

Art | In Conversation

Jennie C. Jones with Ann C. Collins

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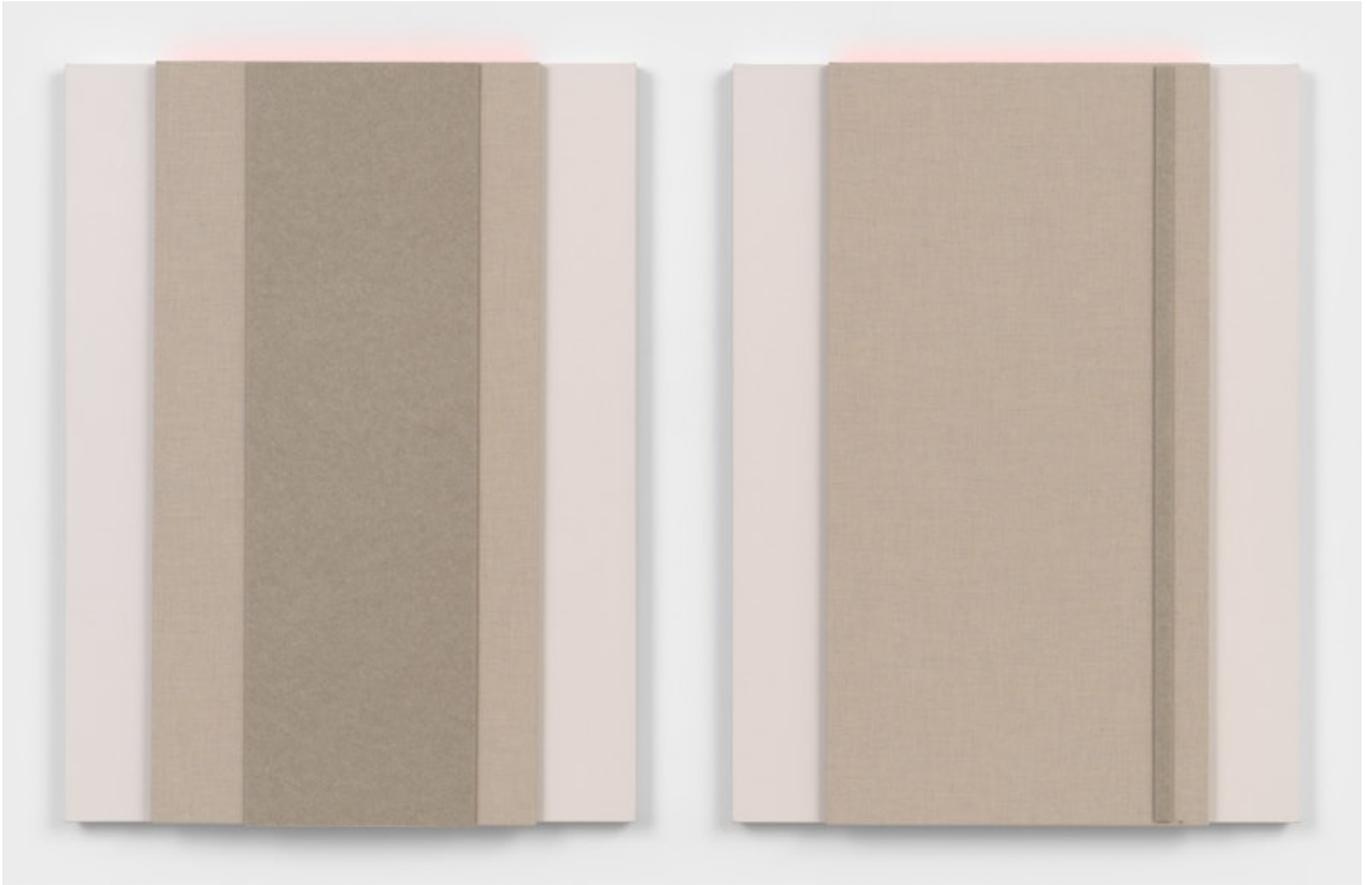
Portrait of Jennie C. Jones. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Jennie C. Jones: Dynamics
February 4 – May 2, 2022

Perception comes gradually, when the mind is quieted enough for awareness to seep in, and even then, it is never fixed. Mingling visual and aural work, lineage and legacy, *Jennie C. Jones: Dynamics* infuses the Guggenheim Museum with minimalist abstractions and tonal callings. The first Black woman to have a solo exhibition in Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic rotunda, Jones throws open long-held narratives of art history, expanding the tracings of inspiration and influence to include both Black and female histories. Mining a vein of work in which paintings stand as sculptures, music is rendered in graphic statements, and color becomes a source of light, Jones's work throws us off balance, requires us to shift and reposition ourselves in response to her slow reveals. As her gentle harmonics roll down from the oculus, the space itself seems to sway and expand.

