images of collapse – of the economy, of the environment, of alliances, of physical, social and intellectual infrastructures and of democracy, to name but a few – and a blue dystopian future seems almost inevitable. What can be done in the face of such runaway greed and destruction? How do I travel between these two images? Will I be mesmerized by the spectacle of the blue collapse, or can I manage instead to keep things aloft and alive?



Torkwase Dyson's "Proximities, Whispers of Love Are Built in the Water-Deep (Water Futures and Architecture Series)" (2020).

Photo: Portrait by Gabe Souza © Torkwase Dyson. Artwork © Torkwase Dyson

## Torkwase Dyson

*Born in Chicago in 1973.*

*"Racial capitalism is capitalism." – Cedric J. Robinson*

*"Safety safeguarded by violence is not really safety." – Angela Davis*

*"Being black is belonging to a state organized according to its ignorance of your perspective – a state that does not, that cannot, know your mind." – Bryan Wagner*

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

## **One: Legal Abstraction; Super Capitalism and Madness.**

Systems of capitalism have historically deployed a type of abstraction that leaves humanity illegible, with Black and brown bodies in particular illegible through lenses of white supremacy. The state constructed a system of illegibility that Bryan Wagner refers to as "legal abstraction." Legal abstraction was concretized by falsely representing Black being through newspapers, language, laws, paintings, space, slave codes and naming. This system was made operational through weaponized policing. As a painter, conceptualizing capitalism starts by thinking through abstraction as a comprehensive condition related to industrialization, slavery, globalization, patriarchy, space, but also liberation. Racial capitalism is capitalism, and in the face of legal abstraction providing the infrastructure to capital madness, I offer more Black imagination. I offer more acts of autonomy, self-defense, poetics, activism, creativity and more abstractions from the deep Black mindful architecture of Black being.

## **Two: Illegal Abstraction: Methods in Liberations and Abolition**

That brings me to the question: As a painter, what does it mean to produce an illegal abstraction as dissent? To recognize that the illegal measures of action in a police state are actually the actions of moral grace against super capitalism. I offer illegal abstraction as a tool for the immeasurable presence of Black perception. A language that regards our methods of liberation as unpredictable, genius, improvisational, structural, hauntological, smooth and acute. I am certain that the beauty in Black indeterminacy, from sound to science, from architecture to migration, will continue to guide us toward liberation. I'm interested in forms that are deeply spatial, generous and where the spectral presence defies the narrow proposition of life and death by the hands of industrialized white supremacy. A second question for my practice: If Blackness is already an architectonic developed out of liquidity (ocean/the middle passage), how can the work embody this phenomenon and offer sensation (sensoria) at the register of liberation?

## **Three: I Am Painting What I Am Doing and Doing What I Am Painting.**

Legal abstraction is reinforced by the domination of a police state protecting systems of super capitalism. An abstraction of dissent needs to be named and practiced as a contribution to the traditions of Black radical imagination. I argue these issues through painting because of its ability to awaken truth between the mind and the brain. It's time for a new relationship with abstraction, an illegal abstraction developed out of the condition of new world-building toward liberation and revolution. An illegal abstraction where Black perception, ideas of scale, space, and the immeasurable are embedded in art experience. Art projects that are new conceptualizations of these histories and assert these by their presence. Objects that are not autonomous or referential, but phenomenal. I'd like to address abstraction comprehensively in terms that are responsive to the breath/breadth of this unmeasurable presence of Blackness. We are always.

## **Closing: Now**

In this moment of environmental precarity we will need to be both liquid and mountains, bird and lava. And it is the density of Black grace that will always be the thing that keeps us in our own humanity. Thinking through the histories of Black liberation, these are the victories that fortify my being in the objects I make. The paintings are true because the history of Black triumph is true. These are histories of illegal abstraction.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Cao Fei's "New Planet Old Rules" (2020).

