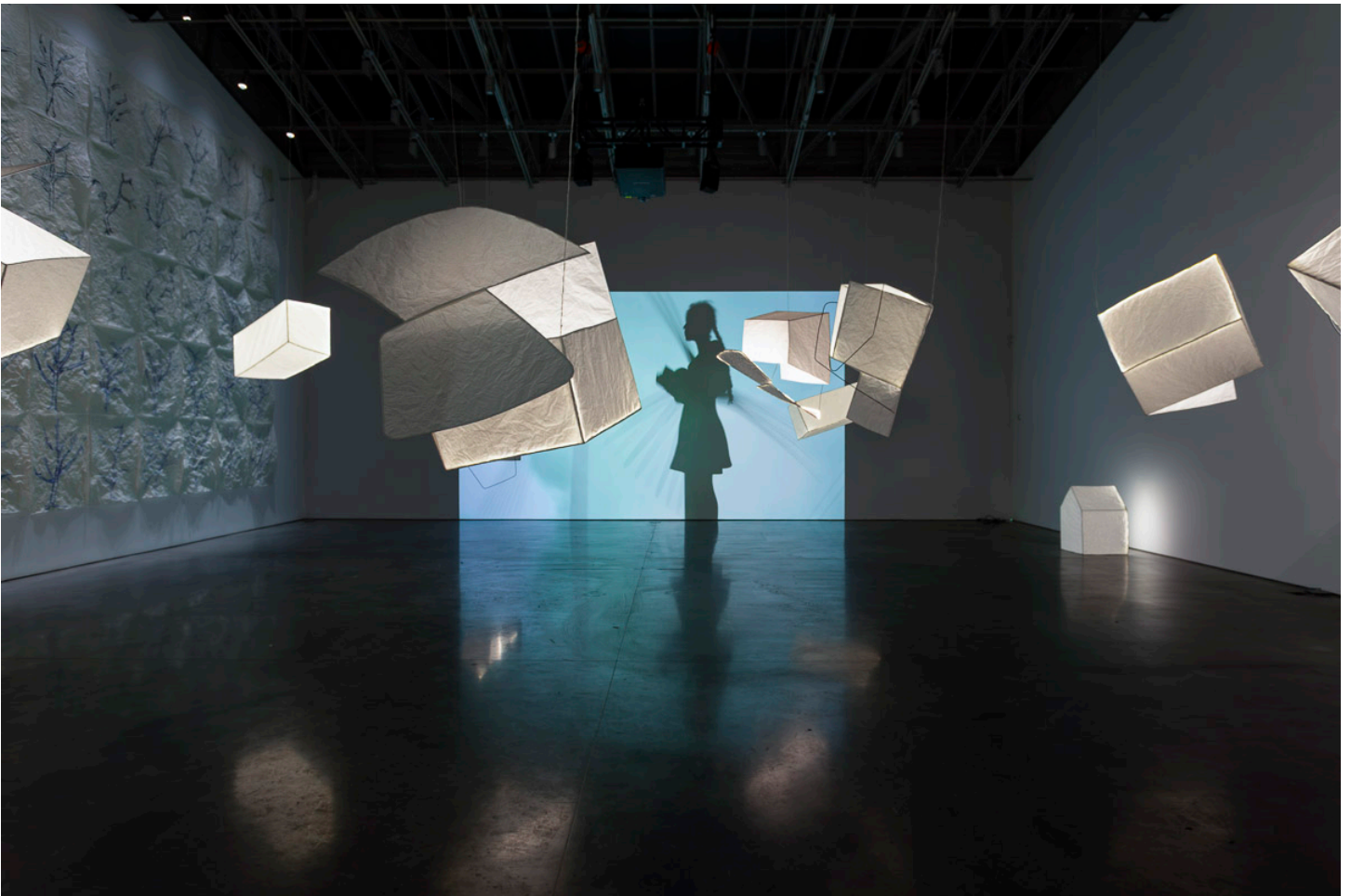


GLADSTONE

Emma Fiona Jones, "Joan Jonas: Empty Rooms at Gladstone Gallery," *Whitehot*, March 26, 2025



Joan Jonas: Empty Rooms at Gladstone Gallery



Joan Jonas, Empty Rooms, installation view, 2025

Joan Jonas: Empty Rooms

Gladstone, New York
March 1–April 12, 2025

By **EMMA FIONA JONES** March 26, 2025

An artist friend once told me that she will never replace hand stitching with machine sewing because the occasional prick of the needle brings her back to herself, grounding her in her body in a way that nothing else can.