I spoke with the artist from her home in Hudson, NY, where she was taking a breath just after the exhibition's opening. Jones holds a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and MFA from Rutgers University, and we spoke about how her early days as an art student shaped the path she continues to navigate in her work. Along the way, we chatted about her influences in art and music, moments of woodshedding, and the importance of getting lost.



Jennie C. Jones, *Neutral [clef] Structure 1st & 2nd*, 2021. Acoustic panel and acrylic on canvas, diptych, 48 × 36 × 3.5 inches each. © Jennie C. Jones, courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and PATRON Gallery, Chicago.

Ann C. Collins (Rail): It was really exciting to stand in the middle of the Guggenheim and to be surrounded by your work. The work and the way it fills the space is amazing.

Jennie C. Jones: Thank you! It's meant so much to hear how people are responding to it, especially because making the work was such an insular process. Even regardless of COVID, I'm very private and insular. It's also been strangely challenging to have to talk about myself so much.

Rail: You're in Hudson right now—are you living there full-time?

Jones: Yes, I moved from Brooklyn to Hudson. I was teaching at Bard for a couple of summers and so I had an early peek at the Hudson Valley before it became the next Brooklyn. I enjoy being in this kooky, weirdo, Upstate small town, although now it's getting hip. So now, when I'm in town, chances are I'll hear my name and see someone from college. But I was feeling like it was time for a move and knew that I would never be able to afford any sustainable anything in New York. So now I'm right in the town. I can walk to the train. One of my neighbor's sons rehabbed a building that has studio space, so I got really lucky.

Rail: You grew up in the Midwest. How do you think that shaped you?

Jones: I grew up in a little hamlet outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. I hate to make the reference, but it's a total *Pretty in Pink* vibe, where my parents moved us over the railroad tracks for the better school district. So, from the start, I was the weirdo, othered, poor kid. Sometimes I was the only Black kid in the classroom. But it was an amazing school system. And I really wouldn't be anywhere near where I am in my life without that early education. In high school I had a great art teacher who was very encouraging. He called my mom and begged her to let me into the AP art classes. So when I got to college at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), I already had some studio credits under my belt.

Rail: What was it like to leave a small town and to go to Chicago for art school?

Jones: One thing about art school is you're with the weirdos from every school. You're the only weirdo in your high school and then you show up at art school and everyone has the same backstory of being the weirdo. So there was definitely a comfort in going from Ohio to the Art Institute, because I found a lot of kindred spirits very young. It was an intense time, 1987 to 1991. There was a lot of crazy politics. I think the Art Institute was, honestly, the most formative time for me. Because it's a museum school, there was no student housing, so I was looking for apartments, learning to navigate a big city. Multiculturalism was an ism. Lucy Lippard's book, *Mixed Blessings*, appeared and blew our minds away. Everyone was taking their first Women's Studies class, their first Black Studies class in tandem with art history. I think to this day my experience at SAIC shapes the ways I navigate my relationship to art history, and where I am in that history.

I don't think there's enough art history being taught today, not as much as when I was in school, and it breaks my heart. Someone who's in grad school should know who Robert Rauschenberg is. Women painters working with pigments need to know who Helen Frankenthaler is. This is basic canon. I emphasize the importance of knowing art history when I speak to students today, the idea that they have to learn it to push against it.

Rail: Do you think there is a generational attitude that history is no longer relevant? Or do you think institutions err in keeping students happy above requiring coursework they may view as dry?

Jones: I think it's a combination of both. I think art school is a bit of an industry now. There's not enough rigor. I feel like an old person saying this, but I'm sorry, you should have to write a paper to get your Masters. You should have to write an artist's statement. What are you going to do when you graduate and you have to apply for grants, and you have to know how to talk about your work and contextualize it in the contemporary universe?