Photo: Portrait by Myrzik and Jarisch. Artwork courtesy of the artist

## Cao Fei

*Born in Guangzhou, China, in 1978.*

Considered a classic "black swan" event, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has not only resulted in a sudden global recession but indirectly triggered civil unrest around the world. Economists in favor of the free market insist that depressions lead to greater recovery in the future, whereas Marxist intellectuals believe that recurrent economic depressions reflect humanity's inevitable doom under capitalism. Regardless of these views, we do seem to be locked in an endless struggle, and this struggle will follow us – even to the other planets we will conquer one day.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Daria Irincheeva's "Unforeseen Dimension" (2020).

Photo: Portrait by Ruy Sánchez Blanco. Artwork courtesy of the artist

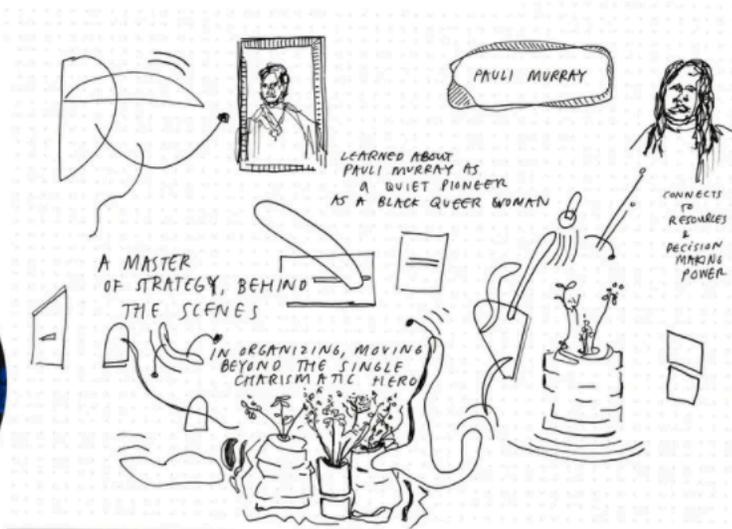
## Daria Irincheeva

*Born in Leningrad, U.S.S.R., in 1987.*

The challenges we face as a result of the current economic crisis are underlined by a need to constantly monitor and update our personal finances, to mitigate our fears and anxieties over future uncertainty and to adjust our aspirations amid the violent fluctuation of internal emotions and myriad external metrics. Balancing these factors requires a critical, existential consideration of our place as individuals within the popular mass of the national body. We must attempt to find unity in the midst of that entity, to see beyond the material and to strive for a post-capitalist reality – which the human soul has long cried out for. In the absence of a government able to manage the multifaceted crisis before us, we are all compelled to create and become our own self-administering nucleus, to metabolize and distill meaning, to rid ourselves of life's unneeded extras, to rethink our values and listen to the deepest thoughts of our hearts.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Clockwise from top left: Tomashi Jackson's "Ruth Batson Holding a Child With a Doll, 1975" (2020); Jackson's "Pauli's Hands at the Beach, 1937" (2020); Martha Schnee's "Moving Beyond the Single Charismatic Hero — Nia K. Evans on Pauli Murray, 4/21/20" (2020).

Photo: Portrait by Celeste Sloman. Images courtesy of Tomashi Jackson, Martha Schnee and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Artwork courtesy of the artist and Jack Tilton Gallery

## Tomashi Jackson

*Born in Houston in 1980.*

Funded by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, "Brown II" was meant to be a solo exhibition that opened in April with three public teach-in conversations with attorneys, advocates, historians and specialists in human rights, ethics and contemporary tech policy. I've worked with three research assistants — Kéla Jackson, K. Anthony Jones and Martha Schnee — who sourced archival images, documents and poetry for me to use in new works on paper with photo lithography and painting, and with Rachel Vogel, our copy editor. After meeting in person regularly since late January, we held our first video conference call in mid-March as the

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

campus was being evacuated. We chose to continue the work by asking: How can the project be meaningful and of service at this time? We designed a research methodology ecosystem grounded in our conversations with people we'd hoped to host at the teach-ins, producing material for transcription, videos and stills, a social-media plan, interview documents of questions and images and a curricular outline to be made accessible through the exhibition publication and digital platforms well before the rescheduled 2021 opening.

