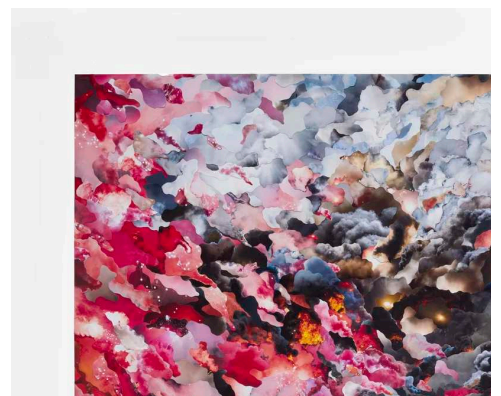
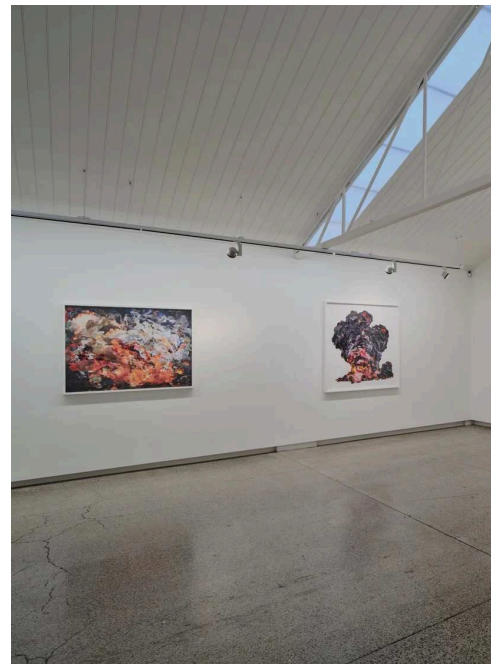
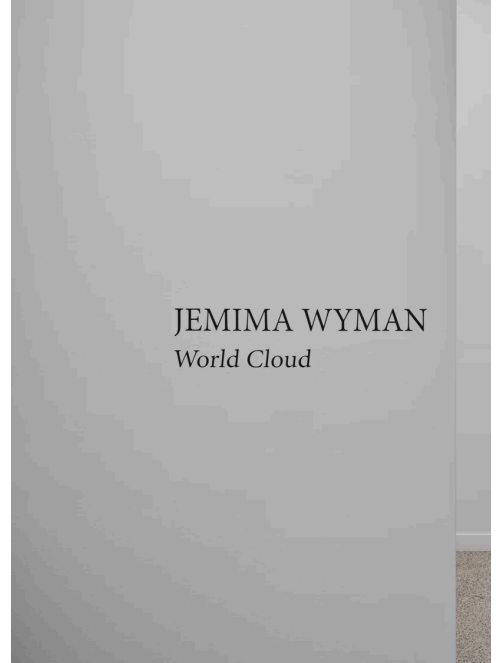
