

And ever an edge

04	<i>And ever an edge: Studio Museum in Harlem Artists in Residence 2022–23</i>
	by Yelena Keller
08	JEFFREY MERIS
15	<i>Cosmic Bodies</i>
	by Re'al Christian
20	DEVIN N. MORRIS
27	<i>Improvisation in the Making</i>
	by Dani Brito
32	CHARISSE PEARLINA WESTON
39	<i>Cut Over Cross at the Black End Side</i>
	by Darla Migan
44	Artist Biographies
46	Contributor Biographies
47	Exhibition Checklist
52	Studio Museum Staff
53	Studio Museum Board of Trustees



JEFFREY MERIS

Studio Museum Artist In
Residence 2022–23 Jeffrey
Meris in his studio, August 2023.
Photo: Lelaie Foster





COSMIC BODIES

Re'al Christian

"Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say."

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

"Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience [and] attempt[s] at new and unprecedented commingling with cosmic powers."

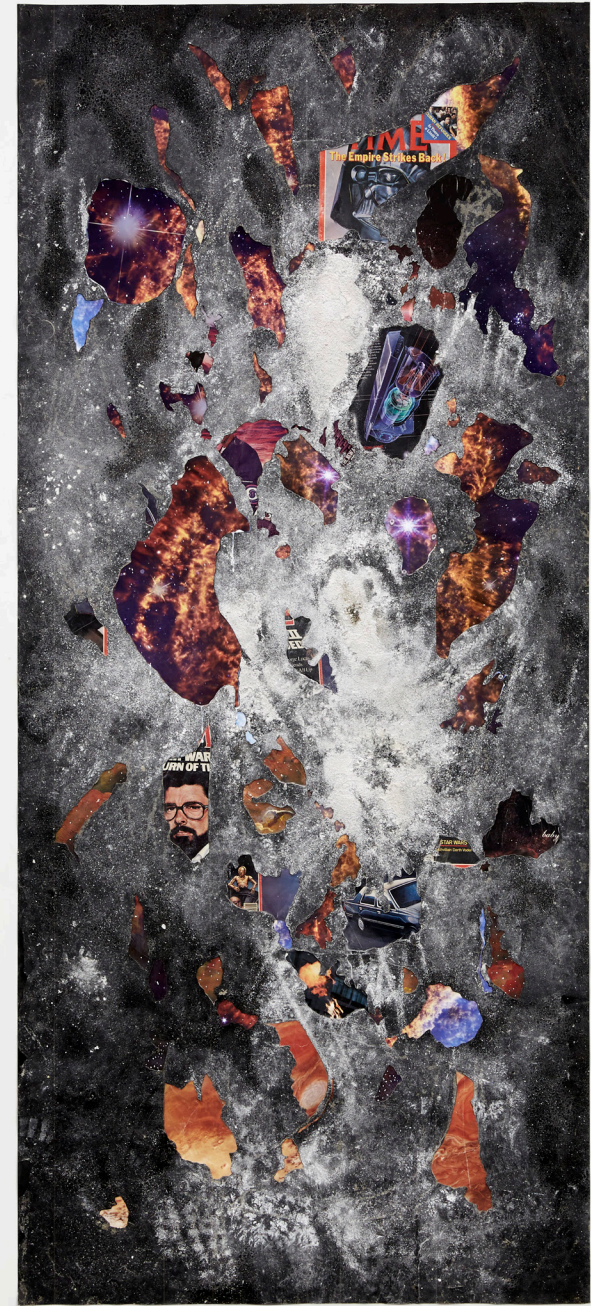
—Walter Benjamin, "To the Planetarium"

Working with metal, calcium, limestone, asphalt, and plaster, artist Jeffrey Meris incorporates both additive and reductive modes into his practice. Scraping, cutting, welding, combining medium after medium—this continuous process of making and unmaking plays out on a bodily level, as the artist fuses personal narratives and collective experiences of diaspora throughout his work. Meris describes his work as "environmental," the exact nature of which could take on multiple connotations. He contends with environments both built and natural, impermanent and static, deeply rooted and sedimented, and in need of constant care. Born in Haiti and raised in the Bahamas, Meris anchors his work in the Caribbean and his experiences navigating nationhood within this geographical context. More broadly, his interest lies in examining the social construction of queer blackness holistically, exploring its intersections with notions of the global, borders, and citizenship.

Throughout his practice, Meris often speaks to material ecologies of reuse, refuse, and renewal, drawing on cultural associations within the diaspora. Drawings and sculptures comprising discarded materials, T-shirts, crutches, hangers, and plastic bottles nod to processes of upkeep and repair, of building on decay. The material acts as a point of departure often abstracted through the process of transforming everyday objects into works of art. In *The Block is Hot*, from his series "Now You See Me; Now You Don't" (2020—), a plaster cast of the artist's torso suspended in

COSMIC BODIES

REAL CHRISTIAN



a motorized rig jostles up and down on a sheet of perforated steel, slowly destroying itself over time. The series was partly inspired by an incident in which the artist was wrongfully accused of evading subway fare by the NYPD.¹ He received a ticket on which his height and weight had been grossly exaggerated. The body in *The Block is Hot* approximates this indexical figure, a subject of the misrecognition of the Black queer body, but here divorced from time, space, and context. For his *Shirt vs. Skin* series (2021), Meris took terry cloth rags and old T-shirts previously used to wipe away rust from his metal sculptures and transformed them into color field paintings stretched over aluminum frames, testing their tensile strength and resiliency. The brilliant cerulean blue in these works references images of the clear oceanic waters often associated with the Caribbean.

