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Plié Meets Twerk in a Performance of Black Queer Joy

In Jumatatu Poe's work, movements that appear classical blend seamlessly with voguing, African dance movements, and J-Sette, a style sprung out of black Southern drill teams.

Meredith Sellers | February 3, 2017



Jumatatu Poe's "Let 'im Move You: A Study" (2013/16) and "Let 'im Move You: This is a Success" (2016) at ICA Philadelphia (all photos by Ryan Collerd)

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PHILADELPHIA — Rihanna was blasting through the DJ’s sound system, remixed with Italian prog rock band Goblin’s soundtrack to the 1977 horror masterpiece *Suspiria*. Two performers emerged from the audience, clad in tiny track shorts and shredded polo shirts emblazoned with hashtag marks in pink tape. They strode onto the small, slightly raised, bare wooden stage, and the shorter one, William Robinson, raised a tin can. In carefully rhythmic, halting steps, he danced across the stage, sprinkling grits as if in sacrament. The pair moved together for a few moments, circling in a sort of shuffle, then stopped. Choreographer and dancer Jumatatu Poe addressed the audience. He noted the institutional setting, the white cube, and the majority white spectators. “I brought some black folks with me, just in case,” he said, as projected video images of around 30 black men and women appeared behind him.

The performance was [Jumatatu Poe’s “Let ‘im Move You: A Study”](#) (2013/16) and “Let ‘im Move You: This is a Success” (2016), choreographed with [Jermone Donte Beacham](#) and curated by [Danielle Goldman](#) as part of ICA Philadelphia’s [Endless Shout](#), a multifaceted exhibition exploring performance and improvisation. In Poe’s work, movements that appeared classical, like a plié, blended seamlessly with voguing, African dance movements, and J-Sette, a tightly choreographed dance style sprung out of black Southern drill teams.



William Robinson and Jumatatu Poe in “Let ‘im Move You: A Study” (2013/16) at ICA Philadelphia

James Blake's somber ballad "Measurements" began to play. The dancers struck a pose: left foot pointed in front, arms akimbo on the waist. Poe shifted first, pulling his legs apart, swinging his hips wildly, and grinning like a madman. Robinson followed suit, mimicking the movements a moment later, two beautiful black bodies moving in tandem. Their pumping fists and fast, swirling movements were deliberately ill-paced for the slow, melancholy music. Break dance drops, high kicks, heads pulled back in the ecstasy of a self-caress, ingratiating bows with steeped hands — each move made clear that these were performative gestures of joy. That we, the predominantly white audience, were consuming and exoticizing their bodies, as white people have consumed black bodies, for entertainment and gain, for hundreds of years.

In the postmodern cauldron of cultural references Poe draws from, J-Sette emerges as the most overtly political choice. In a 2013 [interview](#) with the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Poe discusses his discovery of J-Sette on YouTube and his fascination with what he describes as "this huge, combustive energy in these really small spaces." He first found videos of Beacham "dancing in the garage, the living room with the table pushed back, the kitchen sometimes, or in the bedroom, behind the bed." The domestic scale of the choreography coupled with its eruptive gyrations had Poe considering its origins in the black South. He ruminated on the tight spaces involved with the service work that people of color in the South often do, and the emotional labor that work demands, drawing lines between it and dance through the performance of joy for others. It's rare to see an artist smile during a performance, but Poe and Robinson were both grinning throughout, exuding a sly gaiety that they wielded like a knife, a weapon to disarm viewers.



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William Robinson and Jumatatu Poe in “Let ‘im Move You: A Study” (2013/16) at ICA Philadelphia

The music cut suddenly and sharply as the dancers continued moving in offset synchronization. Poe and Robinson broke off in separate directions. The latter affixed his hands to the wall, while the former wove through the crowd. He placed his foot on a bench, and a woman seated on it slid over to accommodate him. Both dancers leaned into the wall and twerked to a spoken rhythm: gaga-gaga-ga-ga, gaga-ga-gaga-gagaaa. They then moved back to the stage, got on the floor, entwined their legs, threw off their shirts, and jerked down their pants. Bare assed, they fitfully twerked with labored breaths as a thin keyboard organ played against the sound of a metronome, worlds away from the previous R&B remixes.

