

UNBINDING THE SYSTEM

Samuel Levi Jones:
Bad Practice, 2014,
mixed mediums on
canvas, 85 by 61
inches. Courtesy
Papillion, Los
Angeles.

Samuel Levi Jones, whose exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem is his first in New York, deconstructs old encyclopedias to set the record straight.

by Leah Ollman

*And still a world begins its furious erasure—
Who do you think you are, saying I to me?
You nothing.
You nobody.
You.*

—Claudia Rankine¹

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

“Samuel Levi Jones: Unbound,” at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, through June 8.

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THE SHELF BENEATH the broad worktable in Samuel Levi Jones’s studio sags to the floor under the heft of a Chinese edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, medical textbooks, a set of the *Book of Knowledge* and random Harvard Classics. Alongside the heaped volumes are covers from reference books that Jones has rendered into so many dry husks by wresting them from their pages and tearing out their stiff cardboard inserts. For the past several years, he has been stitching these fabric, leather and leatherette skins into grids and other, less regular patterns and mounting them onto canvas, spines face down.

The destruction of each volume yields a scarred surface, distinct in its display of violation. Shreds of cardboard cling to the cloth. Loose threads dangle. Seams gape, their ragged edges exposed. Sewn together, the covers of faded burgundy, diluted rust and sober blue accrete into viscerally immediate, texturally rich fields. Quiltlike, they conflate order and disorder, denial, defiance and declaration. By tearing apart these ostensibly authoritative, comprehensive volumes, Jones

symbolically dismantles the systems of values embedded within them, the structures of power they support. He registers, with both violent force and raw elegance, his protest against such totalizing yet exclusionary narratives.

The ripping, cutting and scraping are “cathartic,” he says, the reconstruction “a bit more playful.”² The resulting works resonate with process-driven Post-Minimalism, the temporal complexity of found-object assemblage, and the material resourcefulness of sewn handwork. A dozen of Jones’s “paintings”—his term for them, though the only paint involved appears along the edges of the canvases—were shown last fall at Papillion in Los Angeles under the title “Black White Thread.”

Related work and a site-specific installation are on view in “Samuel Levi Jones: Unbound” (Mar. 26–June 8) at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the artist’s first New York show. The museum named Jones, 37, recipient of the 2014 Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, a \$50,000 award given annually to an emerging or mid-career African-American artist. Previous winners include Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, Leonardo Drew and Trenton Doyle Hancock.

BASED IN PLEASANTON, outside of Oakland, Jones began using encyclopedias in 2011, when a graduate-school friend gave him a 1972 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He started looking at it in terms of power, asking: Who is in control? Who is being represented? Who is being left





View of Jones's exhibition "Disposing Histories," 2014. Courtesy Recology, San Francisco.

out? He created an image-only archive of the notable people featured in the books by excising all of their portraits and mounting each on a small masonite panel, painted black on the reverse. Only 13 of those 736 faces belonged to African-Americans. Jones installed *736 Portraits* (2012) in a syncopated spray across a wall 20 feet wide and 16 feet high. Inverting the balance of legitimization, he hung only the portraits of African-Americans facing out, so that their stars alone shone within the vast constellation of panels. The rest of the notables were denied visibility, their faces supplanted by blankness.