In his reuse of materials, he considers not only their shelf life but their futurity, and by extension, that of the subject itself. His twelve-part suite *I, Used to Be* (2020), for instance, incorporates gestural drawings rendered in plaster particles (remnants from his sculptures) on a kind of roofing paper typically seen throughout the Caribbean. The drawings, made to mirror the size of the artist's body and recalling the grandeur of Renaissance altarpieces, at once evoke the space of the home as well as experiences of labor and migration embedded in the diasporic experience. Meanwhile, the abstract and the figurative intertwine as Meris traces the spectral presence of the human body. Some of his sculptures, such as *Mouth to Mouth* (2019), comprising a steel structure shaped from a chaise lounge, recycled bottles, resin, and fiberglass, surrogate the human form through vaguely skeletal apparatuses. His more recent sculpture *To the Rising Sun* (2023), composed of crutches, similarly alludes to a body that is not there.

The sculptures *Catch a Stick of Fire I and II* (2022), exhibited at Matthew Brown, Los Angeles, and Socrates Sculpture Park, respectively, bear a different relationship to the body. Curved aluminum tubes bloom into botanical-like structures subtly evoking Billie Holiday's "strange fruit,"¹ with a bullet-shaped plant vessel hanging from each branch. Also referencing the anthropomorphic Bullet Bill from the Mario video game universe, the vessels point to the violence embedded in our popular culture or hidden in plain sight.² Meris in turn appropriates an object synonymous with aggression against Black communities and transforms it into a sanctuary, a space in which new histories can take root.

Meris doesn't intend to conflate diasporic experiences, but rather to illustrate how processes of colonization bear similarities across cultures—despite various linguistic, political, and economic divergences, the colonial mission of total control, of constructing otherness, tends toward a certain uniformity. As Meris's work reflects, this desire for control is projected onto the colonial body as well as the environment itself. Land, body, water, and the borders between them become superfluous in the establishment of a new colonial order. Meris wrestles with this ongoing rationale, seen most presently in the continued positioning of the Caribbean as a paradise, what Édouard Glissant calls a "conjectural place,"³ amid an industry of tourism and offshore financial intervention. His environmental concerns raise larger



Imperial Strike (2023)

questions about the ecological circumstances in which race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationhood are forged in relation to our physical surroundings. For Meris, environmental themes open conversations on the prevailing legacies and myths of colonization, specifically settler colonial practices of displacement and extraction. The land becomes a keeper for these histories, a porous container wherein slippages reveal the environmental manifestations of colonization's myriad aftermaths.

Meris's new body of work looks toward space, the so-called "final frontier," to not only examine how conversations around the cosmos closely mirror the colonial language of domination and control but, perhaps more importantly, to also envision how blackness exists within this particular environment. As a continuation of the *I, Used to Be* series, Meris turns his attention toward coded representations of blackness in media and science fiction, with the cosmos as a fitting backdrop. The artist uses *Time* and *National Geographic* magazines as source materials for the collaged drawings. Meris brings our attention to the stark dichotomies between representations of whiteness and blackness in these forms of media, as well as the tropes forced upon the latter, to highlight the frameworks that dictate how and where blackness is seen. Similar to the earlier works in the series, the drawings approximate the artist's body—they are not exactly portraits, but archives of consumed media that represent the Black community, albeit imperfectly. Works such as James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Toni Morrison's "Recitatif", in which the protagonists surrogate Black experiences, inspired this examination, as well as preexistent archetypes of fantasy, speculative fiction, and Afrofuturist reimaginings of preexisting narratives—à la Octavia Butler's sci-fi novels, or Sun Ra's epic film *Space Is the Place*. One drawing, titled *Imperial Strike* (2023), features photographs of characters from George Lucas's *Star Wars* collaged onto an astral background. The space opera sees both a villain and an antihero in Darth Vader, a symbol of disembodied blackness, while the subservience

and discrimination levied against droids, like C-3PO and R2-D2, has long been interpreted as a metaphor for queer and BIPOC—coded experiences.

If the Black body is a landscape, it is not a conjectural place, but a site where multiple histories unfold in opposition to spatiotemporal heterogeneity. The concepts of blackness and darkness often intertwine—darkness is seen as an absence, as nothingness, but ultimately, nothing comes from something. “[T]he darkness. Nobody made that. It just happens. Light and all that—someone made that; it’s written that they did. But nobody made the darkness,” says Sun Ra.⁴ Meris’s work contends with the poetics of this delicate intermingling of the Black body and space-time. Thinking through the cosmos as an ecological manifestation, the artist complicates our understanding of both darkness and blackness and, by extension, representations of it. He invites us to consider our proximity to absence—to the immaterial terrain between something and nothing—in his additive and reductive processes, what he gives to the work in relation to what is taken away. Representation, or the ability to capture a subject, might diminish our sense of the cosmic or the natural world; in Meris’s work, with its embodied materiality, he pushes beyond the limits of representation to evoke new associations with blackness as witnessed through a queer, ecological lens.

ⁱ Interview with the artist. See also “Practices of Care: Jeffrey Meris Interviewed by [Erica N. Cardwell](#),” *BOMB* (June 20, 2022), accessed September 2023, www.bombmagazine.org/articles/practices-of-care-jeffrey-meris-interviewed/.

ⁱⁱ Socrates Sculpture Park, “Jeffrey Meris,” accessed August 2023, www.socratessculpturepark.org/artist/jeffrey-meris/.

ⁱⁱⁱ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. Originally published in French by Gallimard, 1990), 37.

^{iv} Sun Ra quoted in W. Kim Heron, “Space is Still the Place,” *Metro Times* (June 6, 2007), accessed August 2023, www.metrotimes.com/music/space-is-still-the-place-2187462.