

# DEBORAH-JOYCE HOLMAN



## DEBORAH-JOYCE HOLMAN

1991, Basel, Switzerland

Lives and works in Basel and London

Deborah-Joyce Holman is a multidisciplinary artist living between Basel and London. In her work she is concerned with the notion of authorship, the merits and dangers of representation and visibility as well as blurring the boundaries between fiction, truth and fact while engaging with popular culture and its images. Her artistic as well as her curatorial practice is sensible to the disputed questions of representation in the face of structural (racist) discrimination. Holman contrasts the exploitative potential of images with approaches of artistic and cinematic subversion, refusal, and resistance. She responds to exploitation in her work by using repetition and non-performance as a means to restage refusal and resistance.

Holman's repeatedly posits refusal as well as illegibility as counterstrategies for Black, PoC and queer people in order to work against logics of neoliberal (white) society and their mechanisms of representation. Furthermore this examination of strategies of (refusing) representation probe notions of the 'real' and how image production contributes to our understanding of reality. A recent series of paintings depict orphaned interiors of Black lesbians from contemporary film and television she finds online. The screenshot based paintings oppose the slow paced intentionality of painting process with oil and the quick and often random attitude of taking screenshots we might never have another look at again. The paintings exemplify Holman's examination of the advantages and disadvantages of representing marginalized people, especially of Black people in the face of explicit as well as subtle racist violence. Interestingly enough Holman does not add to these representations but rather explores how absence (of the Black body) can become a form not only of agency but also of resistance.

Deborah-Joyce Holman (b. 1991, Basel, Switzerland) holds a BA in Fine Art from the Haute École des Arts et de Design in Geneva. From 2019–20 she was enrolled in the independent study programme CAMPUS at Nottingham Contemporary. At the moment the Istituto Svizzero presents her solo exhibition titled 'Spill I-III' at Archivio Storico di Palermo, recent solo shows include 'Moment 2' held at schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, Zurich (2022); 'Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmare of weakness' Sentiment, Zurich (2022). Her work has been on show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2022); Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (2022); The Shed, New York City (2021); Last Tango, Zurich (2022); 7th Athens Biennial (2021); Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (2021); and La Quadriennale di Roma (2020).



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *A Soft Spiral*, 2019



*Jane's room, 2022*  
Oil and pencil on linen canvas  
100 × 178 × 4.3 cm



*Cleo's room*, 2022  
Oil and pencil on linen canvas  
100 × 178 × 4.3 cm



*Denise's room, 2022*  
Oil and pencil on linen canvas  
100 × 178 × 4.3 cm

## Shadow Games: Deborah–Joyce Holman Olamiju Fajemisin

Sitting with Deborah–Joyce Holman, we reflect on the busyness of the past months. The artist had only a little time off between location scouting and shooting their forthcoming moving–image project in Sicily, having just opened two solo shows in Zurich—their first–ever painting exhibition, *Beautiful and tough as chestnut / stanchions* against our nightmare of weakness, at *Sentiment* (2022), and *Moment2*, a nine–hour film and installation at Luma Westbau (2022)—and collected the Swiss Emerging Artist Prize, for which their winning installation at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève included asemiotic text drawings (Maybe intensely so, or not at all, but definitely mistaken—unhinged, unbound, 2020), a collaboratively produced surround sound installation (*Untitled [in rage]*, 2021), and a series of painted cardboard silhouettes appropriated from viral online images (*Untitled [for scale]*, 2021–ongoing).

The artist's oeuvre coils with variation—but how else to protect oneself from such busyness and exposure if not through refusing predictability, thus concealing oneself? Though it may seem Holman is making fabulatory, relative leaps between mediums, placing themselves in danger of incurring the pejorative throwaway title of “interdisciplinary,” their work, particularly of recent production, carries within it gestures of refusal—the voices of *Untitled (in rage)* are refused a body just as the text drawings are refused legibility. This latest creative torrent, bookended by their departure from their role as associate director and curator at Auto Italia, London, at the beginning of this year, reveals an emergent compositional strategy that attempts to wager the question: “For whom should this work be made, if anyone?” Holman has long demonstrated refusal as an embodied action. Where, in droll works such as *Untitled (for scale)*, the artist's desires are clearly represented in terms of form and narrative as the blank cutouts reach inside the mind, searching for our memories of a gesture, it was in their curatorial work that their practice of refusal—of denying the over–availability of the self, or embracing “opacity,” per Édouard Glissant—first steadily emerged. From *Poetics of Relation* (1990) transpire rather the poetics of refusal: “It's important to develop your own take on things and not just consume whatever is delivered to you,” the artist warned, reminiscing on their ill–supported student days.<sup>1</sup> It was during this period of frustration that they started organizing shows at their studio in Basel. “My friend Roberto [Ronzani] approached me and asked if he could do an exhibition in my studio, and it just kind of developed from there. I didn't know anything about the art world and learned through working.” The program of art and music at 1.1 ran from 2015 until 2020 with Holman always at the helm, working initially with Ronzani, then with curator Tuula Rasmussen. During this time, Holman also curated two editions of *Les Urbaines* festival in Lausanne, in 2018 and 2019. Beyond the refusal of group identification, Holman names “elusivity” and “fugitivity” as strategies of equal importance. “It's what we do and what we don't do. It's the way we listen and the way we don't listen—what are we trained to discard as silence?” they ask, only semi–rhetorically. This hypothesis on negation is tested

with *Moment2*, wherein Holman contrasts the exploitative potential of the documentary image with an act of performative refusal. Conceived following *Moment* (2022), an earlier work commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in which artist Rebecca Bellantoni and artist and curator Imani Mason Jordan recite excerpts from Shirley Clarke's seminal work of cinema verité, *Portrait of Jason* (1967) in a Central London hotel room, *Moment2* features a durational, recitational performance by Bellantoni captured in one take, a technical experiment on refusal enhanced by quiet moments of Bellantoni's nonperformance. “With Jelena [Luise], our DOP, we thought of how to make the camera, rather than the performer, a vulnerable object. Its position is fixed and it never turns off, even as crew pass by in front of it, or as Rebecca leaves the room—even the hotel—for break,” Holman explains, laughing. In spite of its apparent openness, only partial encounters may be had with a film of this kind—at nine hours, its duration exceeds the opening hours of the institution on all but one day, moving the viewer to negotiate within themselves how long to stay with Bellantoni, particularly in those moments she seems not there, or is not there at all. The large screen onto which the film is projected is hung from the ceiling across from two sets of three–tiered bleachers installed perpendicular to each other, correspondent to the angle at which we peer into the hotel room, creating an effect that we share in the same four–walled room as Bellantoni. The outcome of the work approaches a critique of Clarke by Tavia Nyong'o who, in “Crushed Black,” an essay from his 2018 book *Afro–Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*, “looks at elements of refusal—such as Clarke blurring the image to conceal cuts to Jason's body—ingrained within the very materiality of the film,” as paraphrased by Holman. Likewise, the artist compromises the material integrity of *Moment2*, producing a tape bloated far greater than is rationally comprehensible.” Slowness, too, is refusal. The paintings shown at *Beautiful and tough as chestnut / stanchions* against our nightmare of weakness were made out of the artist's need to distort the work with a “slow” medium, oil painting, taking movie stills as their source material. “I was working with screenshots of moments when the main character would step out of the frame. The wide–screen rectangular canvases are like X–rays of the scene. One–twenty–fourth, or one–twenty–fifth of a second,” Holman explained to me. Each painting is a glimpse that took many sessions to delineate and even longer to dry. “The oil dictates the process,” they say. In highlighting the slippage between their source materials and their own work, Holman highlights the confrontation that occurs when an artist is put in such a position where they must reflect on how their work might be received by an audience, context depending. “I'm trying to find the spot where I can make work which is opaque, but still reaches who it needs to reach, but is also able to avoid commodification as it enters the art world system,” Holman offers, generously.