Jennie C. Jones, *Red Tone Burst #2*, 2021. Architectural felt panel and acrylic on canvas, 30.5 × 30 × 2.5 inches. © Jennie C. Jones, courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and PATRON Gallery, Chicago.

Rail: I think the world has changed so much since you and I were in college that the experience of living in the physical world is absent for this generation in many ways, not just in an art school. There's an instantaneousness to the way we exist now; everything can be immediately accessed on the computer.

Jones: I was just talking to someone about the importance of getting lost. I did a residency in Paris in my early thirties, and it was exhilarating, but it was terrifying. There was no GPS. I was in a foreign country, figuring it out, relying on asking someone in the street for directions with broken French, and then discovering things because I got lost. But getting lost can also be going to a bookshop to buy a certain book and ending up buying the one that's next to it. Because of happenstance.

Rail: Unexpected connections and surprises. That kind of spontaneity has waned.

Jones: And record stores! I remember going to Tower Records on Broadway and it was like a living history book. Because you could go up to someone with a nametag and tell them what you were looking for, or you could ask, who played the drums on that recording? Then they would take you to another section of the store and show you ten different things, and you would find out that the guy helping you saw the musicians you were asking about play live in 1975, and they would tell you crazy stories about those days on the Lower East Side. So, you would leave with

your CD or your record, but also with all this other information you learned. I think there's a poetic nuance that an algorithm will never match.

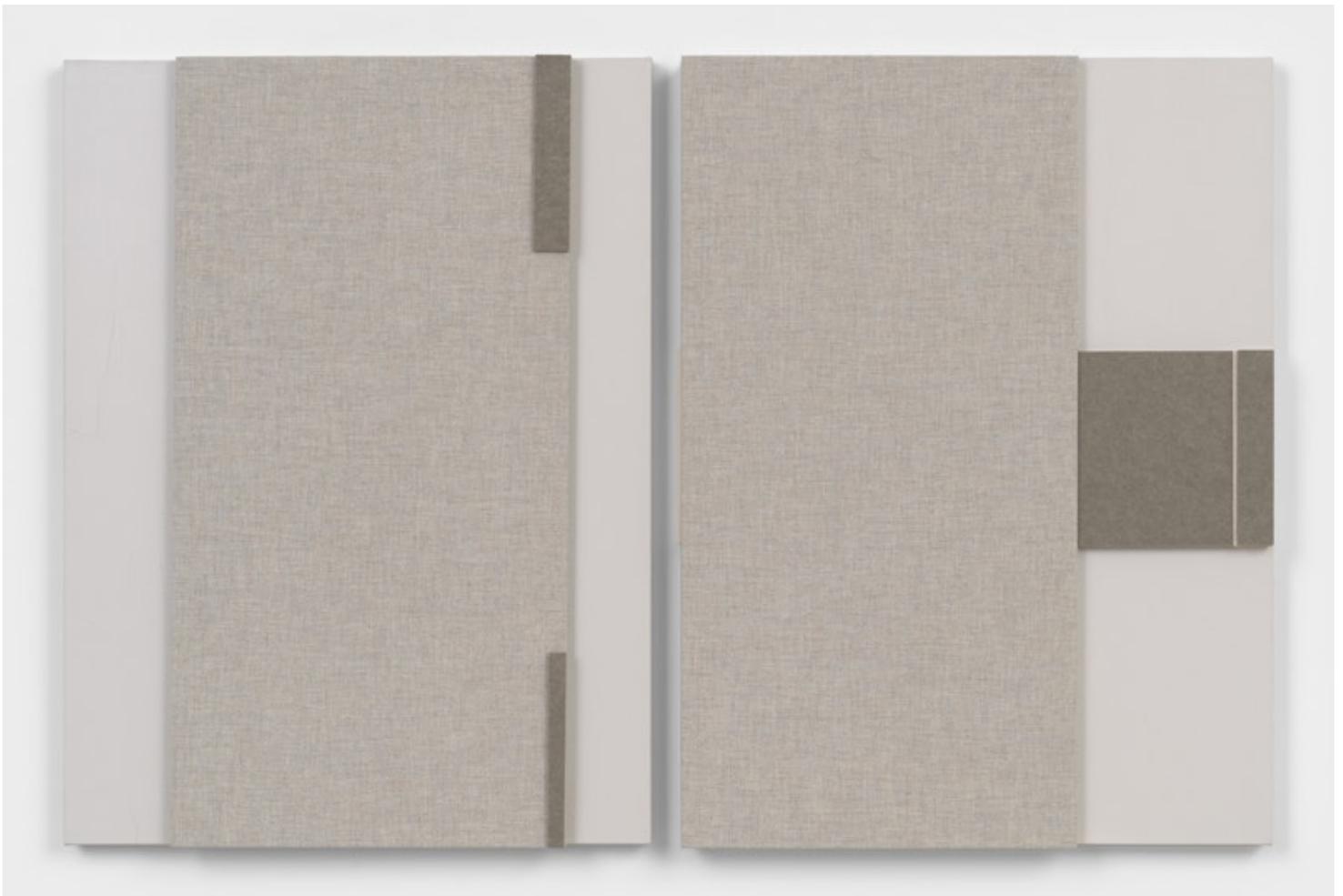
But just to circle back to speaking with art students, I try to rip the band-aid off and make students aware of the labor around art making, acknowledging that there's actual work involved. We call it work, and the joy and pleasure and struggle of that. That's something I'm still grappling with because I don't work in terms of supply and demand. I don't have a warehouse full of things. There's no "inventory" because the work I do takes time to make. And it is about labor, and the risk and the grit that builds character. It takes tenacity to reach a point where you hit that deep vein of work that feels like you could stay in it for the rest of your life. That's what happens as an artist builds their oeuvre. They find their mission statement. Then they sort of stay in that mission statement because it remains rewarding; it remains a source of learning and a source of challenge.

