

Samuel Levi Jones, *Joshua*, 2016



Mixed media, law book skins on canvas, 61 1/2 x 77 in.
Chazen Museum of Art General Endowment Fund and Alice Drews Gladfelter Memorial Endowment
Fund purchase, 2018.5

Artist Biography

My process consists of breaking down the source material then reconstructing it into something visually interesting in order to generate dialogue about the original material itself.

—Samuel Levi Jones ¹

Samuel Levi Jones (American, b. 1978) was born and raised in Marion, Indiana, in a biracial household (his mother is white and his father is black). Levi Jones's biracial identity informs the instinctual decisions he makes while constructing a piece, such as the binary color contrasts that he explains are a natural outcome of his practice. Throughout his career, Jones has consistently focused on creating work that engages with issues of representation, documentation of history, the nature of information, structures of authority, struggle for racial equality, and the ongoing protest against injustice. Jones's advice to students on the role of the artist's personal responsibility and integrity: "Firstly thrive within thyself, and secondly 'the world.' The contemporary art one makes should become you, not you it."

Growing up in a small town in Indiana, Jones would go to the public library to do research for school assignments using the encyclopedia and other reference books. He soon began to reflect on what information, which histories, whose images, were not included in those books; who was not being represented. In his early work in photography, he created portrait series of African Americans that did not appear in the encyclopedia and other reference books, pulping the books themselves in the process—a radical act of protest in itself—to make the paper the photographs were then printed on. Asked about how he feels about destroying books, he reflects on the lack of representation and asserts: "When you think about that, it makes it easy to destroy the material."

Jones earned a B.A. in Communication Studies from Taylor University in Upland, Indiana, where he was recruited to play football. In his last semester, he took a photography course and was hooked. After working for a few years, he went back to school to receive a B.F.A. from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, Indiana in 2009. In college he trained as a photographer; he refers to the camera as his entryway into art. Although his current work does not involve photography—which does not serve his current process—he still considers the method of composing an image to be similar. He received his MFA in Studio Art from Mills College in Oakland, California in 2012. There, he began to incorporate encyclopedias into his artwork. When he began graduate school, he expected to seek a position teaching photography at a university afterward. He has said that his expectation have since evolved.

In 2014, Jones won the Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize. His debut exhibition in New York occurred at the Studio Museum in Harlem the following year. He has held residencies at a waste-management facility in San Francisco.

¹ "Artist x Artist: Mark Bradford and Samuel Levi Jones," *Studio Magazine* (Winter/Spring 2015), 49

Location

Joshua is currently installed at the Chazen Museum in Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

Joshua is a large painting created by Samuel Levi Jones in 2016. The horizontal artwork measures sixty-one and a half inches by seventy-seven inches or roughly the size of a five by six-foot area rug. The painting is composed of the deep red spines and covers of thirty Illinois state law books. Arranged in a five by six grid, the book covers are splayed flat and their edges have been stitched together using a combination of zig zag and straight stitches. Joined as one piece, the thirty book covers are adhered to a large black canvas as evidenced by the edges of the painting. Though this work is mainly red, hints of cream and cardboard brown appear throughout the painting as evidence of the artist's process. These bits of cream and cardboard reveal the inside of the book cover that has been pulled away during the creation of this piece. In a few places, the brown cardboard book spines appear to be collaged over the red covers and seem out of place. Additionally, ghostlike remnants of text appear throughout the painting. The artist has buffed or scraped away much of the identifying characteristics of the books' titles and subjects. The first book in the second row on the left side gives us a clue about the book's identities as the words "West's Illinois Digest 2d" adorn the cover, though hardly visible. In other places, words such as "criminal", "homicide", "officers and public employees –", "assault", and "end" appear in gold text. The accompanying text has been buffed away as seen by scuff marks on the painting's surface.

Content and Context

In *Joshua*, Samuel Levi Jones engages gun violence and the persistent occurrence of racially biased police shootings of African American men in the United States. The piece is named for Joshua Beal, a 25-year-old Indianapolis man who was fatally shot by two plainclothes police officers on November 5, 2016, while he was participating in the funeral procession for a cousin as it passed through the majority-white Chicago neighborhood of Mt. Greenwood. A heated and racially-biased confrontation arose and when Beal displayed his legally-owned gun he was shot eight times and killed. The officers involved were not criminally charged for the shooting.

The work is one of a number created from the red covers of discarded Illinois state law books, which are sewn together and mounted onto canvas to create an abstract “painting” on canvas. In his work, Jones calls attention to the inequality that exists in contemporary power structures—in this case law enforcement and the legal system. In choosing to make this work using law books, the artist asks the question: “Who was the law written for? It was not written for anyone who wasn’t white.” The artist further articulates the message and his critique of the system of justice by selectively revealing the gold-embossed words on the covers in this order if read from top left to bottom right: “End/Assault and/Homicide/Criminal/Officers and Public Employees.” Jones acquired his first batch of 400 law books in December 2014, not long after the protests and riots following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and he commented in an interview at the time that his use of law books, “For what’s going on it’s very appropriate from a personal standpoint and from the current things that are going on, it’s very fitting.”