1 All quotes are from a conversation with the author, July 28, 2022.

221 Deborah–Joyce Holman, *Untitled (in rage)*, 2021, installation view at Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève. Photo: Julien Girard  
222 223 Deborah–Joyce Holman & Yara Dulac Gisler, *Unless (still)*, 2021. Courtesy: the artists  
224 225 Deborah–Joyce Holman, *Moment2*, 2022, installation view at Luma Westbau, Zurich, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Luma Westbau, Zurich. Photo: Nelly Rodriguez





Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmare of weakness*, 2022  
Exhibition view, Sentiment, Zurich



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions  
against our nightmare of weakness*, 2022  
Exhibition view, Sentiment, Zurich



*for much longer duration than before, 2022*  
Oil on linen canvas  
125 × 225 cm



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Moment 2*, 2022  
Exhibition view, schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, Zurich



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Moment 2*, 2022  
Exhibition view, schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, Zurich



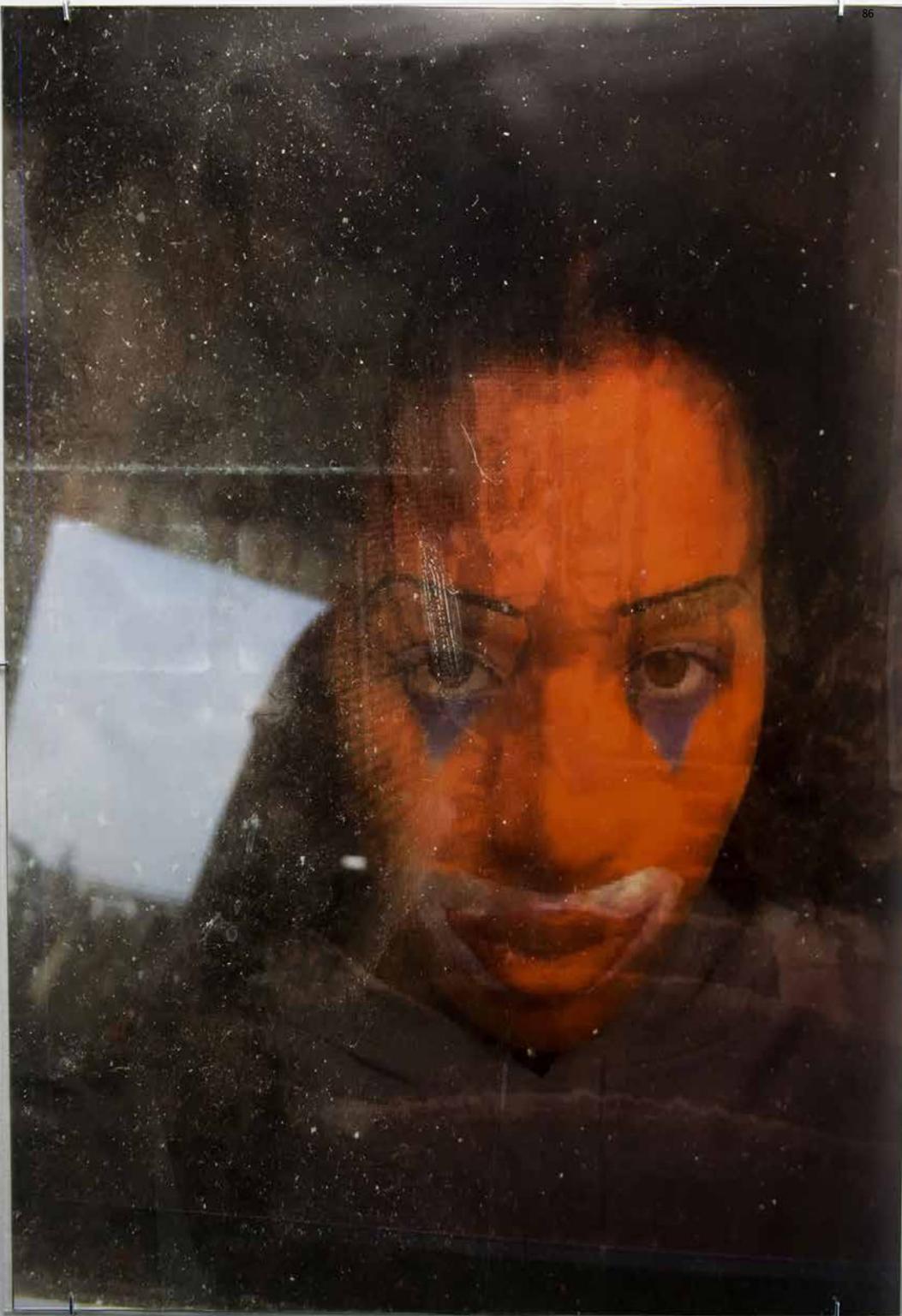
*Moment 2, 2022*  
4k digital video, stereo sound  
540 min. (loop) Ed. 3 + 2AP

## Counter-stances and refusal

**DEBORAH-JOYCE HOLMAN**  
IN CONVERSATION WITH  
**CÉDRIC FAUQ**  
INTRODUCED BY  
**OLAMIJU FAJEMISIN**

One could easily describe Deborah-Joyce Holman as an “inter-” or “multidisciplinary artist,” though the term merely suggests someone who works across different media — it does not capture the expressive and intentional intricacies of Holman’s career so far, which began with exhibiting conceptual sculpture and installation in tandem with their studies at HEAD Genève (2015–18); then developed through curating the work of young artists at their project space 1.1, Basel (2015–20), as well as at two editions of Les Urbaines festival in Lausanne (2018 and 2019); continued in their role as associate director and curator at Auto Italia, London (2020–22); and most recently turned toward moving-image. Their newest work, *Moment 2* (2022), an ambitious, nine-hour film shot in one take and starring artist Rebecca Bellantoni, premiered earlier this year at schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, Zurich. As has been the consistent, steadily emergent theme of Holman’s practice thus far, the work is motivated by questions of subjecthood and identity, and the reciprocal nature of its expression and manifestation, be this through gesture or practiced ritual. In the following conversation with Cédric Fauq, Holman ruminates on the aforementioned themes within the context of language — its confusion and illegibility — endorsing total refusal as an adequate representational proxy.