Rail: So, in terms of finding a mission statement of your own, what led you from your time at SAIC to the vein of work you are doing now and to what we are seeing at the Guggenheim?

Jones: I always struggled with figurative work. I had a painting teacher in art school named Stephanie Byrd, who was probably one of the only women in the painting department and definitely the only African American woman. And I told her how much I struggled with figure drawing. It was just annoying to me, because the poses went too fast. She just looked at me and said, who said you have to know how to draw the figure to be an artist? It was such a simple moment, but it was someone giving me permission, in a sense that the work doesn't have to be about the body, but it could be your body in a different space, and it didn't have to be a narrative space. So that has been a through line.

Then I had a wonderful teacher named Paul Hinchcliffe who taught us all how to stretch canvases the old-fashioned way with copper tacks. And the first time I stretched a canvas, I just looked at this object, this thing I made. You know, I put the wood together. So that was a moment of thinking about painting as sculpture and painting as an object, and not painting as a window. It's so strange because I would thump it. I always thumped the canvas. So there's this little tiny foreshadowing of my sound work, this idea that not only is the canvas an object and not exclusively a picture plane, but it's also something that is like a drum surface, something that resonates.

The Art Institute was an interdisciplinary program, and that has really stayed with me. Lorna Simpson came and gave a talk. So did Carrie Mae Weems. I remember being blown away by Glenn Ligon's conceptual wizardry from that time also. When Ellsworth Kelly's work was shown at the Art Institute I felt guilty because I liked it, and yet I felt really entrenched in that moment of hatred of the artists or the white male canon taking up all the space in these museums. All of this circles back to having a strong leaning towards a modernist aesthetic and towards a love of minimalism.



Jennie C. Jones, *Split Bar, End Note*, 2021. Acoustic panel and acrylic on canvas, diptych, 48 × 36 × 3.5 inches each. © Jennie C. Jones, courtesy the artist; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; PATRON Gallery, Chicago.

Rail: You work with sound, but also with materials culled from recording studios. Much of your work functions simultaneously as visual art and sound art, with the materials dampening or changing the acoustics of the space in which the viewer—or listener—encounters them. And your works on paper include musical notation, so in a way we are looking at music, or a visual representation of music. There's always this sensory cross-pollination happening between your pieces. Can you talk about that?

Jones: I think around 2000 I made my first sound piece. I was making lots of drawings of equipment and thinking about audio speakers as proxies for the body. The body became

speakers, and wires were conduits connecting social, political, cultural discourses. I was seeing them as metaphors. And then with the death of analog, a lot of physical material was getting lost, things were getting thrown away, and so I started working with ready-mades, searching for things on eBay and bringing the acoustic materials into my work. It's just this crazy circle that happened over like thirty years.