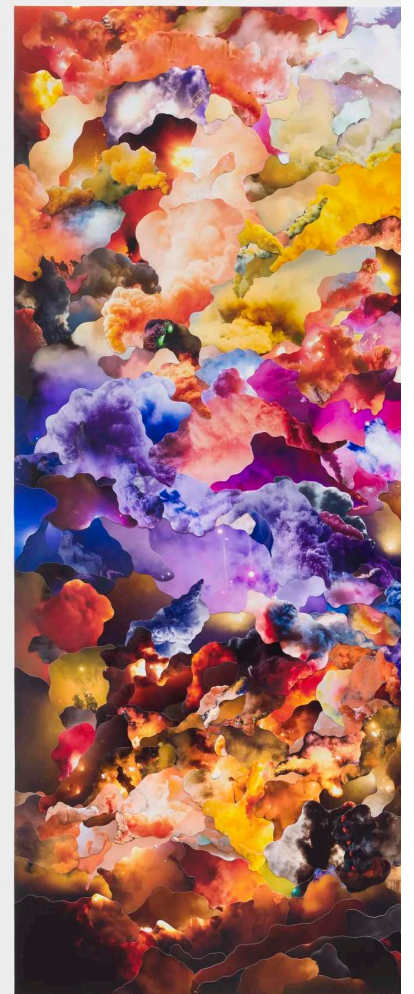
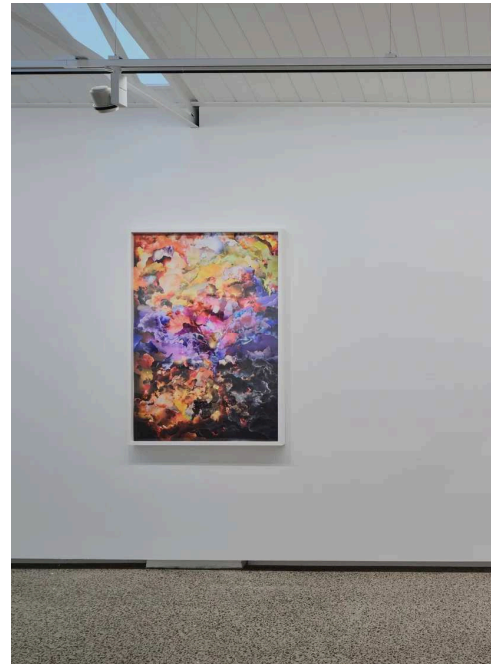
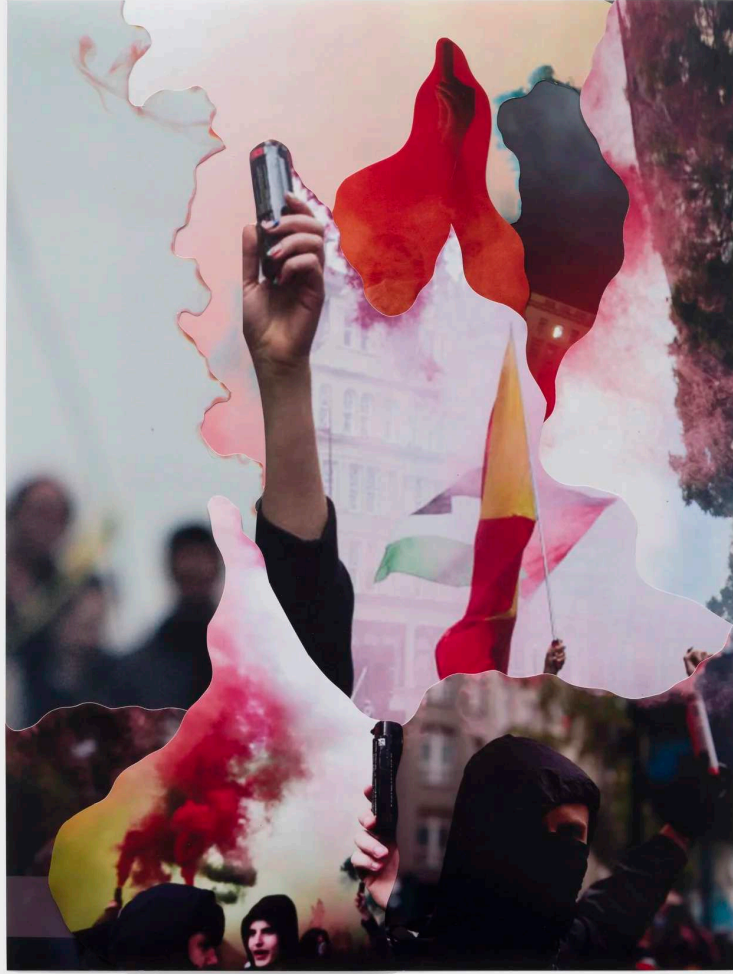