As I wander through Joan Jonas' floating forest of body-microcosm-vessels comprising translucent Torinoko paper hand-stitched onto steel frames softly lit from the inside, I envision the physical maneuvering entailed in tethering the delicate skins to the unwieldy skeletons. Their edges are marked by wounds tended to with varying degrees of care, some neatly fused, others destined to leave a scar. It is clear from this painstaking act of mending and tending that art, to Jonas, is a practice in the truest sense of the word: constructing, undoing, repeating. "Ritual" has become rather fetishized in the context of artistic practice, but Jonas embodies ritual without pretension, cyclicity without nostalgia.

Empty Rooms, Jonas' first exhibition at Gladstone (<https://www.gladstonegallery.com/exhibition/14100/empty-rooms/installation-views>) New York, brings together sculpture, works on paper, and video, enacting a spectral contemplation of loss. While unmistakably hers in its careful choreography, awareness of the shape and feel of space, and attention to constitutive elements and their relation to the whole, the body of work is strikingly still—and distilled—in the context of Jonas' sweeping artistic trajectory.

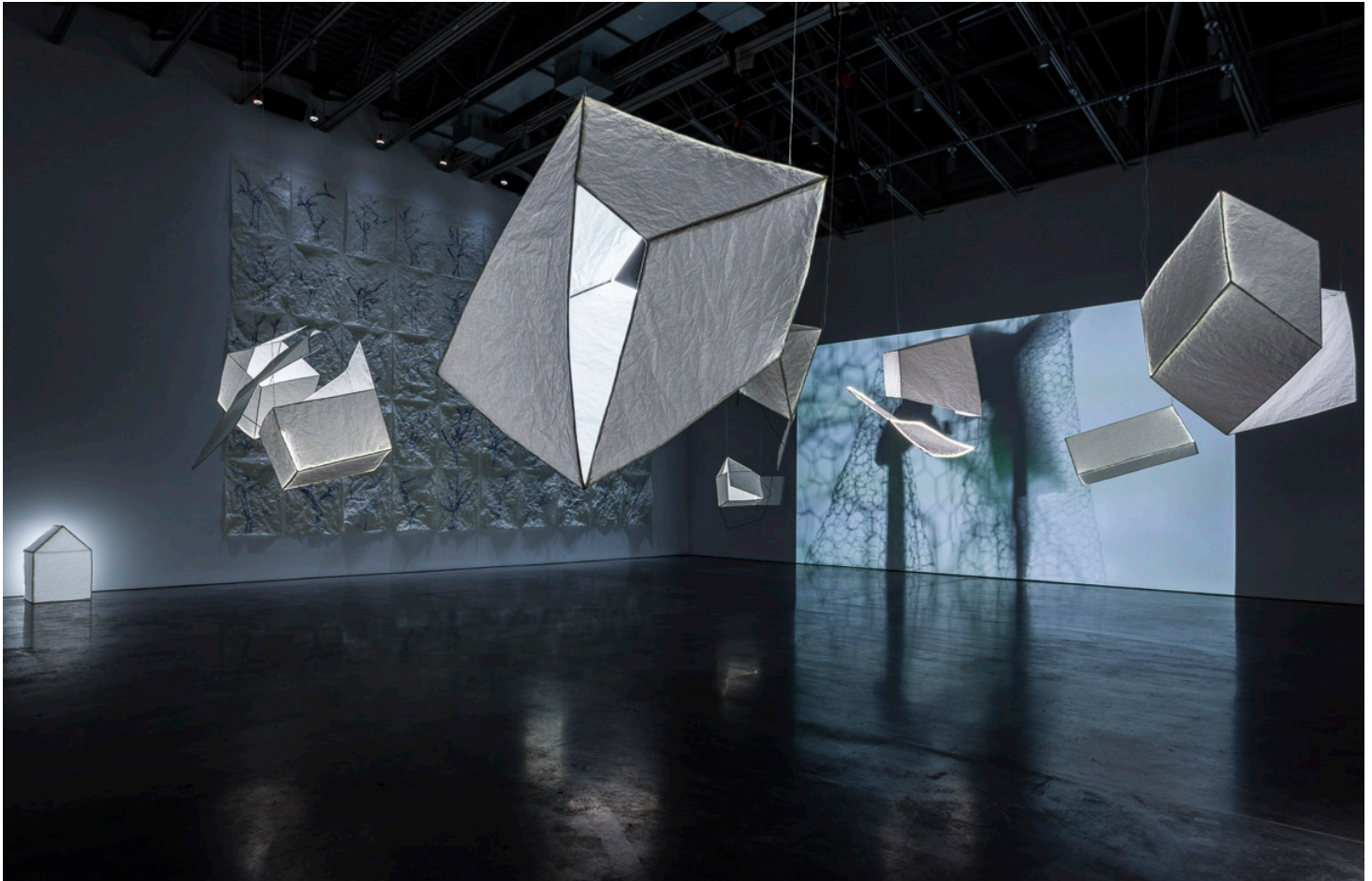
Jonas' expansive body of work enacts a lively, if haunting, interplay of poetics and politics, mythologies and mimicry, encompassing a proliferation of occult-like objects and enchanting acts. Yet in its current iteration, *Empty Rooms* is markedly devoid of performance, focusing, rather, on gesture—or perhaps enlisting viewers, by means of its architecture, into its choreography. "Immersive" is often synonymous with "overwhelming" within contemporary art, but here, dispossessed of its usual theatricality, the environment Jonas has cultivated is all-encompassing, yet reduced to its necessary elements. The work's literary and mythological bone structure is evident, but the stories themselves are not imposed on the viewer, leaving fissures for an endless cast of characters to slip in.