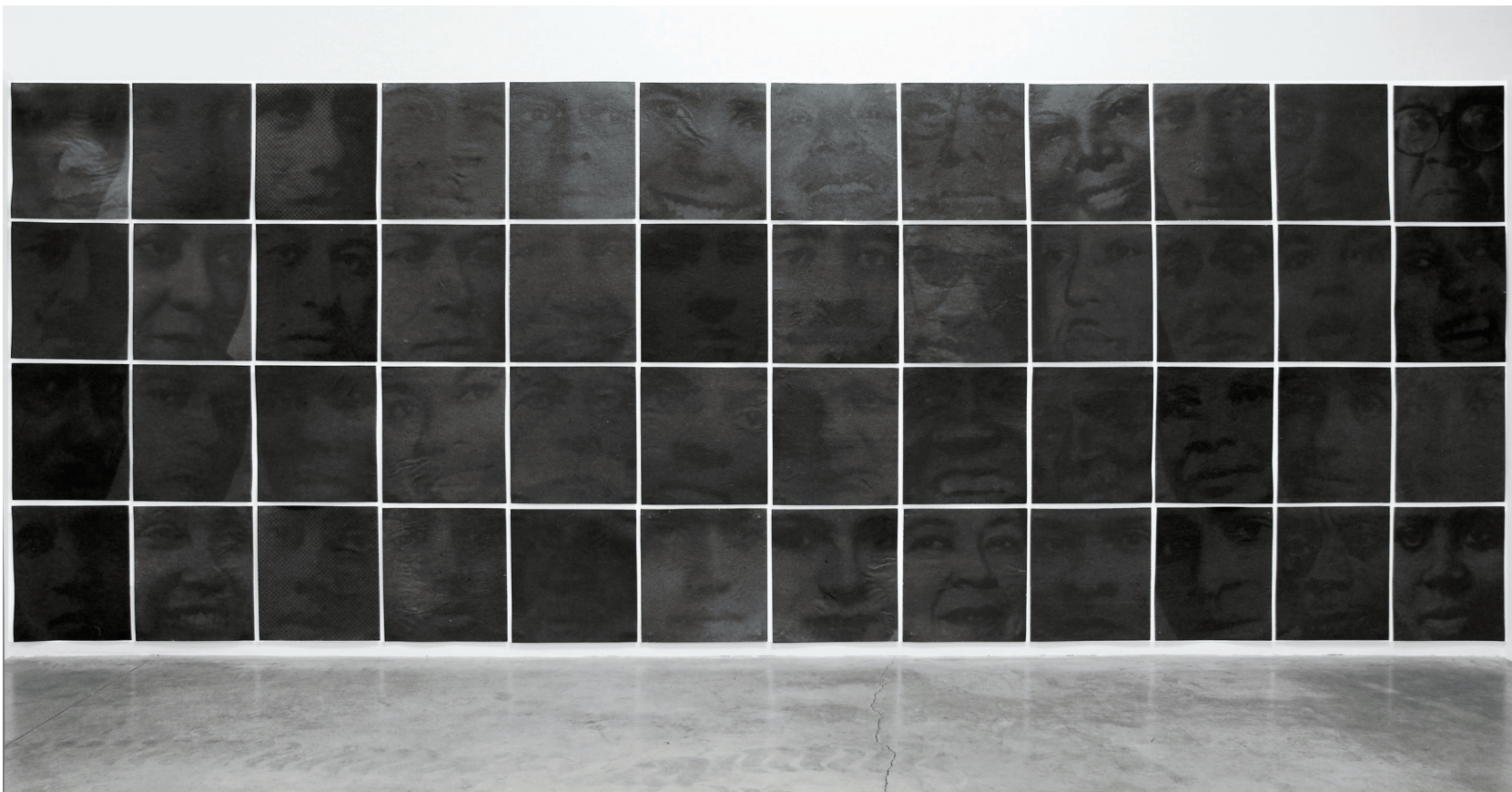
Another series of portraits that Jones based on the reference volumes responded to the related issues of representation and exclusion raised by a Gerhard Richter installation from 1972, the same year the encyclopedia set was published. Richter's "48 Portraits," made for the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale, depicted icons of Western culture from the 19th and 20th centuries. All of them are white males, painted from their encyclopedia entries in black and white, with pronounced attention to their uniform, homogeneous appearance.