A Glare (glimpse), 2020.  
Inkjet print on paper,  
aluminum, and glass.  
84.1 x 64 cm. Exhibition  
view at Material Art Fair with  
Alienze, Mexico City, 2020.  
Photography by Ramiro  
Chaves. Courtesy of the artist  
and Alienze.

**Cédric Fauq:** This year was a big shift for you: you decided to leave your role at Auto Italia to focus on your practice as an artist. What was the incentive to make that decision? As a curator myself, I guess I'm interested in how you look at this experience now. I mean, you've always been an artist supporting other artists.

**Deborah-Joyce Holman:** I started my project space 1.1 in Basel in 2015, at the same moment as I started studying my BA in Visual Arts at HEAD Geneva. My curatorial practice really grew out of that, quite spontaneously so — 1.1 was founded spontaneously, I never had the intention to run a space before that. It developed organically as I was motivated by being in exchange with artists, to work alongside them in production and exhibition-making as well as being in a position where I could contribute to the Swiss art landscape. In that sense, yes, as you said, I've worked as an artist supporting other artists. I worked at Auto Italia in London over the tricky years of 2020 until 2022, which has been wonderful. I learned a lot, and again, it fed my interest in working collaboratively — within the team and with the artists, though of course our public activity was significantly limited because of the pandemic. Those years have brought lots of shifts with them — I guess for everyone. For me, one of those shifts was an increased urgency to facilitate the space to fully focus on my artistic practice. Looking at this experience now, I'm happy to have some curatorial and directorial experience. Especially with how I approach moving image, the elements of curatorial work that I enjoy are continued: collaboration and exchange.

**CF:** We got to speak recently at LUMA Westbau about your recent exhibition there. I was so happy to discuss this great piece (Moment 2) with you, but maybe there are some questions that we didn't talk about... a bit tougher... more difficult. I've been thinking a lot about the role I play in the consumption of Blackness as a mixed-race curator. I mean, you and I both try to refuse and complicate the way Blackness heavily hinges on representational strategies within the arts. I'm wondering if this is linked to a specific European/mixed-race position...

**DJH:** I think so, just as much as anyone's positionality influences the way they see the world, the words they write, the work they produce. Maybe more interesting to me would be the question of "how" our positions become tangible in our work — in a way, to look at the world through relation. The push towards complicating and approaching with nuance, etc., also comes with heavy work that isn't necessarily visible or isn't even a part of "the piece" or "the exhibition." I don't want to shy away from these questions, as I'm interested in counter-stances and refusal, which are always already in relation with whatever it is countering. I'm invested in understanding how we can formulate refusal, how an otherwise can exist. Lately, I've been reflecting on that entanglement and whether it is itself a distraction from

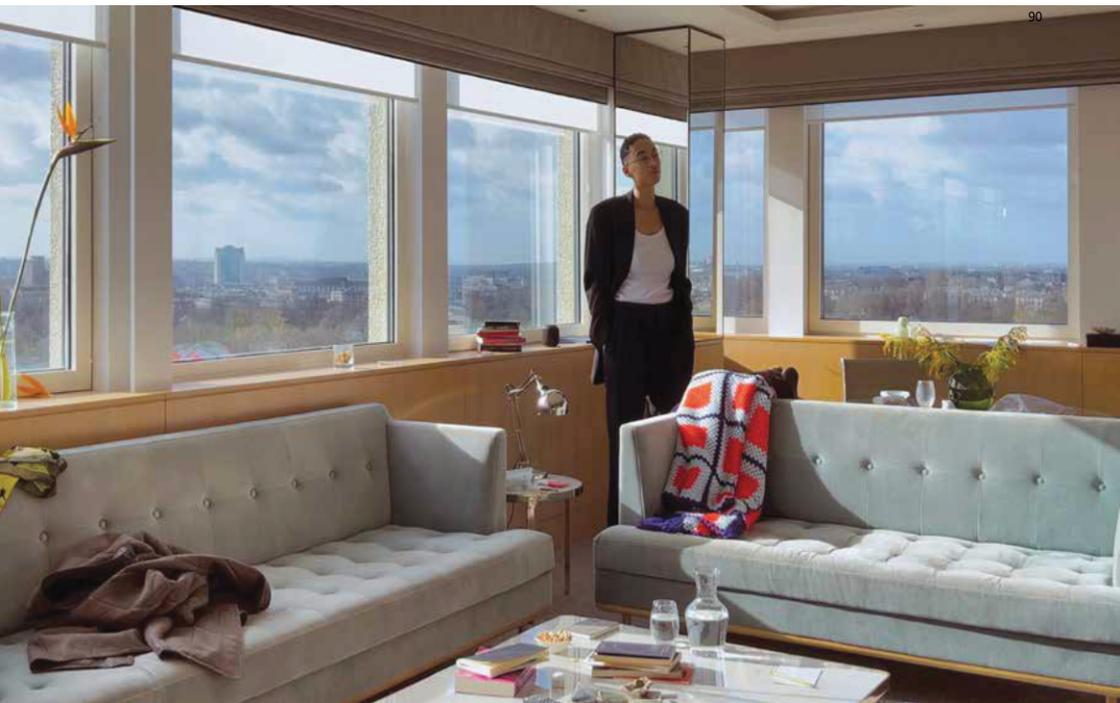
that "otherwise." This is, for me, where positionality comes into it. If we're trying to complicate, it takes the effort to also be specific, and as such, of course our specific socio-cultural context has to be taken into account. What are your thoughts on this at the moment? And how does it influence your curatorial practice?

**CF:** I guess the more I "progress" in my thinking, the less I feel the need to label Blackness and queerness. I work through Black and queer methodologies because they've infused my thinking around exhibition-making and the world. I'm not saying this is a given; it's just part of my artillery, which I'm continually working to sharpen. I guess I feel less pressure to be "recognizable," and I like to come across as reassuring and easy — it gives more space to take risks actually. The possibility to conceive exhibitions like Trojan horses is something I learnt from Sam Thorne, who I worked with at Nottingham Contemporary (who himself learnt this from Alex Farquharson who probably himself learnt that from someone else... maybe Kodwo Eshun!). Would you say that Moment 2 operates like a Trojan horse somehow? I'm very specifically asking this question in relation to the share of violence the work responds to, and the seeming softness and confinement the video first conveys.

