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## Jeff Sonhouse's Latest Exhibition at the Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery

BY THE EDITORS OF ARTNEWS

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JEFF SONHOUSE/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

**Jeff Sonhouse** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/jeff-sonhouse/>)'s portraits of Black men exude an aura of mystery tempered by hints of ironic humor. Throughout his paintings, Sonhouse explores how notions of African-American masculinity are constructed, performed, and interpreted within Western culture. His impeccably coiffed figures often sport dapper suits and accessories; but invariably, their lineaments are concealed behind masks. These masks, and other elements of costuming, are emphasized by painted and collaged textures that stand out against flat backgrounds

and even protrude from the canvases themselves: In *LAMBURNT AKA:FUZZ*, 2021, the three-dimensional brim of a hat juts several inches from the painting's surface, casting a real shadow on its painted wearer's face.



*LAMBURNT AKA : FUZZ*, 2021.  
JEFF SONHOUSE/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

Beyond its formal contrasts between flatness and three-dimensionality, Sonhouse's work is replete with symbolically charged materials and imagery bearing double meanings. Particularly salient is the tension between visibility and concealment, which plays out among the men's eccentric masks, partially hidden faces, and opulent attire. Another key duality is that of strength and vulnerability: The artist is known for incorporating unconventional elements such as steel wool, speaking to toughness and resilience; and matches, suggesting fragility and evanescence. Yet he never steers the viewer in a single direction with regard to interpreting these dichotomies, instead favoring a thought-provoking ambiguity that makes his work seem as playful as it is incisive.

While growing up in Harlem, Sonhouse recalls, he first saw collages by Romare Bearden displayed in a neighborhood store. The familiarity of Bearden's imagery captivated his imagination, leaving a deep impression that influenced his trajectory as an artist and



informed his approach to portraiture. His paint application and collage techniques evince a further affinity with Jack Whitten, whom he met as an undergraduate at the School of Visual Arts and worked for as a studio assistant for two summers. Since earning his MFA from Hunter College in 2001, Sonhouse has participated in solo and group exhibitions at prestigious venues across the U.S., including the California African American Museum in Los Angeles; the Studio Museum in Harlem; and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.



*Danced, 2021*

JEFF SONHOUSE/ZIDOUN BOSSUYT GALLERY

Sonhouse's latest exhibition, "**Bodied (<https://vr.seemore.art/zidoun-bossuyt/bodied>)**," his second solo show at **Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery (<https://vr.seemore.art/zidoun-bossuyt/bodied>)** in Luxembourg, comprises several large-scale paintings depicting multiple figures, as well as a series of smaller individual portraits. The show's title encompasses a multiplicity of connotations. The dictionary definition of "bodied" is "having a specified kind of body," which clearly relates to the artist's focus on Black male identity. The word also sounds like "bodies," evoking sinister notions of institutionalized violence.

Although Sonhouse makes no direct references to current events, one painting in particular, *Danced*, 2021, channels a powerful sense of anguish that could be associated with the past year and a half of protests against police brutality and racial injustice. Unlike the vibrant palettes of the rest of the works in the exhibition, this piece is executed almost entirely in gunmetal gray, which sets off the faces' skin—the only parts of the painting rendered in color. In the left half of the composition, a pair of conjoined dancers contort their arms and legs in balletic gestures whose graceful elegance seems at odds with the gruesome surroundings. Smoke emanates from the dancers' hair, which closer examination reveals to be composed of burned matchsticks. Their bodies are stripped to their musculature like anatomical drawings, except for their abs, which appear stylistically smooth and shieldlike, similar to those of comic book superheroes. Just above and to the right of the left dancer's right knee are two forms resembling severed ears on a string. Most disturbingly, the right portion of the canvas is dominated by a three-headed pit bull standing atop a cartoonish body marked dead by zigzagged eyelids. A disembodied masked head with gremlin ears floats before the pit bull's flank—the ghost, perhaps, of the man who was killed. Completing the nightmarish ambience, the background is a surreal *mélange* of sharp-toothed monsters, scissors, bullet holes, and abstract shapes.