Joan Jonas, *Empty Rooms*, installation view, 2025

Distantly reminiscent of houses but evoking chrysalides in their aeriality and delicacy, each suspended form gives the impression that it once housed a spirit. Some remain nearly enclosed, with one edge gently pried open. Others are distorted and mangled, as if the inhabitant—or captive?—clawed its way out. One structure’s roof gently floats above it, as if deftly lifted and set aside once its resident spirit realized its own agency.

As I make my way through the suspended forms toward the moving image on the back wall, I become acutely aware of the piano composition by longtime collaborator Jason Moran that underpins the body of work. The interplay of shadows that slip in and out of view speak to Jonas’ background in dance, eschewing the narrative tendencies of performance in its dissolution of the decisive moment. A pair of hands caress a windmill, reach for a smaller set of hands, then give way to a child’s figure floating languidly across the surface—video stripped back to the act of layering, the body granulated into sound and light. Quoting from the performance element of Jonas’ installation *They Come to Us without a Word* originally shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale and restaged at The Kitchen in 2016, the work draws on the ghost stories of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where she has spent her summers since the early 1970s.



Joan Jonas, Empty Rooms, installation view

Although *Empty Rooms* is deeply entwined with loss, the word “memorial” never once came to mind as I circled the space. Rather, the works are marked by an intense awareness of the distinction between recollection and memory, enacting a series of vacant archives and psychic cavities. The “empty rooms” to which it gestures embody a loss or absence of stories, historiographies, and choreographies that almost were or could have been: a house where you imagined growing old together, a body that was never destined to bear children, a barren mine that should have been a forest.

Jonas’ drawings have long been incorporated into her performances, but rarely given their own space. Here, the 50 ink drawings on crumpled, handmade paper that occupy the left wall of the gallery take on an imposing presence. In relief against the mottled surfaces marked with cobalt, branching organisms, the fault lines between the drawings become starkly visible.

Bathed in the milk blue light of the shadows flitting across the back wall, the fragile paper sheaths threaten to slip off their aerial frames, like skin sliding off of a snake. This act of shedding underpins the body of work in its entirety, which remains ambivalent to beauty, but turns away from superfluity. Composed of luminosity and shadow, the work draws attention to the place where darkness meets light; it is at this edge, Jonas seems to remind us, that the shape (the scent, the feel) of things emerges. **WM**