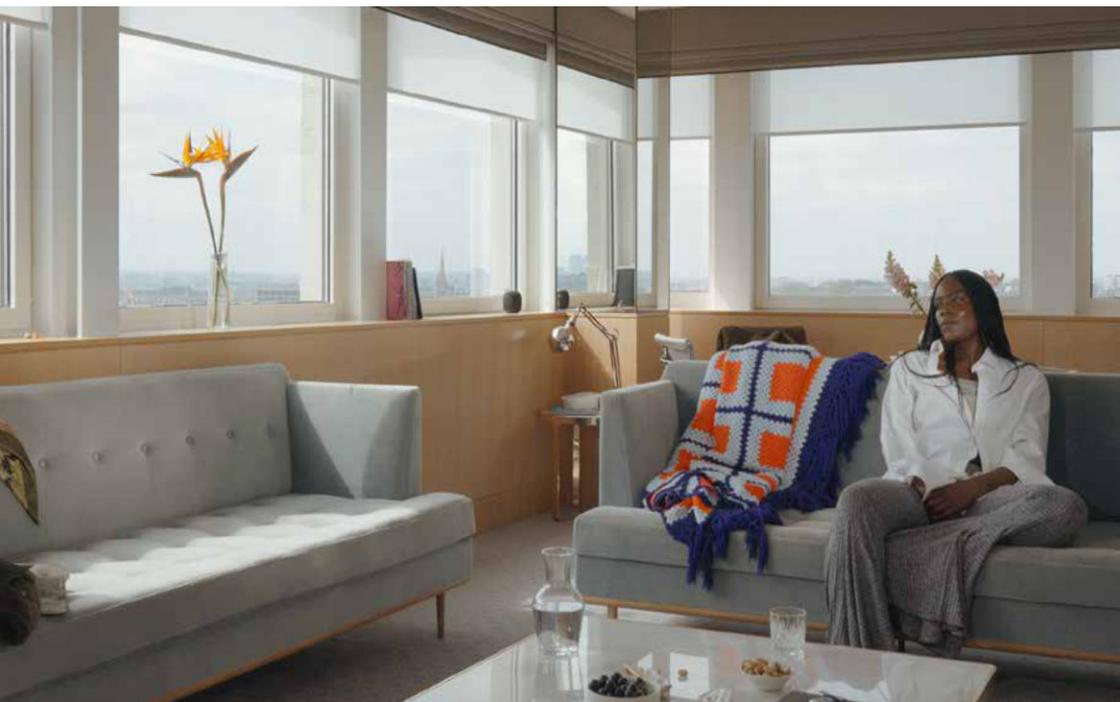
**DJH:** Definitely! Both Moment and Moment 2 are structured by the repeated recital of selected excerpts from Shirley Clarke's 1967 film Portrait of Jason. Moment featured the amazing artists and performers Rebecca Bellantoni and Imani Mason Jordan, and was composed of a two-channel screening, which I presented at the ICA earlier this year, where each performance took place on a separate screen. There are moments where their speech falls together, some where it falls apart, and then some, though we rehearsed separately and it was filmed individually, where it's almost as if they were dialoguing. It becomes a play between the two performances, where the overlapping speech becomes likewaves crashing into each other, flowing with each other, making rhythm and pauses. Moment 2 then pulls the words more into focus by comprising only one single channel with Rebecca Bellantoni, who again performs over and over and over again words uttered by Jason Holliday. What you call Trojan horse I have been thinking about through notions and subtle acts of refusal and opacity. In their excessive repetition, the words become hollow containers themselves, as their meaning shifts and changes or sheds away completely as a result of the repetition. And especially in Moment 2, where there is nothing else, we have to sit and hear these words over and over, and there's really no distraction over the course of its nine-hour duration. That's maybe also where a shift happens from the lulling and comforting repetition to the no-distraction focus on the words, and where a sort of implicit violence becomes more apparent.



half-valve / sustain non-chordal pitch, 2022.  
Oil on linen canvas. 125x225 cm. Exhibition  
view at Sentiment, Zurich, 2022. Photography  
by Philipp Rupp. Courtesy of the artist and  
Sentiment, Zurich.



Moment, 2022. Film Still. Full HD. 107'. Courtesy of the artist.



Moment 2, 2022. Film Still. 4k, 540'. Courtesy of the artist.

I listen to a lot of experimental music, electronic and instrumental. One thing that I'm always drawn to there, too, is the loop, especially fake loops or those that are imperfect because the instrumentalist repeats a section over and over again rather than playing one loop and automating the repetition of it. The imperfections that come out of that and the slight frictions between instruments creates this tension that holds so much more information than the notes themselves. There's an overlap maybe also with my interest in asemic writing, where semiotics are abandoned to get closer to the opaque, the excess, the irregular vibrations that carry information more of quality and relation rather than what's speakable. The loops in Moment and Moment 2 are essential to me for that reason. They are intended to function in a similar way, thinking here also on the power and politic of the voice, of speech. What happens when these specific words of Jason are spoken aloud over and over, those instances where he proclaims himself as a slippery being, those instances where he makes explicit his awareness of the imbalanced, even extractive, dynamic between him and Shirley?

In relation to jazz, as well as with the original Portrait of Jason, there is a lot of this excess energy or excess information swirling around. Scholar Tavia Nyong'o writes about this in terms of crushed blacks and overexposed whites on the actual film strips in *Afrofabulation: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. Formally these are faulty areas, to which he ascribes the potential of agency and refusal. The way I've been thinking about repetition and recital departs from that point in shifting back from the "archival refusal" to the enactment of refusal.

**CF** It might be interesting for readers to understand how you got to Moment 2, starting with Moment, which was screened at the ICA first. The process of remaking the work, rehearsing it again, is somehow where refusal is enacted too, right?

**DJH** Moment mirrors the duration of Portrait of Jason, as it is also 107 mins long. For Moment 2 I extended it to be 540 minutes to correspond to the opening hours of schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, so as to avoid the film looping and instead solely work with the imperfect loops, the repetitions I was speaking about before. I worked closely with Imani Mason Jordan and Rebecca Bellantoni. They're both incredible artists, curators, performers, writers... and importantly, they both have complicated relationships with performing for the camera.

Taking Portrait of Jason as a starting point interested me, as it exemplifies so many problematic dynamics — one of which was the way Jason was choreographed and the mode in which the camera captured him. They filmed over the course of twelve hours through the night at Clarke's suite at the Chelsea Hotel in New York. Through the course of those twelve hours, Jason gets more drunk and high and tired, I'm guessing

as are the people behind the camera. Combined with the abrasive questions Clarke and her then-boyfriend Carl Lee ask, the film takes the approach of scratching away the surface of someone, peeling away at how Jason himself wants to present himself. There's something really troubling, that speaks to maybe a wider dynamic of a huge appetite for trauma, or, specifically Black trauma, which turns trauma into a consumable, especially in images and video. The rehearsals were shaped by lots of conversations with Imani and Rebecca about the text excerpts, about Jason and about this film project and their role in it. I rehearsed with Imani and Rebecca individually, with a main focus on the recital of the text. The script, the decisions of which excerpts to use and the different configurations of them were informed by those rehearsals.