The act of deconstructing and desecrating the law books by ripping off the covers and discarding the contents is parallel to the process of removing and withholding information in the historical event that the encyclopedias memorializes. By presenting this void, the artist compels us to consider who creates the information, what information is left out, and who does it serve. The process of destroying the books is a cathartic process and a radical action for the artist himself: “Calling attention to the struggle is a means of grappling with or surviving the past in the present, and what feels like will be an ongoing maltreatment of the other.” Jones’ radical flaying of books challenges the viewer to question sources of knowledge and authority as they are unjustly wielded in today’s society and his intention is to reach a broad audience and move his viewers to engage in conversations that will inspire societal change.

Discussion Questions

1. Samuel Levi Jones uses book covers as a material but intentionally refers to the covers as “skins” when discussing the work. In what ways are the covers like “skin” and why might this distinction be important to Levi Jones?
2. Levi Jones has said that his color palette isn’t intentional and often is based upon the set of books he’s working with. Given that the books used here were already red, what might the red color symbolize in a larger context?
3. Though this painting is titled “Joshua,” it is abstract. Without more context, the viewer might not be able to fully interpret its meaning. Can a work of art that is abstract also be realistic? Can a work that is realistic also be abstract?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

El Anatsui (Ghanaian, active in Nigeria, b. 1944), [Danu](#), 2006, Aluminum, copper wire, 88 x 138 in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2006.35. On view in Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17.

In a similar way that Jones utilizes the skins of books as the material of his artwork, so too does African artist El Anatsui use the wrappers of alcohol caps to speak to a history of colonialism and alcoholism.

Honoré Daumier (French, 1808—1879). - [Oh, my son, what an admirable scene!](#) *You see from here the palace of the Exposition, The Temple of Peace . . . , - Yes Papa, and the military school, too! (O mon fils! quel admirable tableau! Vois-tu d'ici le Palais de l'Exposition, ce temple de la Paix!... - Oui papa, et l'Ecole militaire aussi!)*, number 7 from the series *News (Actualités)*, 1867. Lithograph, 11 1/2 x 10 7/8 in. Gift of Helen Wurdemann, 1979.64.

In this satire, French artist Daumier uses humor to comment on military presence under the auspices of peacekeeping. Much of his work skewered the French government.

Adrian Piper (American, b. 1948). [Forget It](#), 1991. Color lithograph. Gift of Richard E. Brock, 2016.7.6.

Conceptual and performance artist Adrian Piper highlights race and gender in her highly political work. This piece features photographs taken for the *New York Times* and Black Star agency alongside a credit card application. In the background we see three monkeys: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.



Chazen Museum of Art

Fall 2020 Faculty Curriculum: Activism through Art

Diego Marcial Rios (American, b. Mexico 1962). [*Run! It is the Police*](#), 1987, Woodcut, 38 1/2 X 61 1/4 in., Edward Rolke Farber Acquisition Fund purchase, 1989.51.

According to the artist, the inspiration for this print was the artist's fear of the police and "other oppressive agencies" in the United States.

Additional Resources

Samuel Levi Jones's website: <https://samuellevijones.com/>

"Artist x Artist: Mark Bradford and Samuel Levi Jones," *Studio Magazine* (Winter/Spring 2015), https://issuu.com/studiomuseum/docs/studio_ws15_hancock_singles/49?e=2586965/11816241 [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

"Samuel Levi Jones Artist Talk," *Black White Thread*, Papillon, Los Angeles, CA, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x2brzqisvc>

Maya Dukmasova, "Sixteen months after cops killed Joshua Beal, still no ruling on whether the shooting was justified," *News & Politics* (March 26, 2018), <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/joshua-beal-joseph-treacy-thomas-derouin-greenwood/Content?oid=43961784> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Juliet Helmke, "Pulped Fiction: An Artist Destroys History in Order to Rewrite It," *Modern Painters* (May 2017), <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=aft&AN=122874899&site=ehost-live&scope=site> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Asraa Mustafa, "Chicago officer cleared of shooting Joshua Beal has history of racially charged violent encounters," *Chicago Reporter* (June 20, 2019), <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/chicago-officer-cleared-of-shooting-joshua-beal-has-history-of-racially-charged-encounters/>

Leah Ollman, "Unbinding the System," *Art in America* (April 2015) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Seph Rodney, "An Artist Gives Us a Vision of the Future Through Books," *Hyperallergic* (January 6, 2017), <https://hyperallergic.com/348748/an-artist-gives-us-a-vision-of-the-future-through-books/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]