*ONE-FIFTH LESS THAN*, 2021  
JEFF SONHOUSE/ZIDOUN BOSSUYT GALLERY

Other pieces build more explicitly on Sonhouse's ongoing investigation into how identities are composed and perceived. In nearly all the large paintings, the subjects' bodies are fused together. Unable to move independently, the conjoined figures serve as



metaphors for the difficulty of escaping racially reductive gazes that regard them as one entity rather than individuals.

In *ONE-FIFTH LESS THAN*, 2021, two spliced men, with muscles idealized like those of action figures, are screened by pixelated color blocks that could suggest the role of digital technologies in shaping perceptions of self, race, and gender. Indicating movement, the right figure's arm is tripled, as though he were testing the limits of his motion, or perhaps seeking to be acknowledged.

More ethereal is *Bodied on Audubon Avenue*, 2021, in which a quartet of disintegrating cephalic forms float against an atmospheric backdrop. Recalling the stylistically patterned manes on Greek busts and indigenous African masks alike, the hair and beards are composed of meticulously applied rows of spent and unspent matches, but there is no sign of any bodies underneath; the forms read as empty wig–mask combos whose absence of wearers conveys a foreboding overtone.



*Bodied On Audubon Avenue*, 2021  
JEFF SONHOUSE/ZIDOUN-BOSSUYT GALLERY

The intimate scale of the individual portraits places further emphasis on surface texture and detail. Since his last solo show, Sonhouse has complicated his signature Picassoesque harlequin patterns: Instead of solid colors, each diamond is now mottled, variegated, and smeared in a manner recalling the abstract expressionist paintings that Jack Whitten made in the 1970s by dragging squeegees and afro combs over polychromatic passages of slathered paint.

These irregular textures give the masks a newly unsettling effect belied by such comical references as the anticlinal mustachioed mask in *Groucho's Manifesto Left a Stone In My Path*, 2021.



*Groucho's Manifesto Left a Stone In My Kidney, 2021*  
JEFF SONHOUSE/ZIDOUN BOSSUYT GALLERY

Sonhouse's protagonists have been compared to folkloric tricksters; and the exact nature and purpose of their masks remain a tantalizing enigma at the core of his work. Did the men don the facial coverings to protect their identities? Or could the masks represent others' projections upon them? Similar to Mexican lucha libre masks, they have four holes that expose the eyes, nose, and mouth, and portions of skin around them. Given the fact that they reveal as much as they conceal, they seem more like expressive statements than disguises. Compounding the puzzle, the subjects exude the pensive, dispassionate air of fashion models. Sonhouse increases his work's fascination by leaving questions unresolved; but one thing is clear: His characters' covered faces highlight Black people's historic lack of visibility in the Western art canon and larger culture. Challenging those who would obscure them or reduce their personalities to a single set of characteristics, his protagonists sardonically sport flamboyant masks whose composite textures and motley colors betoken the complexity of their true individualities.

***“[Bodied \(https://vr.seemore.art/zidoun-bossuyt/bodied\)](https://vr.seemore.art/zidoun-bossuyt/bodied)”*** runs through November 6, 2021, at ***Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery*** (<https://vr.seemore.art/zidoun-bossuyt/bodied>) in Luxembourg.

***Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery*** (<https://www.instagram.com/zidounbossuytgallery/>) on Instagram.



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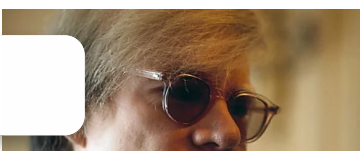


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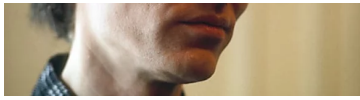
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