We've decentered images of white violence against the desegregation mandate and instead highlighted imagery from the archives, both held at Radcliffe, of two Black women strategists for human rights, Pauli Murray and Ruth Batson. Every conversation informed the question structure for the following one, and after months of work, the manuscript feels as if we were all in the room together. Communities that endure systemic economic disruption, income disparity and targeted state violence are now experiencing the most damning effects of Covid-19-related school closures and financial fallout. So the history of schools shuttered by segregationists in defiance of the Brown legislation and the ideal of education as the cornerstone of citizenship have become even more important for us to re-enter now. I'm interested in the strategists' visions of humanism that exist counter to the deprivation policies historically at the heart of economic disaster. It's become something amazing — much more than we could have imagined.



Jamian Juliano-Villani's "Venetian Dolphins" (2020).

Photo: Portrait by Isabel Asha Penzlien. Artwork courtesy of the artist and JTT Gallery, N.Y.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

## Jamian Juliano-Villani

*Born in Newark in 1987.*

The photos of dolphins swimming in the canals of Venice while humans were forced into quarantine went viral, even though it was fake news. We all wanted to believe it was real, and during an emotional and economic crisis, it seemed pretty sweet. Now, as many people are losing their jobs, influencers have turned to the website OnlyFans for income, selling pornographic content that is generating just as much serotonin as nature itself.



Isaac Julien's "Silver Atlantic Coaty" (2020).  
Photo: Portrait by Thierry Bal. Artwork courtesy of the artist

## Isaac Julien

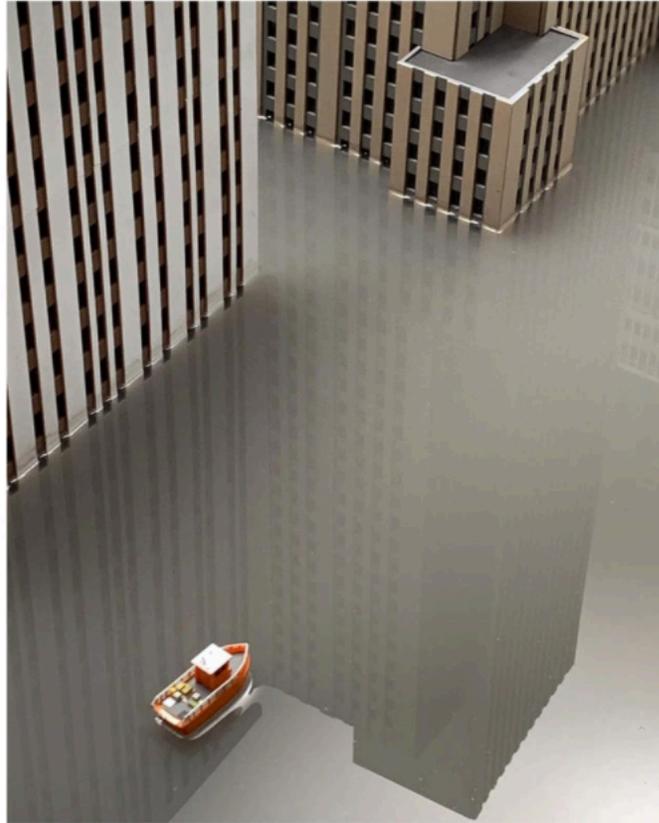
*Born in London in 1960.*

It's been a critical time to be here in the States, where I've been socially isolating since the start of the lockdown measures. The urgency of tackling racial injustice — a central theme in my work over the past four decades — has been reignited and reaffirmed. As I revisit and rework images from my most recent film project, "Lina Bo Bardi — A Marvellous Entanglement" (2019), into a new series of collage works, the historical scenario we're currently witnessing has me reconsidering her role as a Latin American architect and social activist with renewed admiration. I'm also recalling my time filming in Brazil and reflecting on what that country is currently going through. The space pictured in the work above is an experimental social-housing complex and restaurant designed by Bo Bardi between 1986 and 1990 in an attempt to revitalize and unify the local cultural community. Called the Coaty, it's located in the city of Salvador (the capital of the northeastern state of Bahia), where half of the local population are descendants of African slaves, brought to Brazil to