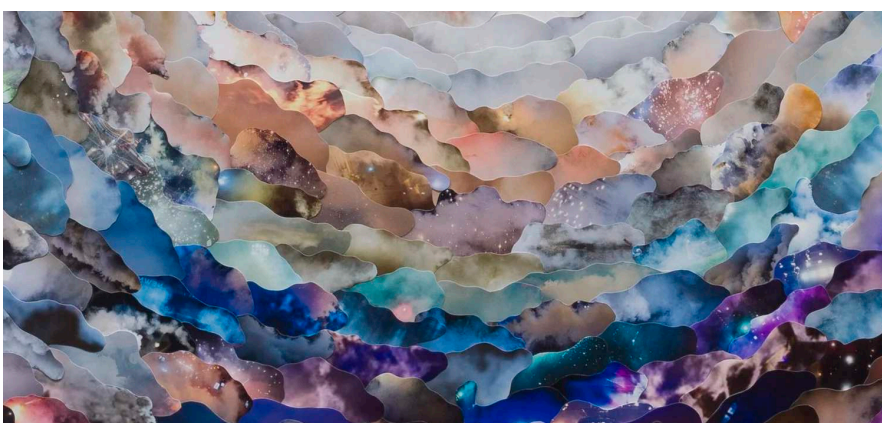
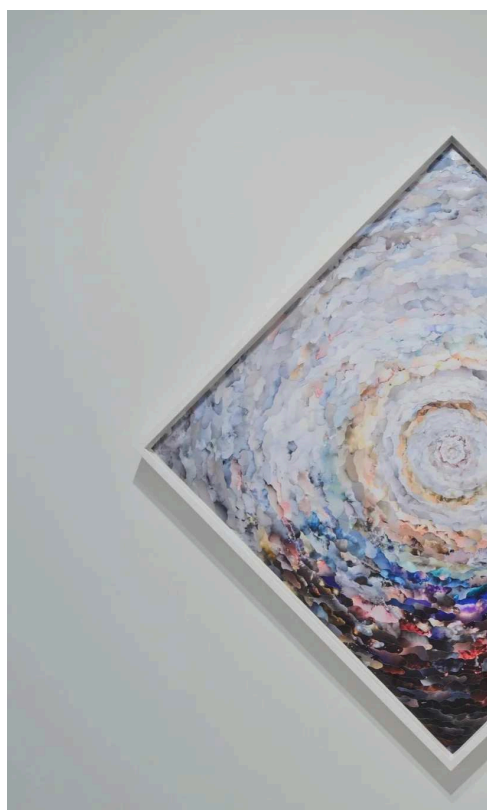
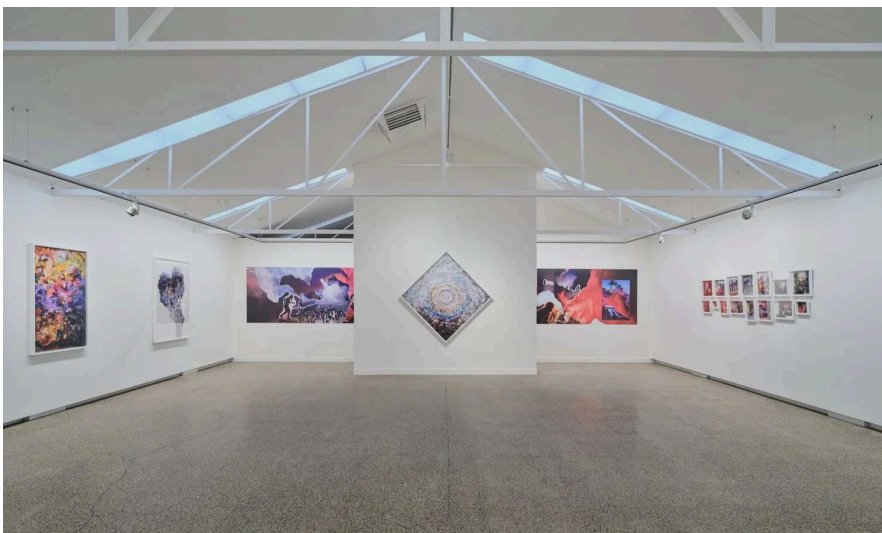