Imani has an extensive practice of performing poetry and spoken performances at large. They have an incredible register and way of moving through the set. They very much enact Jason's words. It stands in contrast to Rebecca, whose voice gives such depth to each word without doing much else. They both performed very, very differently, which I love about the first version, because it creates this space between the two performances and two iterations of the same text. Moment 2 included more rehearsals again and discussions, as it's quite a big ask to invite someone to perform for nine hours straight. There was something quite unsettling about doing it all over again. On the one hand, it is of course much more strenuous, but on the other hand, the long duration of the performance and of the film allows for more slipping away, as audiences would typically only see excerpts of the film. It changes the relationship to time as well, though both versions were one-takes and very much real time, but the knowledge that the film keeps playing for nine hours almost spills it over into a performance more so than a film, and hopefully creates some sort of friction with the audience in terms of how time is felt.

This went hand in hand with developing the image together with my friend and director of photography Jelena Luise, who I've been working with for both versions of Moment as well as my first video work, Unless (2020, in collaboration with Yara Dulac Gisler). In both projects there was a big negotiation around the role of the camera and its movement (or non-movement in Moment and Moment 2), which we thought about as a part of what's going on in front of it and as such was part of the performance as opposed to a neutral bystander. The way we were thinking about the set was also as a performance in that moment that happened once. The set included the off-camera and the camera itself as just an element inside that set.

**CF** In parallel to your exhibition at LUMA Westbau, you were also showing a series of paintings at Sentiment. These were your first



paintings and were “unfinished” —I don’t know if you would use that term though. It’s interesting to me that Moment 2 was shot “twice,” while the paintings weren’t fully completed in terms of the paint applied onto the surface of the canvas. Obviously this brings about big questions about the status of the artwork, but instead of asking “what is?” or “where is?” art it shifts it to “when is?” I’m wondering how you navigate time, time of production versus time of display more specifically, since to me your work tends to make the two overlap.

**DJHI** made the paintings at the same time as I was working on the post-production of Moment 2. The two bodies of work have some touching points, though I didn’t conceive of the exhibitions as a two-part single project. Thinking about archival material, about set design, but particularly also about temporality and movement ran through both projects significantly. “Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmare of weakness” takes as its starting point screenshots of film scenes inside the domestic space of the main characters. I was interested in the moments where all actors are already out of the shot and all we see is the staged interior, which becomes a staged extension of the characters, specifically in Black lesbian films. I work very intuitively when in production after an extended period of research. With the paintings it was a feeling I had —I could not bring myself to “finish” them. They would’ve lost the sense of movement it creates by leaving parts uncompleted and allowing the pencil lines below to show. This movement was so important to somehow bring to the canvas, especially as the images are screenshots of moving image. I was interested in the relationship between first the layering of meaning and context through the staging process, the selection of props and placing or construction of the set. Then the moment the camera captures this without the presence of a person inside the set, which in itself was only during a few seconds in the films I watched, as well as the film still itself then being a snapshot of only 1/25th of a second —which is then extended again through the process of painting: pushing around oil paint on a canvas, layering it, letting it dry before returning to it, etc.

manuel arturo abreu wrote the exhibition text for this and brought asemic writing into this context so beautifully — an engagement with which we both share in our respective practices. They write, and I really cannot articulate this better: “While the works are in a sense figurative, in another sense they also refuse to engage the western dualism of abstract/concrete, preferring instead a liminal space that is flexible enough to engage not only the overdetermined narratives distributed in mass media (particularly regarding Black gay women

and nonbinary people) but also what we might call the ‘asemic’ potential of the marks the hand can make with the oil medium. Figural strategies of absent presences stoke the perception of potential alternatives to value-generating semantic codes which are nevertheless not abstract or ineffable, but in fact registered in the body — in the hand itself, and the oil (which is itself a petroleum record of the cosmic cycle).”

I spoke about staging in the works before, which obviously is instrumental in the display of the work itself again. I started my artistic practice with installation and sculpture, which now throws up the question of “when is?” massively in my thinking between modes of production and display, as the question of time was so intimately entangled in the making of both works. It comes out of the engagement with the specific space — Moment 2, for example, will be exhibited at Cordova, Barcelona, in November this year, in a completely different setup than Luma, where it was projected onto a screen that’s suspended above the corner of a ten-by-nine-meter-long theater stage, which fills the entire exhibition space short of a narrow alley to all sides between wall and stage. I wanted to give weight again to the duration of the performance, to bring the perception of time of the audience closer together to the one of Rebecca and those of us who were behind the camera. For “Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmares of weakness,” my painting show at Sentiment, Zurich, we decided to paint the walls gray to bring out the colors differently, in thinking along with exhibiting moving image, which is best shown within grays rather than blacks or whites. I was concerned with the opposite of Moment 2, of bringing movement back to the static.

**CF** I’m now wondering if you could share with us a bit of what’s coming up for you? As we speak you are in Sicily working with Tarek Lakhri on an upcoming film for Istituto Svizzero in Palermo, right?

**DJHY** —we’re in Palermo, working towards our first collaborative artwork. We’ll be filming in the beginning of August with Jim C. Nedd as our director of photography, who I’ve worked with as a curator for the presentation of his amazing collaborative film with Invernò muto, Pico: Un Parlante de Africa en América at schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, in 2018, and at Auto Italia in 2020, as well as for a gig at House of Electronic Arts in Basel in 2019. We’ve been thinking about politics of representation, queer desire, the voice in relation to poetry, eruption, and the body. It’s going to be a three-channel installation with an extensive soundscape. The work will be presented at the Istituto Svizzero in October this year.



Deborah-Joyce Holman and Yara Dulac-Gisler, *Unless*, 2021. Film still. Three-channel 4K film. 16’43”. Installation view at Cherish, Geneva, 2021. Photography by James Bartone. Courtesy of the artists and Cherish, Genève.