Poe and Robinson performed an iteration of the same piece last summer on a stretch of 52nd Street near Baltimore Avenue, deep in West Philly. 52nd Street was once considered the “Main Street” of West Philadelphia. It was a center for jazz, shopping, and black culture until it fell into a spiraling decline in the 1980s and ’90s, when it became better known for crime than culture. In a panel after the ICA performance, Poe described the experience of dancing there in contrast to dancing at ICA, on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, an institution historically rife with white supremacy; he spoke of the street’s summer heat, the homophobic jeers, and pushing, pushing through the performance. That version of the piece was sans nudity, but with plenty of booty popping.



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Toward the end of the [video documenting the work](#), a woman appears in the doorway of the Chinese restaurant they're dancing in front of and crosses her arms disapprovingly. Everything from the grime on the sidewalk to the diegetic noise of passing cars seems hostile. It was an action that carried real personal risk. Poe spoke about "circumnavigating expectations" with his work, and indeed, "Let 'im Move You: A Study and This is a Success" is a strange, eclectic mixture that has roots in many cultural traditions, but no true home. The work changes with the context of each space it's performed in and with each audience it's performed for. Poe challenges viewers by confronting them simultaneously with pleasure and with a self-awareness of their gazes meeting his black, queer body.

Robinson got up, and Poe kneeled in front of him. Hands out stiff in a near embrace, they shared breaths as Robinson slowly sank into Poe's lap. They rocked each other back and forth, sharing breaths, touching lips, but not kissing. "Do you want not to know me?" Robinson asked into Poe's slightly open mouth. "I want not to know you," replied Poe into Robinson's. A few more mumbled exchanges. "Let us dissolve into one another."

Beacham appeared and stood behind them. Still locked in an embrace, they arched their backs away from each other, and Beacham pulled a chartreuse henley over Poe's head. He placed a dark green jersey over Robinson's head. Still clutching each other, they moved into the audience. Beacham pulled off their track shorts and dressed them in pants leg by leg. Flinging themselves back against the wall, hands stretched out, the dancers reached for each other. The DJ, Zen Jefferson, stepped away from his booth and, sharpie in hand, traced their profiles gesturing in eternal longing. They moved, and the line followed them. Robinson walked away and melted into the audience. This marked the end of the first piece.



Jumatatu Poe, William Robinson, and Jermone Donte Beacham in Jumatatu Poe's "Let 'im Move You: A Study" (2013/16) and "Let 'im Move You: This is a Success" (2016) at ICA Philadelphia

A throbbing beat picked up, a remix of Erykah Badu's "Trill Friends." The ICA transformed from a rarified art gallery into a club. Now Poe and Beacham danced together, smiling and twirling. Step to the left, hands up, folded on top of the head, point out, turn, hands up again, hands on hips, twirl. Poe took out his smartphone and posed, Beacham just behind him. They grinned for the screen — he was taking live video. Jubilant, he pranced around the room, weaving his roving video selfie through the crowd, which shifted to accommodate his whims. We watched him watching himself. He exited the gallery, and everyone craned their necks, wondering, should we follow? All rules had been broken. Anything was possible here. He returned momentarily, put the phone away, and swept into a pose with Beacham on the stage. They turned away from each other and faced the crowd.

Poe locked eyes with me and approached, a toothy smile painted on his face. I held his gaze, wondering when it would break, wondering if I was about to become part of the performance — but of course, I already was. It was utterly infectious, and I couldn't help but grin back. He looked out across the room and picked four members of his ensemble who'd been embedded in the audience. They joined him on the stage and writhed together to Ciara's "I'm Out," then snaked through the audience. The floor vibrated with beats and electricity.



Jumatu Poe's "Let 'im Move You: This is a Success" (2016) at ICA Philadelphia

The group danced out of the gallery to a remix of Beyoncé's "Sorry," heading onto the landing, lassoing with their arms as they moved down the ICA stairs and into the lobby. The performance was boundless, breaking the fourth wall, transgressing the space of the stage, then the gallery, and ultimately the viewer's voyeuristic pleasure. This time, the audience followed, enraptured and watching from the balcony. Arms raised in a final movement, the dancers finished, as waves upon waves of raucous applause were showered upon them.



Jumatatu Poe's "Let 'im Move You: This is a Success" (2016) at ICA Philadelphia

Jumatatu Poe's ["Let 'im Move You: A Study"](#) and ["Let 'im Move You: This is a Success"](#) were performed at the Institute of Contemporary Art (University of Philadelphia, 118 S 36th Street) on January 22. [Endless Shout](#) continues through March 19.

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