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

work on plantations and in gold and diamond mines. The complex never fully opened and quickly fell into ruin. It's now guarded by military police and public access is forbidden. It took me three years to gain permission, with the help of the Goethe-Institut, to film there. I was immediately struck by the signature cutout motif of the building's windows and decided to use the shape as a way to frame this private, yet suddenly universal, moment of contemplation.



A production still from Josh Kline's "Adaptation" (2019-20).

Photo: Portrait by Anspeniel De Guzman Aquino/Bellas Artes, Philippines. Artwork courtesy of the artist, 47 Canal, N.Y. and Modern Art, London. Photo by Josh Kline

## Josh Kline

*Born in Philadelphia in 1979.*

In 2019, I started working on a film set in a flooded Manhattan, ruined and silenced by catastrophic sea-level rise. In the short film, a crew of recovery workers — essential workers — surfaces from a dive in the drowned, deserted city and watches the sunset on the water. Working with scale models, 16-millimeter film, old-school special effects and a talented crew and cast, I wanted to create an image of working people in the ruins of the 20th century's financial capital. Survivors.

When I wrapped shooting in December, I didn't know that four months later the life we knew and lived — "normalcy" — would drain out of New York, leaving behind silent streets punctuated by ambulance sirens and endless sadness. It's easy to casually speculate about future disaster when that future is decades away. It's another thing to confront the reality in real time. The global

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



bubble in the real-estate market or a revolution. Unlike real epidemics, these outbreaks are based on imaginary threats, gossip and conspiracies in individual communities or entire cities or across nations. Many are fueled by fear and uncertainty; others are driven by hope and expectation and some by more obscure causes. Over the course of human civilization, these social contagions — including widespread laughter epidemics, asteroid panics, collective hallucinations, ghost scares, cargo cults, toxicity fears, tulip manias and waves of U.F.O. sightings — have destabilized the health of millions of individuals, societies and, in some cases, the global economy, despite the scientifically confirmed absence of real pathogens, objects or phenomena causing them.



Still from Jen Liu's "Pink Slime Caesar Shift: Gold Loop" (2020).

Photo: Portrait by Adam Murphy. Artwork courtesy of the artist and Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam.

## Jen Liu

*Born in Smithtown, N.Y., in 1976.*

The human labor enabling your material existence has disappeared. Consider the objects surrounding you, keeping you company, feeding you, connecting you to the world. Each one arrives as a mass quantity of invisible human labor: work that is under-compensated, precarious and enforced by immigration and economic policies that create pockets of brutal exclusion. Your belongings do not spark joy. Your belongings precipitate human suffering. Each object is a disaster — human and ecological. No country is exempt from this type of consumption: Global supply chains ensure this.