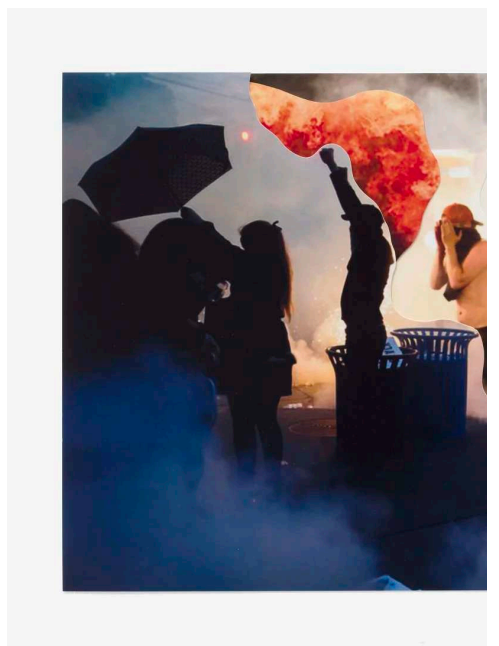
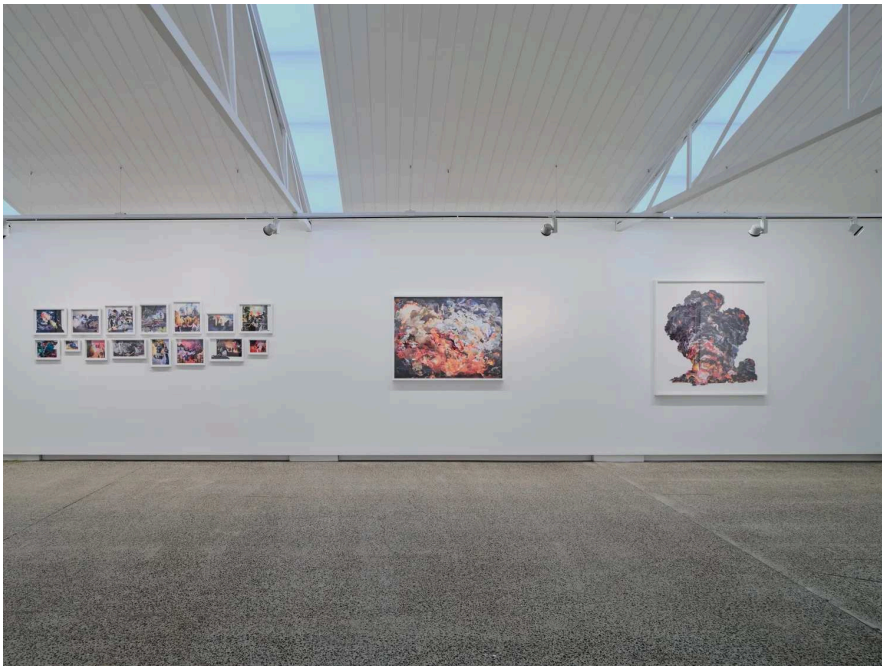
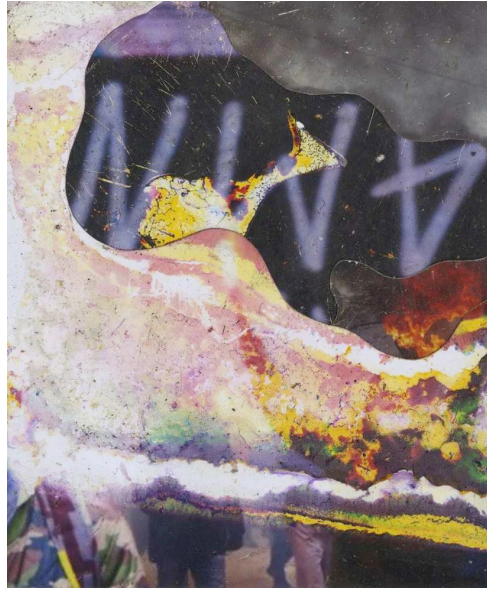


