



LaJuné McMillian
THE PORTAL'S KEEPER—ORIGINS

Combining new digital media and performance, LaJuné McMillian meditates on Black movement as a vehicle for liberation. Working especially with motion-capture software, they transform Black dancers, performers, and the artist themselves into beautiful avatars whose intense colors and dynamic bodies move within fantastic environments in response to poems, incantations, and an array of musical and extra-musical sounds.

Movement and the spoken word drive the story of the exhibition's central work, the multi-channel projection *Spirit and Child*. This is an exchange between avatars—animated figures representing the artist at various stages of life. McMillian used motion-capture and 3D-modeling software to generate the characters, and a 3D graphics program called Unreal Engine to create the pulsing environments they occupy. The installation is part of a larger body of work that includes performances, public projections, and extended reality installations.

Addressing themes of “embodiment, inner child healing, spirituality, and liberation,”¹ *Spirit and Child* is a prayer of pain and recovery that explores the limits of the body and the expansiveness of the soul. The avatars' voices are the artist's own—a confused and distraught child who cannot grasp and may not be able to justify living in the body and world they were born into, and the grown self who has survived to offer perspective, comfort, and wisdom (cover):

“A Child’s Prayer”²

I just want to know where I’m going when I disappear.

I want to know where my voice travels when it is silenced.

I want to dive into the space my mind occupies when it dissociates.

I want to understand how my body is still here. How it manages to survive while everything else is forced elsewhere.

The avatars meditate on traumatic memories and self-hatred, subjects that are deeply personal for the artist but also reflect the feelings of people who have been led to believe that they have no value save, perhaps, for the capacity of their bodies to work for or entertain others. Through this poignant exchange, McMillian hopes to help Black children who feel lost in the world to find their way home (fig. 1):

This is a letter to the children.

Who woke up so far away from home they lost sense of self

And made room for the ills of a network of abusive systems to overcome their body
with such deep sadness they almost gave up.



Figure 1

You have always been on the search for home
You are home. Home lives inside of you. Breathes inside of you. Is around you always.
In your smile. Through the vibrations of your laughter. May you reestablish your
connection to home. Your lineage. Your magic.

The installation is psychedelic and immersive. Three walls are filled with projections of dizzying arrays of smoke and clouds, fractals, and other abstract patterns that flow together in an exuberant dreamscape where the laws of nature and physics seem suspended. Throughout these otherworldly atmospheres, supple figures move their arms and bodies in graceful gestures with a freedom of movement that gives the impression that everything is possible.

At the center of the three-channel projection is a physical arch forming the exhibition's titular portal (fig. 2). Projections within this doorway are denser and more amorphous than the surrounding patterns, revealing a realm that is intensely mystical and psychologically fraught. In it, an abstracted figure dissolves, reappears, and for long intervals runs toward us, gasping and grunting for breath as if being chased from the dream space. Terror and beauty are joined. At various moments, the figure disappears and the cinematic narrative gives way to soaring abstract inventions unfolding with the accompaniment of a sublimely paced orchestration of sounds.

Because the figures are all avatars of the artist, one may ask who the portal's keeper really is. Is it the runner? Is it the graceful silver figure floating through the immersive atmosphere surrounding the portal? For the artist, the answer is that the keeper is themselves—flesh and blood, heart and soul, embodied pain and enduring life. This realization completes a circle in which the digital and physical ultimately do not feel separate:

“Spirit’s Response”

May this body protect you.

Keep you warm. Hold you.

Under the thick wraps of dark skin.

Allow me to bury you in the love of your fullest self.

May you be loved fully in this body

Cared for in this body

Seen in this body.

May you know this body. Completely

To know this body is to know your divinity.

Is to know me.

in my fullest

realest.

Rawest self.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Images generated by emerging technologies often have a dreamlike quality—they appear to be solidly of the world and yet are wholly synthetic electronic compositions. Although it is made primarily of physical materials, McMillian’s sculptural self-portrait in an adjacent gallery, *Mother and Child*, is even more dreamlike. At center is a black cast of the artist’s own face surrounded by artificial yak hair, or *yaki*, a material that is deeply meaningful to McMillian. They connect it to the spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism, in which a yak’s body parts are believed to have been transformed into the sun, moon, stars, rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains. Yaki is also used in hair extensions and wigs worn by many Black women, so it has an additional layer of cultural significance for McMillian.

Projected onto the hair is a video of the artist’s mother styling their hair as a child. This calls forth a traumatic memory: “Growing up, I associated my relationship with my hair to pain and sacrifice. Sitting long hours in uncomfortable positions, I was told and reminded that beauty was pain, and that my ability to sit in stillness even when suffering would be rewarded. . . . I often wonder how we teach young Black children about pain. How we associate pain with obedience.”³ Here, the traumatic memory is not just of physical pain but of psychological suffering at the hands of a protective authority figure. Such memories are hard to outgrow without the kind of solace and wisdom offered in *Spirit and Child*.

The exhibition also includes a series of self-portraits shown as both as prints and holographs—deep digital frames that appear to contain three-dimensional figures and unfolding patterns. These figures morph in psychedelic sequences of rich colors and glowing forms to suggest that identity is formed and re-formed through constant motion (fig. 3).

McMillian's fascination with the kinetic body has origins in their childhood, when they learned the expressive potential of figure skating. In 2017 and 2018, they took this interest into the public realm as the director of Figure Skating in Harlem, combining skating lessons for girls of color with a STEAM curriculum that emphasized technology. In 2018, McMillian started the Black Movement Library, an online database in which Black performers are recorded live and through motion capture technology, preserving and celebrating bodily motion itself as an important yet ephemeral aspect of Black culture "transcending space, time, and oppressive social structures . . . while connecting us with our ancestors and the future."⁴

The imagery contained in this archive centers on movement as both a unique personal attribute and a marker of racial identity. This duality animates all of McMillian's work. Whether in *Spirit and Child*, holographic self-portraits, or motion-capture portraits of other performers, the body—sinuous and vital, uninhibited and unencumbered—moves from a place of pain into one of new possibility. As they extend the dream of liberated Black bodies, McMillian's marvelous works explode the legacy of centuries in which these bodies were bound, constrained, abused, and exploited.

Mark Scala
Chief Curator

NOTES

1. LaJuné McMillian, email message to author, May 31, 2024
2. All poems are excerpts from "A Child's Prayer" and "The Spirit's Response," McMillian email to author.
3. McMillian email to author.
4. McMillian email to author. See <https://www.blackmovementlibrary.org/>.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover: LaJuné McMillian. Still from *Spirit and Child* (detail), 2024. Video; dimensions variable. Courtesy of LaJuné McMillian and bitforms gallery

Fig. 1: LaJuné McMillian performing *Spirit and Child* at Onassis ONX Studio, June 5, 2024. Courtesy of LaJuné McMillian, bitforms gallery, and Onassis ONX Studio. Photo: Zachary Schulman

Fig. 2: Installation view of *The Portal's Keeper* at Onassis ONX Studio, 2024. Courtesy of LaJuné McMillian, bitforms gallery, and Onassis ONX Studio. Photo: Zachary Schulman

Fig. 3: LaJuné McMillian. *Self Portrait 3 (static)* (detail), 2022. Dye-sublimation on aluminum; 40 x 22 1/2 in. Courtesy of LaJuné McMillian and bitforms gallery. Photo: Emile Askey

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