

HOST Aryel
René Jackson
Sept 28, 2023
– Jan 28, 2024

The ContemporaryAustin

LAGUNA GLORIA

3809 West 35th Street

Austin, Texas 78703

512 458 8191

Art School: 512 323 6380

JONES CENTER

700 Congress Avenue

Austin, Texas 78701

512 453 5312

HOST

HOST is an exhibition space and program series that amplifies The Contemporary Austin's commitment to centering artists and welcoming publics. With each exhibition cycle, an artist will create a newly commissioned environment in the HOST gallery space at the Jones Center. Programming will accompany each work. Throughout the run of each exhibition, artists will invite visitors into their worlds.

Artwork © Aryel René Jackson. All images courtesy the artist unless otherwise noted.

Text © The Contemporary Austin 2023.

HOST display type by Simon Walker at Beasts of England.

Graphic design by Phillip Niemeyer.



Artist Aryel René Jackson in their studio in Austin, Texas, 2023. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Rebekah Flake.

Aryel René Jackson

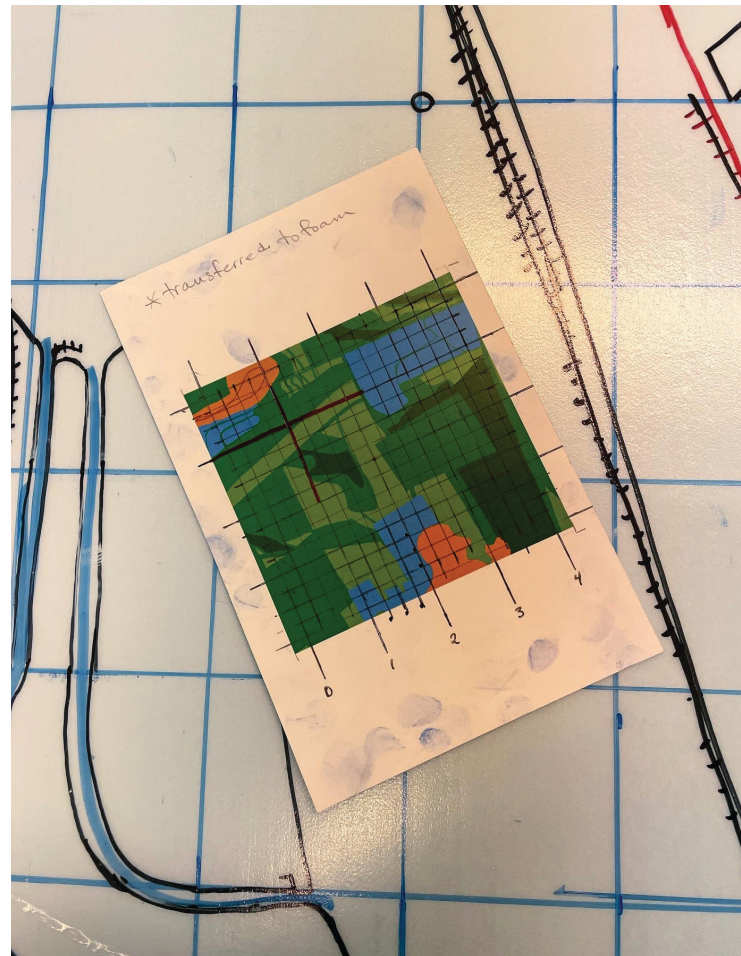
Working across sculpture, video, sound, and performance, **Aryel René Jackson** (born 1991, Monroe, LA; works in Austin, TX) explores landscape as a site of personal representation. In this newly commissioned work for The Contemporary Austin, Jackson presents a sculptural installation that recalls the terrains of Texas and Louisiana, two places that hold profound meaning for the artist, who was raised in New Orleans and is now based in Austin.

Motivated in part by the artist's desire "to see myself represented in the landscape," Jackson's installation, *What it means: iterations of a welcoming place*, hovers between painting and sculpture, and abstraction and representation, in an imagined topography that merges figural imagery with geography, and weaves personal narratives with public histories. The collaged images, painted and carved into large panels, are drawn from Jackson's familial archives, an important resource in the artist's research-based practice. Jackson uses this personal material to explore how their own family history has intersected with stories of persistence, endurance, and resistance by Black, Indigenous, and Creole communities in the American South. For Jackson, landscapes are like a palimpsest, something reused or altered by time and history but still bearing visible traces of their earlier form.

This installation is accompanied by a rich soundscape of field recordings made in East Austin, mixed with simulated sounds of nature, and intercut with original poetry written and narrated by the artist. As the audio unfolds, visitors are invited to relax, imagine, and consider themselves in relation to the imagery in Jackson's installation.

Throughout the course of the exhibition, the installation will also serve as a production studio for Jackson to create a video work, functioning as both a public exhibition and a platform for the development of a new work. This forthcoming film will further expand the artist's project, *A Welcoming Place*, which explored the history of East Austin's development through an intergenerational dialogue with Black Austinites. Jackson's new film will extend the project's scope across state lines to include new interviews and archival research on urban planning and environmentalism in New Orleans and New York, cities where the artist has previously lived and worked. This in-progress project will premiere at Laguna Gloria in early 2024.

— **Julie Le**, Assistant Curator, The Contemporary Austin



An in-progress image in Aryel René Jackson's studio in Austin, Texas, 2023. Artwork © Aryel René Jackson. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by the artist.