World Cloud









Jemima Wyman: A Painter of World Clouds

by Dr. Omar Kholeif

I first met Jemima Wyman in 2010 in a downtown warehouse building in Los Angeles. The journey to the West Coast of the U.S. was part of a personal act of reconciliation and reconstitution. At age 7, I had moved just south of the site of where Wyman's studio was situated—what would become a space of impermanence for the artist, as a wave of redevelopment swept the area. Luxury condo buildings, coffee shops, and the gentrifying instrument of art were deployed to offer downtown L.A., a fresh Hollywood sheen.[1] My earliest memory of the city clasped neatly into the seat of Wyman's imagination, and preoccupation, with camouflaged bodies, and with the digital silkscreen fashioned by the spectre of smoke in public protests.

We paused for a breather on the roof of the building. I lingered down a lane in time to a small screen in my childhood living room. Here, a corpus of bodies performing as one—ones right outside of our doorstep, were clustering in protest, and then disbanding.[3] Me and my siblings were forever sanctioned indoors—the threat of tear gas—the series of aerolite compounds, my mother worried, could blind us, and sully our lungs, was being emitted into the air to 'neutralize' crowds. A smouldering thickness creolized the sky—black smoke from burning cars formed a shroud that concealed any semblance of place. This, for me, was to become the architecture of Los Angeles, and specifically South-Central L.A. in 1992, during what was referred to as the 'Rodney King' or 'L.A. Riots'. [3] The haze from this event would later feature in several of Wyman's artworks.

The exposure that I felt being in proximity to a centre of such melancholy—one where the innocence of childhood play was withheld, found a riposte in Wyman's abundant spirit and tactical pursuits. We would proceed to work together on an exhibition for the Liverpool Biennial, producing camouflaged mandalas, developed over years with various communities, which would come to form architectures of shelter and respite. In the intervening years, I have visited Jemima, almost once a year, bearing witness to her performances with textile, her assemblies of abstract bodies, and her collages with pictures of dissent. Querying the artist's journey, the most devastatingly candid of offerings, as often is, was the story of her beginnings.

Wyman is a Palawa woman who was born in Sydney and raised in North Queensland (Dysart, Moranbah, Tolga and Mackay). Her own visual sense of identification and what would emerge in the public sphere as a question of both indigeneity and authenticity, were perplexing, challenging, and unresolved growing up—a matter further complicated by living in a diasporic context. Attending the Queensland University of Technology, Wyman's initial desire to pursue painting was met with defiance. In the early noughts, art schools were navigating the politics of post-modernity and modernist disambiguation.[4] The jargon around the open studio practice of environmental art and transdisciplinary new media was used to discourage female painters from pursuing what was perceived as decorative, leaving the 'history painting' to the men.[5] Wyman eventually resurrected the act of painting through her own distinct language. Using a Turkey baster—the mythologised phallus perceived to be a tool for individually performed female insemination, was used by the artist to create drip paintings on canvas. Claiming this instrument was as an act of queering.

Wyman used the syringe-like object to pour latex, ink, enamel, and housepaint onto countless surfaces. Her configurations, most often realised across multiple panels presented surreal landscapes composed of modernist stripes, and lattice-like grids that at first evoked Abstraction Expressionism, a space historically dominated by male figures such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Marth Rothko, bar the few women, such as, Joan Mitchell, and later in life, Lee Krasner. A decade on, Wyman's paintings began to resemble the disguised, un-catalogued figures of the Zapatistas—a leftist Liberation army of the Mexican state. Paintings became assemblages—text embedded within them, invoking the history of political posters. For this author, they are evocative of the paintings of British artist, Lubaina Himid especially her Freedom Kangas (2017) and her Metal Handkerchief (2019) works, where each painting is a summoning. For Wyman it was to 'riot.'

The artist's nebulous landscapes contort the ocular, conjuring Bridget Riley's optical illusions, such as the artist's 'poster poems' from 1968. Frames of reference were expanding. Occupied with the mask as a sealant—an object that suppresses human identification, Wyman explored how masking offered the state apparatus a mechanism to suppress human empathy with prisoners of war and victims of torture, such as the covered and wounded figures in Abu Ghraib. Eager to interrogate the racialised and classist feelings of anxiety elicited by facial dressings, Wyman studied the emotional responses to the Balaklava, and grew concerned with the complete disappearance of the self that is induced by wearing the appropriated Guy Fawkes Mask. The façade of a face covering returns us to the artist's early paintings. The primary material in most house paint is latex—the milky fluid found in plants such as poppies. Visually, this conjures the materiality of rubber gloves—an everyday instrument for sanitation. The resurrection of the mask in mainstream culture after the Covid-19 pandemic crisply comes into view. The act of concealing and camouflaging subjects of war is a visual trope found in contemporary visual culture since the Second Iraq War. An unceasing swell of protest images emerged in the hyper-saturated digital sphere of early web 2.0 technologies. Victims of conflict, nonetheless, were still commonly disassociated from human perspective. The distancing of frames of violence intimates that the wounded body of war is unsanitary—concepts that have been debated by queer, feminist and urban philosophers such as, Judith Butler and Paul Virilio.