Rail: In terms of your paintings, which function as both picture planes and sculptural objects, as a viewer, you're required to shift and move around the work, to discover what's happening along the sides or between seams or along the top edges of things. There's also the quieting of the room that the work creates as you move closer to it, and the physical comfort the texture of the material elicits. You were saying that as a student you were excited to learn that you didn't have to create work in which the body was rendered in a narrative space, and yet your work is so much about the body.

Jones: Yes, I think it is. I've talked about Agnes Martin, and about her being a swimmer and the extent of her reach as a swimmer being the same as the gesture in her work. When I think about my own work, I know I will probably stay in the scale that I am and let the modularity be what expands. In that sense it's very bodily, right? Because the panels I'm working with are four by four. So it's like the extent of my arms. I work without having other people in the studio. If I have to have someone come in to move a piece, it feels disruptive, like there's an interloper in the space. I don't want a witness and I don't want to have to ask someone to take something off the wall for me. So it'll be interesting when I'm an old lady. Carmen Herrera, God rest her soul, and Alma Thomas both worked on tables in their older age, by leaning the canvases at an angle, so they could sit and work with no assistants. I think that there's an intimacy to that, but it's also so much about the body, thinking about what it is to be ninety and having a painting leaning on your lap so you can keep working. So there is that kind of thinking about the body.

I'm not judgmental about anyone else's work, and there's a ton of artists that, when I was in art school, were just cutting trails that were so important to me. And I understand the desire to educate an audience through sharing parts of Black history as the content of the work. But I feel like my lifetime, my career trajectory, has shown what happens when it's commodified, and where it's going and who's living with the work. I'm hyper-aware of collectors because it is like another form of commodification. And that's where I have this sense of concern. I think it's taken me a long time to just come right out and say that I don't want to be a part of selling Black bodies. I don't want to be in that territory. But then there's also a sort of anxiety that the work is not Black enough. And I worry particularly that my peers might take issue with that. So it takes a certain amount of courage to own it. It takes courage to own your aesthetic when it's against the grain.



Installation view, *Jennie C. Jones: Dynamics*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, February 4, 2021-May 2, 2022. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2022.

Rail: It's interesting that you mention anxiety because to me it feels very confident and bold.

Jones: It's amazing to me that it translates that way.

Rail: Well, I think of you as someone who is challenging art-world narratives, aligning yourself with minimalism and abstraction very decisively, which is not an association that has readily been given to Black women artists. I think that's where the sense of confidence comes in. But also, your work is so striking, your construction is so impeccable, and that feels very confident. I think the end result feels complete and perfect and kind of breathtaking because of its precision.

Jones: I think the other missing piece to the puzzle is the Black Radical Sonic Practitioners—that's the phrase I throw around—that's where my courage and my strength and my ideas around freedom, for lack of a better word, come from. When I made my first sound piece in 2000, I was still at the beginning of my mission of really looking at music history and art history as parallels, and really educating myself. Not just about what I liked, but also challenging my ears to learn about things that maybe I felt were too dissonant or that I wasn't into, and then seeing how that folded into the punk that I listened to in the eighties, and how the core was a sense of refusal, and a sense of radicality. I mean, if you listen to Roscoe Mitchell or Pharoah Sanders or Milford Graves, they don't give a shit. There's a moment of total liberation that I found happening in music from the late fifties and early sixties.

You know, Miles Davis would turn his back on the audience, and there was just something about turning your back on the audience. And there's also a phrase called woodshedding, which is when a musician has to just go on their own path, they go to a woodshed to figure out their skills, to figure out their method, their voice. I've had several moments of woodshedding. I really felt like moving to Hudson was a woodshedding moment. I was like, "I'm done." I don't want to take a train through Brooklyn for an hour to go make a drawing in a studio that's not near my apartment because I can't afford anything closer anymore. But that moment was also the beginning of really refining painting and thinking about the new materials, the felt in tandem with the panels, and letting myself let the paint come to the foreground, letting color come to the foreground instead of relegating it to the edges, and really thinking about my time as a painter. This sort of combination of lavishing in the radical freedom of musicians feeding back into me while saying, "Well, I can make paintings, but I'm going to use paint as a material, paint as a real plastic art." The idea that paintings are objects in rooms that affect the acoustics of the space. Then, underneath all of that is this lineage of modernist history, inclusion and exclusion. Which modernist histories get told and which are left out, because a lot of those radical thinkers in music were working at the exact same time as artists in the canon that I admired, but we never put them together. We never even think about something as basic as Jackson Pollock and Thelonious Monk. I mean, they're not living on different planets. They're in the same city at the same time. So there's this oil and water thing that happens with how we construct our histories.