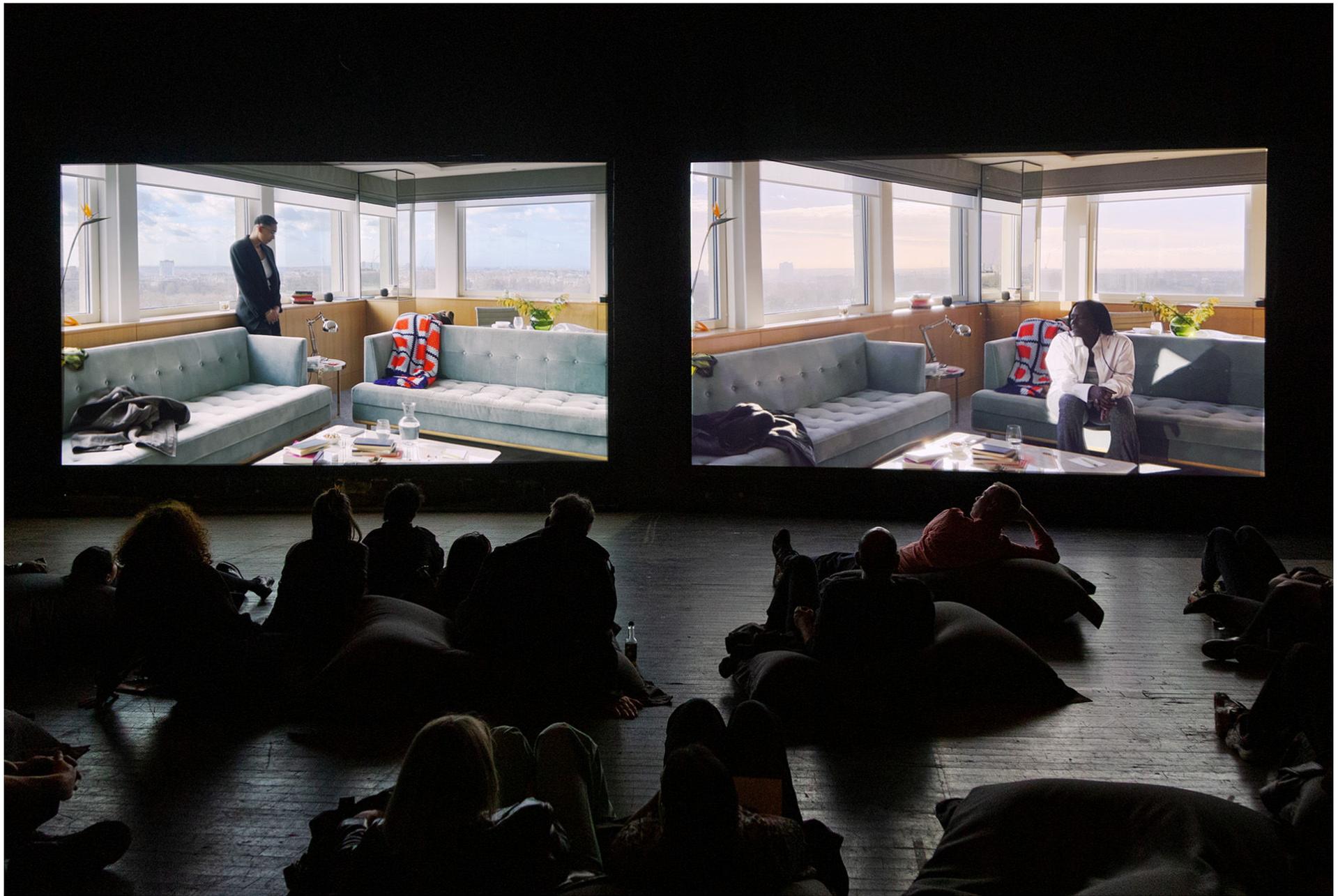


*Unless*, 2021. Film still. Three-channel 4K film. 16’43”. Installation view at Transbona Halle, Basel, 2022. Photography by Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of the artist and Explorers Film Club.

Yara Dulac-Gisler and Deborah-Joyce Holman, with contributions from B Covington, *False Prphit and Suutoo, Untitled (in rage)*, 2021. Surround-sound installation. 20’24”. Installation view at Prize Nominee Exhibition for Swiss Emerging Artist Prize at Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva, 2022. Photography by Julien Girard. Courtesy of the artist and Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva.

**Deborah-Joyce Holman** is a multidisciplinary artist based between London and Basel. From 2020 to 2022 Holman worked at the East London arts organization Auto Italia, first as associate director, then as associate curator. They were the founding director of 1.1, a platform for early-career practitioners in arts, music, and text-based practices, with an exhibition space in Basel, Switzerland, which ran from 2015 through 2020. Holman has curated the 2018 and 2019 annual group exhibitions for the arts and music festival Les Urbaines, Lausanne, titled “...and their tooth, finest gold” and “Cinders, sinuous and supple” respectively, presenting newly commissioned works by more than fifteen international artists. Their work has recently been shown in solo and group shows at schwarzescafé, Luma Westbau, Zurich; Sentiment, Zurich; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris; Last Tango, Zurich; Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva (all 2022), among other venues. Upcoming presentations include a solo exhibition at Cordova, Barcelona (November 2022) and a collaborative presentation with Tarek Lakhri at Istituto Svizzero, Palermo (October 2022).

**Cédric Fauq** is chief curator at CAPC Musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux.



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Moment*, 2022  
Exhibition view, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London



*Moment*, 2022  
Two-channel Full HD video installation, stereo sound  
107 min. (loop), Ed. 3 + 2 AP

# Deborah-Joyce Holman



ICATheatre, Thursday 24 March, 7pm

A new two-channel moving image work documenting two performers reciting excerpts of the seminal Cinéma Verité film *Portrait of Jason* by Shirley Clarke. Meditating on Black and queer subjecthood and portraiture in visual cultures, this work employs cinematographic tools from a wide range of reference points such as Cinema Verité, social media and popular culture and employs repetition and opacity in order to retain agency.

## Q&A

**Where did the initial idea for your new work come from?**

I read an essay by Tavia Nyong'o a couple years ago called 'Crushed Black'. It's a chapter of his book *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2018), which has informed my practice a lot. In this specific chapter, Nyong'o considers the 1967 Cinéma Verité film *Portrait of Jason* by Shirley Clarke through its technical faults, such as crushed blacks and blur, which allow spaces for the agency of the film's protagonist Jason Holliday. I couldn't shake the film after watching it, as I was taken aback by how violent and extractive it is, and felt I needed to engage with it in some way through my own work.

This project has grown out of two endeavors or questions: on one hand, I'm expanding on my engagement with tactics of refusal, non-performance, and other aspects of a positioning in opposition to the short-sighted and insufficient logic of Black representation that the Black struggle for liberation is co-opted into. And on the other hand, I hope it can be an amplification and an act of solidarity with Jason.

**How does moving image fit into your practice and what do you explore in your practice more broadly?**

I work with different media. A lot of my work has been object- or text-based. In 2020, I was commissioned to make a moving image work, which was the first time I even ever thought about it. I'm interested in exploring the limitations and possibilities of whichever medium I'm working with at that moment, so I was intrigued to work through moving image and to explore what questions arise through the process. In working with moving image, one aspect that I really enjoy is how collaborative the nature of it is and how much space there is to consider the process of working together, which hopefully informs the work, though this is sort of a project away from what is made explicit in the work itself.

As of the last couple of years I've been thinking about notions of refusal, especially in relation with visual culture and popular media. This has been the red thread of my practice, conceptually and formally. With object- and text-based works, I've been turning away from portraiture or figuration. I was interested in what would happen when that entry point is denied and a more in-depth engagement with this buzzword 'identity' is required. With moving image, I feel much more drawn to feature people, which has led me to consider ways to approach this with the same questions of refusal and illegibility.

**Do you feel like there's a direct connection to some of your other work that you've made?**

With this project, I was thinking about the refusal enacted by acts of recital and repetition. This includes engagements with notions of time in terms of non-linearity and cross-temporal engagement with Jason Holliday and Shirley Clarke's portrait of him. My more recent works include asemic text drawings, which were on view at Yaby in Madrid in 2021, and cardboard cut-outs painted with layers of black bitumen paint, *Untitled (for scale)*, exhibited in a group exhibition that's just closed at Kunstverein Last Tango in Zurich.