Fast-forward to 2023, and another form of hermetic masking, arises. A flattening of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.[6] Despite a seeming richness in visuality appearing in the public realm after the prominent protests of Black Lives Matter both in the United States, and globally, we are equally, bearing witness to an act of segmentation and fragmentation. Solidarity amongst creative practitioners has become sectioned into policy-speak and metrics in seats of higher education, galleries, and museums.[7]

Jemima Wyman's political interest in the mutable nature of representation is what led her to Los Angeles. The California Institute of Arts (CalArts) had become home to the historic feminist art programme founded by artists, Judy Chicago, and Miriam Schapiro. Los Angeles was also a haven for the aesthetic politics of artists engaged with the social aspects of visual culture, home to artists including, Andrea Bowers, Nancy Buchanan, and Suzanne Lacy.[8] After completing her MFA, the world was in flux—the Arab Uprisings and Occupy marked the beginning of a world order delineated by civil war and constant revolutions mediated through broadcast, and increasingly, through social media platforms. Wyman's interest in how patterned fabric served as a form of codification was amplified. The fluidity of gender and personhood as mutable within these sites served as a consistent topic of question. Could a curtain, a colour field, a work of lyrical abstraction, offer shelter to these individuals, or perhaps, relieve?

In the exhibition *World Cloud* (2023), Wyman is painting, conjuring, summoning the ghosts. Now, the practice is constituted by meticulously cutting thousands of digitally printed photos from numerous archives, to form plumes, mandalas, and hazes, which become architectonic accumulations of smoke from protest. At first glance, the ethereal plume is revealed to be a siege unspooled from a subaltern realm. *Plume No. 23* appears as if it is spitting, transmitting, and unclenching figures whose visual identity has become subsumed by news and photo agencies such as Getty Images. In *Plume No. 22*, a pink car crash, unfolds. In *Plume No. 21*, shades of blue—the gendered colour of melancholy, abound. How does one decode this? The infinite titles that accompany each artwork, mark every visual protest—forming a rhizomatic public archive. The lengthy titles identifying and situating these conflicts, are demonstrative of Wyman's concern with indexicality—her desire to produce a capacious, open-source library before it disappears. The visual references of racialised, gendered, and/or perceived 'othered' bodies have consistently vanished—vanquished by state regimes, news and photo agencies, copyright law, and the like. Wyman liberates them with her *World Cloud*—evidently a play on the term, word cloud—computational tags that give preference to commonly used words, creating deterministic social hierarchies.

In the artist's *Haze* constellations, such as *No. 12*, a cluster of images unfold akin to a leviathan. Is this goliath? In *Haze No. 11*, peering at the hovering bodies, I am reminded of the late queer photographer Jimmy De Sana's staged bodies from the 1980s, and the sense of the exposed and unprotected—a volatile vessel that is prone to attack. The celestial is also evoked, suggestive of Chicago-based artist, Paul Heyer's otherworldly paintings on silver lame. An iridescence transmutes the subject from a present state into a singular, contoured, world of their own making.

Wyman, despite life or circumstance, is consistently cultivating her embryonic ideas. A new body of work, *Distress* from 2023, presents pigment prints forged by the anxiety provoked by the Los Angeles floods, which have occurred regularly since 2005 through to 2023. Tangentially influenced by Leonardo da Vinci's *A Deluge* (1517-1518), now in the UK's Royal Collection Trust—the work seeks to interrogate the environmental impact wrought by the distributed inhabitants of Southern California. Animate bodies return in another of Wyman's new series, *Declassified*, which present constellations of protestors who have fallen out of the fold—people erased by the archive. Here, human detritus coupled with Wyman's negative space form plural *Haze* landscapes—a shrine to those who have been erased by official record or history.

Collaging the unseen—each cut-out fosters an embodiment for the absent figure—a scene for them to co-exist. Wyman has described the constellation of works on view as part of an 'Atlas of Protest', but it is also an interrogation into what constitutes the notion of a dominant ocular sensibility or ideology. She queries: who constructs it? And where do these images find their indigenous site, their space of origin? Is it the subject (body) in the image, the photographer, the news agency that owns its perceived copyright, or is it the spectator, who brings to the animate body in conflict, their own projections? This line of interrogation is one that I have long been preoccupied with. Both Wyman and I, have found inspiration in the collage works and visual words of artist, Arthur Jafa. After a recent talk at the Hammer Museum, Jemima pointed out a single sentence by Jafa that felt both emotional and aptly situated: 'where the images meet is in you'. The human's capacity to feel and construct fields of vision, what the spectator brings to the picture, is integral, generating its distinct aesthetic politics.