For me, and for our generation, the postwar period was our art education, 1945 to the present. It was always that window. That is the peak window where American music is being shaped, where Black music and cultural crossover and the record industry are being invented. In that shift from Paris to New York, America became the site of defining what modernism is through Abstract Expressionism, when the world shifted to New York as a cultural mecca. Paris was starting to fade because it was trying to rebuild itself after the war, but it was also that moment where Sartre is writing existentialism, and Miles Davis meets him and he comes back and writes *Kind of Blue*. There are all these weird and magical moments, and it actually circles back to us talking about getting lost. This sort of happenstance of meeting and how it can really change someone's trajectory. Miles was also, at that moment, brokenhearted over Juliette Greco, because it was impossible to have an international interracial relationship in the fifties. All of that is happening in that same timeframe, along with one decade after another of social political protest, and another kind of radicality for space, for voices. I find metaphors in dampeners, sound dampeners and sound absorbers, and what it means to have your voice absorbed in a space. What it means to have a color that's loud and screaming next to something that's absorbing and suppressing. Metaphor is a big part of it, but also there's so much history in things—that's why I lecture students about history, because you can find so much, you can find so many of your power animals and your tribe and your people and kindred spirits, from these little historic nuggets that don't quite make it into the main narrative.



Installation view, Jennie C. Jones: *Dynamics*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, February 4, 2021–May 2, 2022. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2022.

George Lewis is my hero—I always talk about George and *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, his pivotal book on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, the AACM, and the history of creative music. When I was at SAIC, George was teaching there. I never studied with him, but I saw him in the hallway because there were only like three Black professors. When the *Freedom Principle* exhibition was up at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which was a great exhibition about the history of avant-garde music and art from 1960 to the present, George invited me to give a talk with him. He said, “Just come, it’ll be a casual conversation.” He opened the talk by scrolling through the Tate’s page on the history of sound art. He just scrolled through it and scrolled through it. And you saw everyone you would expect, starting with John Cage, just scrolling through it all. Then George took this dramatic pause, and he looked at me, and he looked at the audience, and he said, “Where are we? Where are we?” As if sound art could exist without any people of color, without any Black people’s polyphonic funk radical gestures. It was mind blowing. So, in one moment I feel like crying because I’m such a weirdo outsider. Then in the next moment, I’m angry because it seems so obvious. We wouldn’t even have modernism if Picasso and Braque weren’t looking at African sculpture. And yet, me thinking about ideas of sacred geometry and math and color and measure feels unpopular and scary, which is totally wrong.

But I've also been fortunate to work with curators who really see me and who really support the work. Who understand everything I've been talking about with you, including my neurotic insecurities. They have fought for my work. That's been really huge. Evelyn Hankins gave me my first solo museum show at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2013, all because she came and saw my work in my apartment in Brooklyn. She sat on my bed in my apartment, and we talked for like, four hours, and after that she said, "We're going to make this happen." A year and a half later, my work was in the Smithsonian collection, because she sat on my bed.

Rail: The Hirshhorn exhibition, *Higher Resonance*, featured your "Acoustic Paintings" and works on paper, but you also filled it with sound, and then you literally changed the shape of the space by introducing an architectural element, a curved wall that created an enclosure for the exhibit. Can you talk a little bit about what happens when you're considering building work within a space? Because I think the way your work inhabits a space is another very important component that a viewer/listener encounters when they're in the presence of your work.