Jones sought out images of 48 African-American cultural figures (24 men, 24 women) who could have appeared in the 1972 edition of the encyclopedia but had not: Bessie Smith, Gwendolyn Brooks, Marian Anderson, Nina Simone, Duke Ellington, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and George Washington Carver among them. He

printed enlarged close-ups of their faces on 24-by-22-inch sheets of paper made from pulping the encyclopedia's pages. Their features remain suspended in latency; they barely emerge from the rich, charcoal gray ground. Jones gave his subtle work of reclamation the doubly packed title: *48 Portraits (Underexposed)*, 2012.

Both series of portraits were part of Jones's MFA show at Mills College in Oakland in 2012. Later that year, he met Mark Bradford, who became a mentor and friend, when both were in a group exhibition at the Watts Towers Arts Center in L.A. Bradford encouraged him to dig even deeper into his materials, a prompt that led Jones toward the muscular, metaphorical practice of skinning books.

JONES WAS BORN and raised in the small, working-class town of Marion, Ind., the site, in 1930, of one of the last public lynchings of African-Americans in the U.S. One of the two teenagers killed was a relative. Jones, the youngest of four sons, lived in a shelter for part of his childhood. He was the only one in his family to attend college, having been recruited to play football at Taylor University, a small, Christian liberal arts school in Upland, Ind. In his final semester as a communications studies major, he took an introductory photography class, which offered him a channel for exploring social issues—namely the history of discrimination, a subject that carried palpably into his own generation, into his own life.



Jones put art on the back burner for several years while working as a district manager for the Boy Scouts of America and at a commercial printing house in Indianapolis. In 2006, he went back to school for a BFA, at the Herron School of Art and Design at Indiana University. Most of his work there, in photography, video and sculpture, was overtly political. It was emotionally arduous for him to make, he recalls, but allowed him to process acutely felt injustices: prejudice on the football field, racial profiling at the airport. He made bumper stickers proclaiming, “Democracy is a Fallacy,” and a photomontage showing himself half in black-face makeup and holding a football with a noose around it. He also made photographs of humble farmworker housing near Indianapolis, out of an affinity for the undocumented laborers subjected to a spectrum of inequities. Studying the intersection of feminism and art also struck a poignant chord.

In 2010, Jones moved to Northern California to attend Mills, where he entered a broader conversation about post-blackness, in which black artists resist another kind of racial profiling, the critical expectations of what “black art” should be. His work remained grounded in race and gender-based issues and explored historical, collective invisibility as well as its flipside, the vulnerability of conspicuousness, of hyper-visibility. His methods, though, became less barbed, less didactic.

Jones has crafted a mode of abstraction freighted with relevance, through the material and conceptual deconstruc-

tion of foundational texts. Like many others of and around his generation, he is investigating history’s slippages between actual and ideal—the past’s solids, voids and gray areas—through gestures of deletion, erasure, cancellation, rupture.

His destruction of books rankles some, Jones says, but he notes that most of the books he uses are castoffs, having devolved into office decoration or film props. He recently took ownership of 400 law texts from a firm in L.A., the volumes stacked in a thick, thigh-high wall in his studio. Who were they written to serve? Whose rights do they protect? Whose power is affirmed and codified within?

The questions persist, and are especially pertinent today, even as the use of printed compendia diminishes and the books themselves take on the status of relics. The 2010 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is its last in print form. Jones muses on getting a copy and using it to revisit his *736 Portraits* piece. In the 1972 set of the encyclopedia, several of the African-Americans included were not alphabetized under their own names, such as King or Douglass, but grouped as a category, under their racial designation. When, Jones wonders, did that practice end? After nearly 40 years, how different is the ratio of representation? How much has changed? ○

48 Portraits (Underexposed), 2012, inkjet prints on recycled *Encyclopedia Britannica* paper, approx. 8½ by 23 feet. Courtesy Papillion.

1. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Minneapolis, Minn., Graywolf Press, 2014, p. 142.

2. Interview with the author in Jones’s studio, Pleasanton, Calif., Jan. 2, 2015.