Wyman's collaged forms destabilise traditional schools of thought. Her works are paintings, as much as they are forms of architecture and photography. They pose a fascinating challenge to Walter Benjamin's oft-debated concept of the aura and the art object in the age of reproducibility. Wyman's 'World Cloud' may be composed of found, culled, and cut images, but as they are constituted entirely by hand, using the same ink and pigments that would be found in painting; they possess a magnificent aura that pulls together space and time, nurturing a distinct world all of their own. Whether we are at war with an image, or curious to engage its materiality, Wyman proffers sensuous visual pleasures that transcend any singular reading.

When the smoke dissipates, what side of the political fence will you be standing on?

[1] For more on the subject see: Jay Lin (2019) *Taking Back the Boulevard: Art, Activism and Gentrification in Los Angeles*. New York: NYU Press.

[2] My extensive preoccupation here has related to how aerial photography and smoke are used as a mechanism to flatten bodies during acts of protest. For one reference, see: *Goodbye, World! Looking at Art in the Digital Age* (Sternberg Press 2018).

[3] The subject of the Los Angeles Riots is a sensitive one and of significant media attention, documentaries, and drama series. For a cursory literature review, one could consult, *Official Negligence* by Lou Canon (1998): London and New York: Random House; *The Riot Within* by Rodney King and Lawrence J. Spagnola (2012): London and New York: Harper Collins or indie publishers' takes such as, *Moral Uncertainty* by Bob Almond, et al.: from Andalou Books.

[4] Significant references relevant here are Marcia Brennan (2004) *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, The New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Also see: Klaus Schönberger (2010) 'Studying Theory/Theories of Art School?'. Available at: <https://transversal.at/transversal/1210/schonberger/en>, accessed 11 June 2023.

[5] Amelia Jones, a professor at the University of Southern California (USC) is a key reference point here. See: Amelia Jones (2004) *Irrational*

Modernism. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Amelia Jones's collaborative text with Andrew Stephenson *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (1999). London: Routledge. Also see debates regarding sexism towards females in art schools in: Hilary Robinson (2021) 'Women, feminism, and art schools: The UK experience'. *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 85 (March April). See: Liz Kim and Amy von Lintel, 'Women Artists and Teaching: An Intersectional View,' *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*. Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 2021), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12486>.

[6] My scholarship seeks to explore the mutable contours of racialised, specifically, how Black visibility is presented across various mainstream cultures. These thought forms are developed through and from the writing of certain authors, principally, Saidiya Hartman, Krista J. Thompson, Teju Cole, Kevin Young, Angela Davis, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. A reading list is available upon request.

[7] USC professor, Sarah M. A. Gualtieri, is one of the leading historians on migration and race, and a key reference point in U.S. ethnicity study. One could begin with, Sarah M. A. Gualtieri (2009) *Between Arab and White*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. The artist Richard Bell has also long been an inspiration in this regard. His landmark keynote lecture, 'Aboriginal Art: Is it a White Thing?' presented globally, has served as an anchor.

[8] Jenni Sorkin (2011) 'Learning from Los Angeles: Pedagogical Predecessors at the Woman's Building'. *Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building*. Otis College of Art and Design. pp. 36–65 and Laura Meyer (2003). 'The Los Angeles Woman's Building and the Feminist Art Community, 1973–1991'. In David E. James (ed.). *Sons And Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.* Temple University Press. pp. 39–62.

[9] Walter Benjamin's concept of the aura has been an intense point of negotiation. In recent books, such as *Internet_Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs* (Phaidon 2023), I argue that Benjamin's notions of the aura can be redeployed in the digital age. Indeed, sensuous pleasures can be gleaned in works of art experienced on screens and tablets, if the works are native to those platforms. Likewise, it is my argument that Wyman's plumes challenge the singular notion that the aura exists within an individual image or work, but rather that it can be transposed across surfaces, mediums, art-forms, and platforms.

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< Atmospheric Disturbances

Air >

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