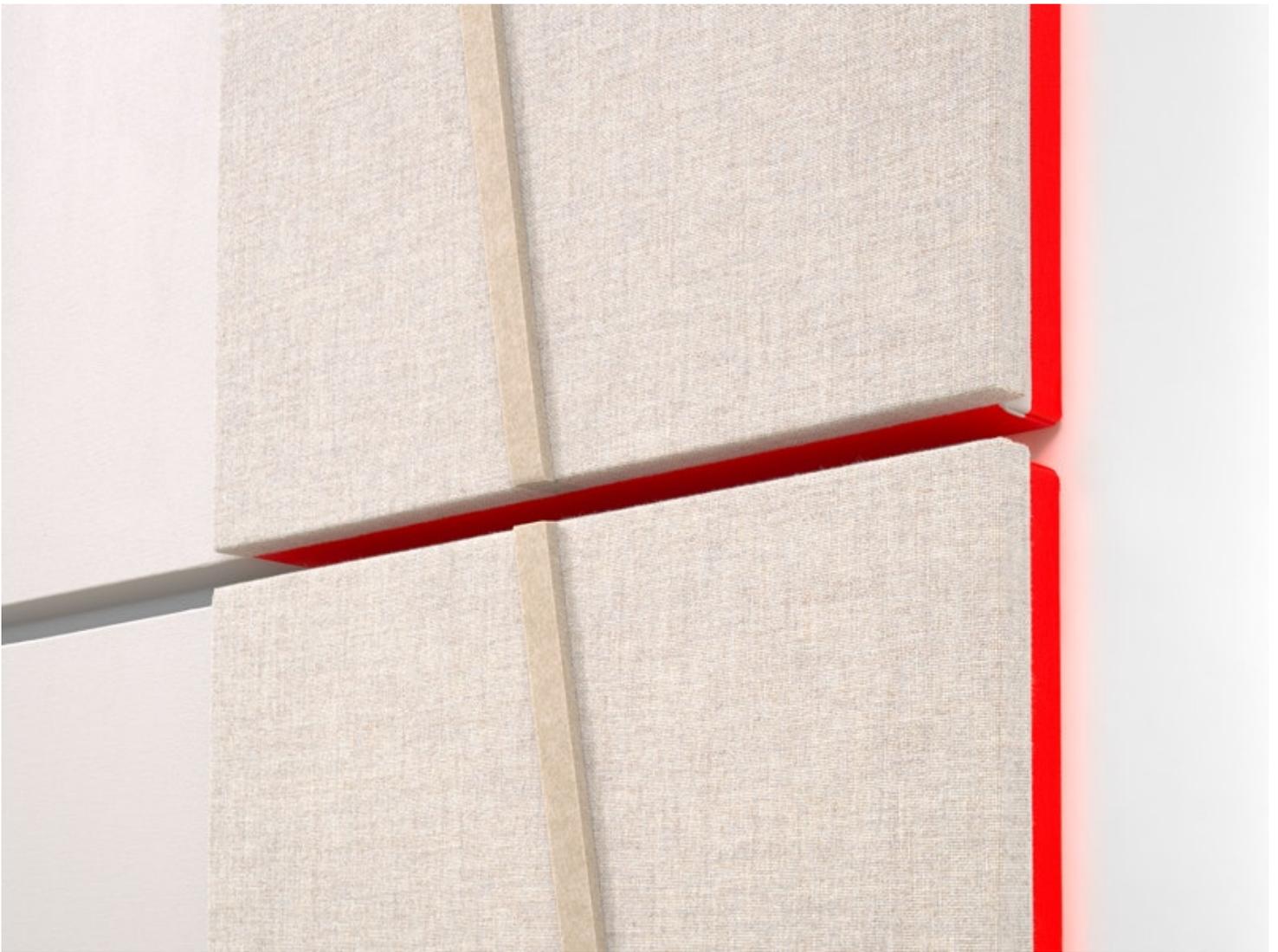
Jones: In terms of the spaces that I've been able to work in, it just so happens that the architecture is always either challenging, or something you can really lean into. My work has led me to all of these modern institutions, like the Hirshhorn, the Clark Art Institute, and the Glass House. When I'm considering a space, I'm very aware that I'm standing in the footsteps of a very austere, particular kind of institution, and so I think the site-specific pieces that I've done have inevitably become site responsive work in terms of those footsteps and when these museums were built. I think that's why the Guggenheim felt so perfect. They've had a great year, they've had a really ballsy courageous year. Wu Tsang's *Anthem* exhibition project with Beverly Glenn-Copeland was amazing. As a museum, they're stepping up, so kudos to them. Choosing Lauren Hinkson as a curator for my exhibition was a perfect match for me because Lauren is really aware of both contemporary and historic work. Then, also, it was really crazy to learn that I was the first African American woman to have a solo show in the rotunda.

Rail: I did not realize you were the first.

Jones: I didn't know either. I asked Lauren during my installation. You know, it just was kind of like, "Wait, am I the...?" And she was like, "Yes."