With the former, I was exploring language, slipperiness and illegibility, which were things I was again coming back to when working on the script, and approaching multidisciplinary artist Rebecca Bellantoni, who also made a film for Image Behaviour, and artist, writer and curator Imani Mason Jordan for the performances of it. With the latter, I was interested in the circulation of images of Black people, non-performance as acts of refusal and opacity, which are themes I've definitely had on my mind when working on this project.

### **Can you talk about the process of making this work?**

I wanted to make a two-channel installation with one actor on each screen. They would engage either in dialogue or monologue that would overlap at points. While working on the dialogue, I returned to *Portrait of Jason*. After conversations with my friend Noémi Michel, a brilliant writer, academic and critic based in Geneva, I grew very interested in the moments where Jason declares himself to be XYZ, like, 'I'm a lazy cat', 'I'm a stone whore', 'I'm a truth teller', as well as those where he promises to go into speaking about his suffering and his trauma as prompted by Shirley Clarke and Carl Lee off camera without getting into it. I decided to transcribe only these specific moments, and to build the rest of the film from there, led by the words, by Rebecca's and Imani's performances.

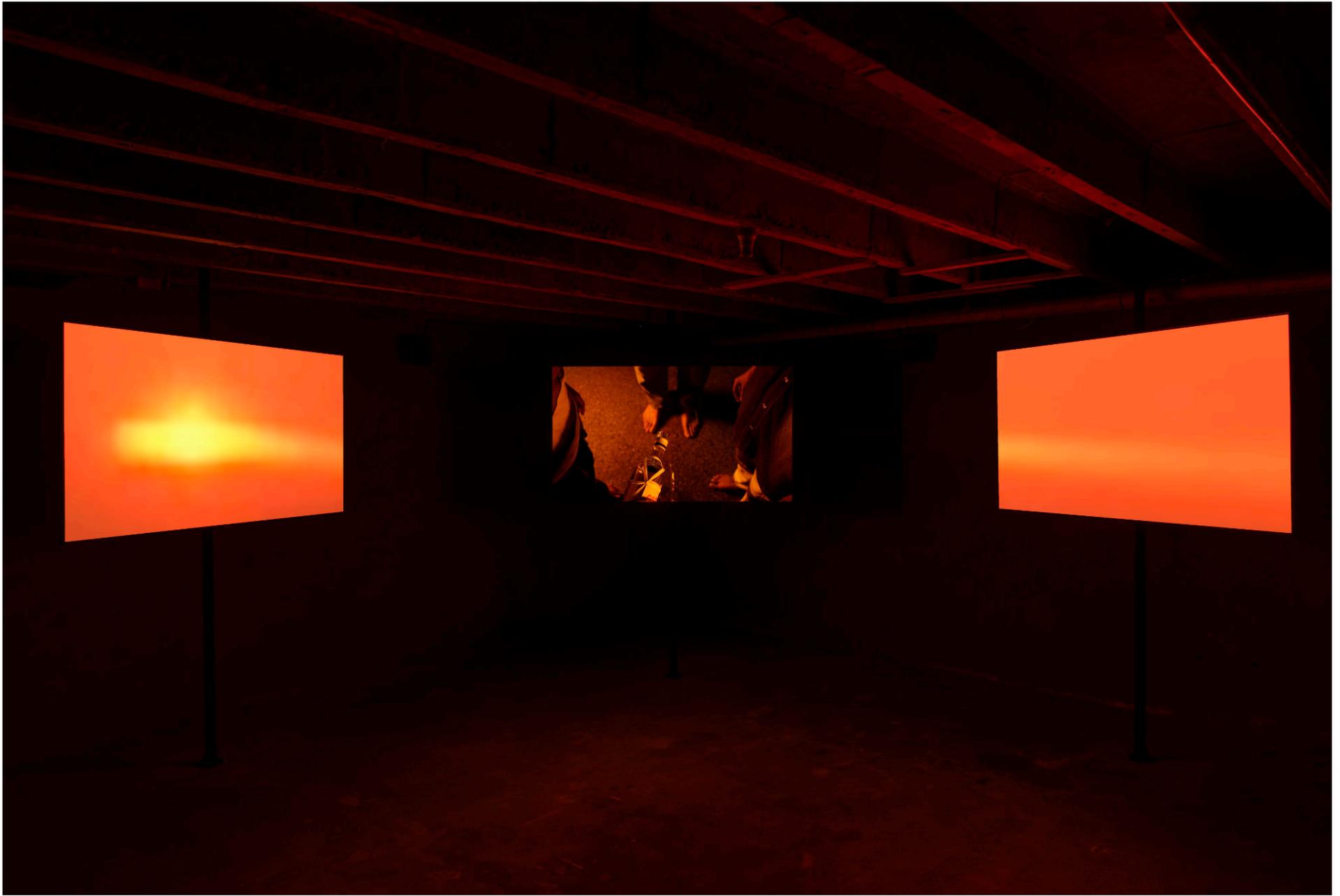
### **Was the process of working with a script and performers new?**

That was definitely new. I was interested in working with the two performers, Rebecca Bellantoni and Imani Mason Jordan, because they have a practice of refusal or complicating 'representation', as well as a specific relationship to performing for camera. It was important to me that I have a personal relationship with both of the performers, so that there is an element of trust and they would feel comfortable just walking off camera if they need to. The rehearsals with Rebecca, whose voice I am just completely floored by, have contributed a lot in the final stages of the film. They both bring something really, really different to the work.

### **Do you think the link to the film *Portrait of Jason* is important for people to know?**

Yeah. One of the reasons I wanted to engage with the 1967 film *Portrait of Jason* now, in 2022, was because the film really exemplifies a mainstream appetite for Black trauma on camera, which speaks to our times, too. It emphasises the voyeurism on the part of Shirley Clarke, as well as audiences, and the mythification of Jason at the hands of the white filmmaker who cut the 1 hour 47 minute film together from 12 hours' worth of footage. These are all very contemporary and ongoing issues – we've all seen how June 2020 was fuelled, the demand for trauma porn that ensued and the short-sighted, empty gestures of making Black folk 'more visible' across the mainstream as well as in the arts. So, as much of my practice, with this project I was interested in working through a complicated relationship with visibility, performance and portraiture, through the cracks in Jason's performance – not those where the supposed 'true' him comes out, but those where he refuses to be pinned down and counters his capture.

