

# UVP Commission

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## Steffani Jemison



Steffani Jemison  
*Figure 8*, 2021  
Commissioned by LightWork UVP

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### Video credits

Performance: Alexis Page  
Harp: Jess Garland  
Additional recording: Steffani Jemison  
Sound: Sean T. Davis / The HalfStyle

Steffani Jemison's practice turns on a fundamental tension between the opaque and the transparent, the hermetic and its hermetic. On one hand, she seeks tools from the past, particularly Black vernacular knowledge, that make space for radical change. You intuit layers of history and deep rigor in her work, yet it resists interpretation. Perhaps the tools are broken or we have forgotten how to use them. Where each viewer goes with that predicament is up to them—an instructive exercise in a year so clearly revealing of many broken tools and systems.

With *Figure 8*, Jemison investigates movement as embodied knowledge. Like many conceptual artists, Jemison employs two traditionally opposed domains: abstract systems of meaning such as language, and the body, often imagined as the last redoubt of unmediated authenticity. She is also highly aware of conceptual art's erasure of race. In a *BOMB* interview, Jemison remarked, "I learned very quickly that one person's neutral vessel is another person's politically freighted, irreducibly marked load."

In 2009, Jemison read a *New York Times* profile of Alexis Page that detailed the young gymnast's struggle to balance school with a grueling training schedule and lengthy public transit commutes between Harlem and a sports center at the far edge of Brooklyn, as well as the incredible financial strain on amateur athletes competing at an elite level.

Jemison contacted Page (who has continued her athletic practice and works with athletes professionally) and the two began a collaboration. This included movement exercises and building a range of shared references informing their process. Black modernist Jean Toomer's poem, "My Body Is Opaque," and contemporary poet Morgan Parker's "Hottentot Venus." Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, a speculative history of young Black women during the Great Migration that reframes "waywardness" and other policed behaviors as both political resistance

and the collective creation of radical beauty. Early Black cinema and vaudeville. In video conference rehearsals, Jemison read aloud as Page translated the words into gesture.

Shot on an overlook in Harlem's Marcus Garvey Park, *Figure 8* only hints at the upheaval happening out-of-frame through the absence of other people. Guided by Page, the camera moves continuously over eighteen minutes in an eponymous rhythmic gymnastics move, an apparatus whose motion reflects hers: in front and behind, above and below, side to side. The performer relates to the camera reciprocally, responding to its resistance and velocity.

Scale and proximity shift dramatically. We experience Page alternately as a figure against a ground who returns our gaze, and as a topography in her own right. Her figure bends, inverts, disappears completely, then sweeps over us like a celestial body eclipsing all else. A virtuoso, Page maintains assured control throughout this performance. Though not at the center, we feel centered. Though tethered, our movement is fluid. We are choreographed.

We hear harp glissandi slide between the tonal centers of *I'm a Little Blackbird*, which vaudeville singer Florence Mills first sang. Page's voice free-associates between properties of waves and the pattern of constructive interference known as a "standing wave" or harmonic resonance, political movements of resistance, and the way that dancers frame movement-in-place as active opposition: to stand, push your feet into the ground and grow.

Halfway through, Jemison superimposes a second video. Here, Page wanders her home reading aloud. In the park video, the performance is for the camera. This feels as if it were shot blind with no intention of being seen, but the sound is synced and the voice anchored in the body. Page recites a poem by Jemison, riffing on their shared references. She enunciates deliberately, pausing between and letting each word resonate and die away as if each were an end-stopped line. The series of "I am" statements becomes almost abstract,

both emphasizing and undercutting their existential assertion.

The superimposed video makes highlights brighter and shadows darker where they overlap in the two scenes, a form of the "constructive interference" that Page muses upon earlier. This resonates with post-colonial theorist Édouard Glissant's remark that opacity is a right that the oppressed must claim in defiance of the colonizer's demand for transparency to power. But the overlay is neither transparent nor opaque.

Instead, it suggests projective, imaginary space, transforming the public space of the overlook, a site of surveillance, into a reflecting pool for Page's interiority. Literary theorist Kevin Quashie calls this realm "watcherless" and "indescribable," a place of quiet that supplements the conception of Black subjectivity as resistance and a wellspring of political imagination.

*Figure 8* does not demand decryption. It operates by touching upon whole histories without directly pointing to them. The viewer may struggle to comprehend, but then Page is not a transparent subject—the piece does not function as portraiture. Encountering this exploration of interior experience on a monumental scale in UVP's public space evokes Hartman's enigmatic words, now an epigraph for Jemison's and Page's project: "Her body is exposed, but she withholds everything."

Anneka Herre

Anneka Herre is program director of Light Work UVP.

Steffani Jemison is an interdisciplinary artist based in Brooklyn, New York.  
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Alexis Page works at the US Athletic Training Center and is based in Harlem, New York.

















Portrait of Steffani Jemison with *Figure 8*