Rail: What was that moment like?

Jones: It made me really sad. It made me sad. That shows you where my ego was. I wasn't like woohoo. I was just thinking that from 1939, how many incredible artists should have been in there? I mean, I couldn't even name names of people. Like, what if when they opened, they had Norman Lewis's paintings? How would that have changed the whole trajectory of thinking about African American artists and abstraction?



Jennie C. Jones, *Fractured Extension/Broken Time*, 2021 (detail). Acoustic absorber panel, architectural felt, and acrylic on canvas in two parts, 48 × 48 × 3 inches each. © Jennie C. Jones, courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and PATRON Gallery, Chicago.

Rail: It was all so close and overlapping, and still these lines were drawn and maintained.

Jones: I mean, they were just up the block.

Rail: Thinking about the sound design, the sound work in the Guggenheim show—how did that concept develop? When you found out you were working at the Guggenheim, I'm sure you went to the Guggenheim to sort of see things, but also to listen. In thinking about creating a site-responsive exhibition in that space: what were you hoping for?

Jones: It took a really hard turn actually. The first six months that I was talking to Lauren, I was thinking about drum brush work, which is the use of a soft brush in a circular motion, and thinking about the shape of the Guggenheim as this drum, essentially, and that the flow of people was this whispery cycle of moving up and then moving down in the drum brush pattern. The way they're notated is with gestures and arrows, circular arrows left, right. So I really went down a rabbit hole watching all these YouTube videos of famous drummers teaching the softness of drum brushing. The idea of having a texture in the air was what I wanted. A texture in the air. Then I encountered the acoustics, which were just not going to have a texture in the air. I went to the top of the rotunda on that first site visit and it was just like, oh my god, the HVAC system. It's at the top. And I kept thinking of—you'll appreciate this because you'll know the reference—Willy Wonka, when they're at the top and the fan is going and they're gonna get sucked in. We got all

the way to the top of the Guggenheim and I was like, no! The HVAC system is this big white noise machine! I thought, I can't have anything that's subtle, right? So then it became about a tone instead of this texture or anything that was tinny. I was looking at symbols for a while, but the sound was too tinny. The first sound piece I took there just disappeared because the tone couldn't hold the volume of that space. I wanted to have something to counteract the HVAC but also to add to it in a way that would be an ambient piece. So it really became a physics exercise. The third time I visited was the charm. I went back to work with Piotr Chizinski, their Head of Media Arts, who's their wizard, their tech guy, and we found the sound we needed. I took four different tones into the space and as soon as we hit the right number of hertz, as soon as it snapped in, it filled the bowl. So that gave me a base, a place to start. I ended up layering two other tones to make some sort of harmonic, three layers of harmonics. I decided it was best, given where we are right now as people on Earth, to have something that's not challenging, that's actually gentle. When we talked about leaving the upper spiral empty as a place of reflection, it made sense. A place where the light from the Oculus and the freshness of plants and space would let the architecture sing. I zhuzhed it all the way up until the day before, believe me. I was like, I'm sending one last file, that's it. But when you're in the space and looking at the paintings, you would never think that things that appear straightforward and simple actually involve so much to get to a place of refinement.

Rail: What I loved about entering the Guggenheim now that your show is up is that intermittently, this abstract chorus of sound descends through the space, and makes it feel very, very new. It doesn't feel like the Guggenheim anymore. It feels like a very specific moment in the present, like you've reinvented the museum itself. Because as you said, it's not discordant or confrontational, it's a sound that you could sort of be in and reflect in. Which is what a museum should be, right? It should be a place of being, not a place of meeting and rushing. So I feel like you really restored the museum to that kind of space as well.

Jones: The highest compliment is that the security guards love it. Several security guards said, "Oh, my God, your show! I love it!" Which means so much, because they're there hearing it all day long.

I've gone to the Guggenheim a couple days as a spy, just hanging out. I went with my nephew and we just sat on the fifth floor. We all know how museum-goers can sometimes rush past things. But then it's kind of like it's a mindfulness test, because there are people that stop and stay static with this work. It's kind of like, I'm here. I'm not going to be too nasty about saying what I'm saying. But I'm going to make sure you hear me.

Contributor

Ann C. Collins

Ann C. Collins is a writer living in Brooklyn. She holds an MFA in Art Criticism and Writing from the School of Visual Arts.