Deborah-Joyce Holman is a multidisciplinary artist based in London, UK, and Basel, Switzerland. Holman employs a variety of media in her practice, such as text, sculpture, installation, film-and image-making. Holman's work has recently been shown at Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (2022); Last Tango, Zurich (2022); Unfinished Live, The Shed, New York City & House of Electronic Arts, Basel (2021); 7th Athens Biennial (2021); TransBona-Halle, Basel (2021); Kiefer Hablitzel Prize nomination exhibition, Basel (2021); Conceptual Fine Arts Live, Milano (2021); Cherish, Geneva (2021); Yaby, Madrid (2021); Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (2021); La Quadriennale di Roma (2020); Material Art Fair, Mexico City (2020); A Soft Spiral (solo), Mikro, Zurich (2019); Fondation Entreprise Ricard, Paris (2019); Auto Italia, London (2019); Live In Your Head, Geneva (2018); Alienze, Lausanne (2018); OSLO10, Basel (2017); Locale Due, Bologna (2016), among others. As part of her curatorial practice, she worked as Associate Director (2020–21) and as Associate Curator (2021–22) at East London arts organisation Auto Italia. She is the founding director of 1.1, a platform for early-career practitioners in arts, music and text-based practices, with an exhibition space in Basel, Switzerland, which ran 2015–20. Deborah has curated the 2018 and 2019 annual group exhibitions for Les Urbaines, Lausanne.



Deborah-Joyce Holman and Yara Dulac Gisler, *Unless*, 2021  
Exhibition view, Cherish, Geneva. Photo: James Bantone



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Having a party (hope you will be there)*, 2019  
Exhibition view, Conceptual Fine Arts, Milan hosts Damien & The Love Guru

# DEBORAH-JOYCE HOLMAN

1991, Basel, Switzerland  
Lives and works in Basel and London

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## EDUCATION

2019–20 CAMPUS Programme, Nottingham Contemporary,  
Nottingham, Independent Study Programme  
2015–18 Haute École des Arts et de Design, Geneva, BA Fine Arts

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022  
Cordova, Barcelona (forthcoming)  
'Spill I-III', Istituto Svizzero, Archivio Storico di Palermo  
'Moment 2', Luma Westbau, schwarzescafé, Zurich  
'Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmare of  
weakness', Sentiment, Zurich

2021  
'Unless' (collaborative work with Yara Dulac Gisler), Cherish, Geneva

2020  
Material Art Fair, Alienze, Mexico City

2019  
'A Soft Spiral', Mikro, Zurich

2018  
'Rich, since my pinky points at me', Alienze, Lausanne

2017  
'O D E', Reto, Zürich

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022  
Nominee exhibition for the Swiss Emerging Artist Prize 2022, Centre D'Art  
Contemporain, Geneva  
'Gazed & Confused', Last Tango, Zurich

2021  
'Eclipse', 7<sup>th</sup> Athens Biennale  
'Explorer's Film Club', Transbona-Halle, Basel  
'Having a party (hope you will be there)', Conceptual Fine Arts, Milan  
hosts Damien & The Love Guru  
'Deadhead perfora', Yaby, Madrid  
'Lemania', Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

2020  
'FUORII', La Quadriennale di Roma, Rome

2019  
'Études sur l'Empathie', Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris

2018  
'Extime', Live In Your Head, Geneva

2017  
'Episode 10: Boudoir Sulk', OSLO10, Basel, Switzerland

2016  
'Venusia', Locale Due, Bologna

## SELECTED SCREENINGS AND PERFORMANCES

2022  
'Image Behaviour', Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (screening)  
TSCHÜÜSS festival, Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (screening)

2021  
'Unfinished Live', The Shed, New York & House of Electronic Arts, Basel (screening)

2019  
'Towards the Theory of Jet Lag', Auto Italia, London (performance reading)

## SELECTED CURATORIAL PROJECTS

2020–22  
Associate Curator, Auto Italia, London,

2020–21  
Associate Director, Auto Italia, London

2015–20  
Founding Director, 1.1 Basel, Switzerland

2019  
'Cinders, sinuous and supple', Les Urbaines, Espace Arlaud, Lausanne (curation)  
'Alternative Graduate Show', BBZ BLK BK, Copeland Gallery, London (curation)  
'... and their tooth, finest gold', Les Urbaines, Espace Arlaud, Lausanne (curation)

## TEXTS

2022  
Deborah-Joyce Holman, 'My Tooth Is The Point From Which The World Unfolds', Madrid:  
\_AH, 2022

2021  
Deborah-Joyce Holman, 'A Physical, Visceral Act of Peeling Away, response  
to Orpheus by Moved By The Motion', Zurich: Schauspielhaus Zürich, 2021  
Deborah-Joyce Holman, 'What if, on James Bantone with Mohamed Almusibli', Berne:  
Kiefer Hablützel Prize, 2021

2020

Deborah-Joyce Holman, 'Assembling A Black Counter Culture', interview with DeForrest Brown Jr., Milan: Kaleidoscope Magazine, 2020

Deborah-Joyce Holman, 'Introduction for The Slow Grind', London: The Laundry Arts, 2020

#### SELECTED PRESS

2021

Eleonora Milani, 'Lemania. Reflections on other scenes. A survey of artistic production in the Léman Region', Flash Art Magazine, 2021

2020

Mark Pietersen, 'Aesthetic curiosities and adventures at the 2020 Material Art Fair', thisispublicparking.com, 2020

Moritz Weizenegger, 'Les Urbaines 2019 - Austauschplattform für Experimente', zweikommasieben, 2020

2019

Cécile Della Torre & Samuel Schellenberg, 'Corps bétons et transidentitaires aux Urbaines', Le Courrier, 10/2019

Olamiju Fajemisin, 'On Tinos with Deborah Joyce Holman', Provence Magazine, 2019

Nkenna Akunba, 'BBZ BLK BK: Alternative Graduate Show 2019', Skindeepmag.com, 08/2019

Jamila Prowse, 'The BBZ art show looks at what it means to take up space and to survive', Dazeddigital.com, 08/2019

'BBZ Black Book: Alternative Graduate Show 2019 @ Copeland Gallery', Thewhitepube.co.uk, 08/2019

Marcia Elizabeth, 'MOVE by Ronan Mckenzie challenges stereotypes around the black female body through dance', Bubblegumclub.co.za, 04/2019

Harry Burke, 'A Series Of Readings Philosophy Of And Performance Towards A Jet Lag At Auto Italia', London, King Kong Magazine, 2019

2018

Jared Davis, 'Fragmented, reformulated, multifaceted: The ever-shifting body online & its means of articulation in 'meet space' for Les Urbaines', AQNB.com, 12/2018

Will Furtado, 'GOD'S P(L)AN', Contemporaryand.com, 06/2018

Chris Soal, '1.1 – create platforms over galleries', Bubblegumclub.co.za, 05/2018

#### AWARDS

2022

Société Generale Swiss Emerging Artist Prize

«To-gather» ProHelvetia Grant, WET LAND: New Terrain for Collaboration, spaces of sharin

2021

National Lottery Project Grant, Arts Council England  
Nominee for Kiefer Hablitzel Prize

2020

Christina Spoerri Prize

Pro Helvetia Projektförderung

Jugendkulturpauschale, Kultur-Abteilung Basel-Stadt

Luma Foundation Artist's Grant

#### RESIDENCIES

2020

Explorers Film Club, Atelier Mondial, Basel

2019

Gasworks, London

Tinos Quarry Platform, Tinos