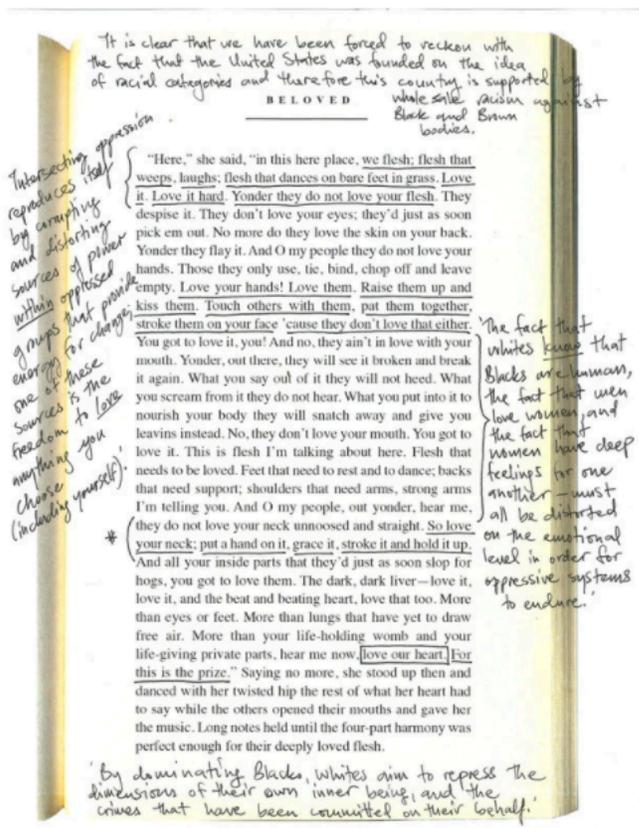
Extracting constituent materials denudes landscapes, leaving generations' worth of toxic sludge. Assembly is often done by workers lacking full citizenship, terrorized into compliance. Logistics entail more resource extraction, exhaust chokes the air and pollution infects waterways, all while strangling essential workers and invisible laborers, disguising them as automated data and faceless delivery systems. And the afterlife: Eons of rot exported to geographically unfortunate soils become a global seepage. Finance is the key abstraction that masks body crunching as number crunching.

This image is from "Gold Loop," a forthcoming video based on the biopolitics of extracting and

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

recycling gold from end-of-life electronics (or "e-waste") in China. In 2018, I worked with the molecular biologist Sümeyye Yar to genetically modify beef cells using gold microparticles so that their DNA might become communication channels for suppressed labor activism. This piece began when I discovered that the lab gold we used originates in e-waste — part of a circular economic model that wraps virtue around further exploitation. It's disaster come full circle: an unending gold loop.



Meleko Mokgosi's "Love Your Flesh" (2020).  
 Photo: Portrait and artwork courtesy of the artist

## Meleko Mokgosi

Born in Francistown, Botswana, in 1981.

If the institutions of America have failed its people, then it is a failed state. It is generally understood that the nation-state sees itself as the sole authority for crafting and enforcing laws within a sharply defined and consolidated territory. Nations should guarantee rights and protections to those housed within its territory. The disproportionately high toll of Covid-19 on Black people and other people of color as well as the surfacing of graphic details regarding police violence against Black and brown bodies have made it starkly clear that this nation-state is not up to the task.

And yet these failures have not fully registered in the institutions of fine arts. Trading in an unregulated market, the art world depends on philanthropy, and deep pockets, to purchase art

**JESSICA  
 SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
 jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

objects (tax incentives for the wealthy), the exclusivity of higher education and a particular Eurocentric history that relies on continental philosophy for views on everything from aesthetics to taste, judgment and all notions of subjectivity. No doubt, the economic effects of the lockdown have produced a lot of anxiety in the field. But what the pandemic made me aware of, as a Marxist and aspiring socialist, is that there is too much at stake to let capitalism fall. Socialists or not, many people found themselves rooting for capitalism to bounce back, for the stock market to recover, for philanthropy and patrons to keep supporting the arts. We are still rooting for the very (American) capitalist system that has many ties to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and for the capitalist state that reproduces systemic inequities and institutionalized violence. But perhaps this will soon change. The calls for justice and protests against police brutality and state-sanctioned murder of Black and brown people might convince enough people to let go of their privilege, their aspiration to live in the right neighborhood or school district, their place in the best liberal arts colleges and their inherited or generational wealth – in short, the benefits of white supremacy. Perhaps these calls will convince enough people to realize that America does not simply have a race problem, America is a race problem.



Guy Woueté's "Hot & Cool Money" (2020).

Photo: Portrait and artwork courtesy of the artist © Guy Woueté 2020.

## Guy Woueté

*Born in Douala, Cameroon, in 1980.*

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Another economy is possible. In this time of global precariousness — amid a health crisis and the growing awareness of systemic racism and discrimination — is it realistic to imagine a sunny blue sky with sparkling yellow stars in the arena of hot money?

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
[jessicasilvermangallery.com](http://jessicasilvermangallery.com) +1 415 255 9508