Aryel René Jackson, *A Welcoming Place* (still), 2020–2022. Single-channel video, color, and sound. Running time: 30:14. Artwork © Aryel René Jackson. Image courtesy the artist.



Julie Le: *You once described the impetus for this work as a desire to “see [yourself] represented in the landscape.” Could you expand on that?*

Aryel René Jackson: When I first arrived in Austin in 2017, I was taken aback by the immense beauty of the natural environment and the diversity of landscapes throughout Texas. I was also enamored by Austin’s climb to become one of the leaders in sustainability, and how the city’s identity is closely tied to its natural beauty. While I was impressed by the nature and beauty here, I also learned about the historical subjugation of Austin’s Black and Hispanic communities through redlining in East Austin leading up to and into the 1960s. I was educated by Austinites impacted by this and began doing my own research into this history.

My desire to see myself in the landscape comes out of the dissonance created from this collision of environmental standards with historical subjugation of the communities I have been raised with, raised by, and nurtured by. I want to see their lives be sustained by the worthy causes being fought by environmentalism.

Julie: *How did you approach creating your installation? How does this new work relate to your previous or ongoing works?*

Aryel: I’ve had this image of figures carrying out acts of mutual aid and codependence floating around in my head for a while. This show was an opportunity to get those images down. I referenced candid family photos, with cousins helping each other climb atop our family’s horse, and my sister holding me gently as a resting infant. These images found a natural home next to a borrowed excerpt from a nineteenth century etching of a multi-racial gathering and picket signs from photographs of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

I am primarily a film-based artist. Here, I am not presenting a video and choosing to present visual and aural elements from my practice, and the gallery itself will also serve as a production studio in which I will film aerial and panning shots of miniature landscapes for my next project.

My previous film, *A Welcoming Place* (2020–22) captured an observation about how Austin’s city planning and development lacked any intention of retaining its Black and Hispanic residents, whose incomes have been driven further north or out of the city’s developing communities. I am continuing to explore what a welcoming place could look like. I’m in the process of creating a sequel that will expand my observations on urban planning and environmentalism and extend them across state lines by looking at Louisiana, New York, and Texas.



Julie: *Could you describe a couple of the major themes you explore through your imagery and how you hope visitors might interact with these elements?*

Aryel: I wanted to use this show as an opportunity to create work that will be used in a future film as a way to bring audiences behind the scenes. The installation also presents opportunities for visitors to sit and choose from which perspective to view any of the landscape panels. While seated, there are also directional speakers relaying a soundscape that encourages viewers to relax, imagine, and remember themselves in the silhouettes of the figures in the panels.

Since 2019, I have been interested in educational mechanisms and repeatedly turned to Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci's grid methods as a concept for seeing the world and translating it. Similarly, in recent years, I have been using meteorological concepts as metaphors for understanding environments. "Forecasting" and "taking the temperature" can be colloquialisms that speak to a practice of collective testimony pointing out forms of anti-Blackness pervading gentrified landscapes. In Black communities, when I say, "What's the weather?" I'm asking, "What is the vibe? Am I welcome here?"



Aryel: *What does a welcoming place look like to you?*

Julie: To me, "a welcoming place" is a shared concept more than it is a fixed, concrete place. I think of my parents, refugees displaced by war who ended up here in pursuit of a more welcoming place. They settled in a country that had a hand in their displacement—a country that eventually granted them citizenship but often has not recognized their economic, social, or cultural rights. How have people like them carved out places for themselves? I am interested in those communities borne out of transnational displacement, but also the secondary waves of displacement of immigrant neighborhoods driven by policy and development, like what's happening in Austin and Houston. My parents settled in a small town, where there's a tiny Viet community. The land is sublime and beautiful in that east central Texas way—vast prairieland with wildflowers and incredible thunderstorms. I feel very at home there, but there's an underbelly of racism and exclusion deeply embedded there that makes me feel like a perpetual outsider. As someone who grew up in the South, I'm very drawn to how your practice locates those intricacies and tensions around place and identity.



Artist Aryel René Jackson in their studio in Austin, Texas, 2023. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Rebekah Flake.

Aryel René Jackson (born 1991, Monroe, LA) is an Austin-based artist whose practice considers land and landscape as sites of personal representation. Their practice is influenced by their Afro-Creole Louisiana heritage and their experience as a Black American growing up in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Jackson's practice consists of what they call "Visual Essays," lyrical film essays that utilize soil, performance, mimicry, and installation sculpture to reflect on critical race theory and archeological studies. Jackson considers how visual, tangible, and experiential material data impacts perception when speculating on the past.

Jackson is an alum of The University of Texas at Austin (2019), the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2019), Royal College of Art Exchange Program (2018), and The Cooper Union (2013). Their films have screened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2022), the Baltimore Museum of Art (2021), and The Momentary at Crystal Bridges Museum (2020). Jackson's work has been exhibited at galleries and institutions such as Artpace San Antonio (2022); Dallas Contemporary (2021); Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle (2021); Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans (2018); DePaul Art Museum, Chicago (2018); Rhode Island School of Design Museum (2017); and Studio Museum in Harlem (2016). In 2021, Jackson was awarded the Tito's Art Prize.

Julie Le is Assistant Curator at The Contemporary Austin.



Aryel René Jackson, *A Welcoming Place* (production still), 2019. Artwork © Aryel René Jackson.
Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Hiram Mojica.