

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Julian V.L. Gaines

Fly in the Sugar Bowl

May 15 - June 20, 2026

Opening Reception: Friday, May 15, 6:00 to 8:00 pm

49 Walker Street

New York, NY 10013

Cristin Tierney Gallery is pleased to present *Fly in the Sugar Bowl*, a solo exhibition of new and recent works by **Julian V.L. Gaines**. This is the artist's first solo show with the gallery. The exhibition opens Friday, May 15th and will be on view through Saturday, June 20th. The artist will be present at the opening reception on May 15th from 6:00 to 8:00 pm, coinciding with **Tribeca Gallery Night**.

Spanning painting, sculpture, and assemblage, Gaines's work examines the tensions between Black experience and the structures of systemic inequality in the United States. *Fly in the Sugar Bowl* takes its title from multiple sources, including Thomas J. Lax's essay in *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (2019), Greg Tate's *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* (1992), and a line from the traditional American folk song

CRISTIN TIERNEY

and singing game “Skip to My Lou.” It serves as a central metaphor for the exclusion and exploitation of Black accomplishment within a white-dominant society. To be a “fly in the sugar bowl”—at most literal, a dark speck against a sea of white—is to exist as an insider and an outsider at once: influential yet unable to fully partake in the nectar of prosperity. Underlying the work is a condition akin to W.E.B. Du Bois’s formulation of double consciousness—the experience of seeing oneself simultaneously through one’s own eyes and through the lens of a hostile society. Here, the “fly” does not simply disturb the sugar bowl; it reveals something about the bowl itself, prompting the question: Who is permitted to partake in the sweetness of America, and who is marked as a disturbance?

This anxiety is made explicit in *Better Days Ahead* (2022–23), a group of wooden doors standing upright on concrete cylinders and affixed with original Jim Crow-era signage bearing phrases such as “we cater to white trade only” and “colored waiting room.” Sourced from the artist’s own collection, the work brings the material remnants of segregation into direct confrontation with the present. The doors are more barrier than threshold. They represent an architecture of separation that persists less visibly, but no less forcefully, in the form of coded language and spatial segregation.

From this spatial register, the show turns to the instability of historical memory in *Bullet Proof* (2025), which references the repeated defacement of the Emmett Till memorial marker in Sumner, Mississippi. Gaines reproduced the sign and punctured its surface with bullet holes, echoing the violence enacted upon the original marker. Backlit with LED illumination, the sign functions as a light box, causing each perforation to register with stark clarity—each point of impact made visible rather than obscured. The artist transforms an object of public commemoration into a scarred and illuminated surface, indexing acts of vandalism that have sought to silence or distort history. Rather than a singular gesture, the work points to an ongoing cycle in which remembrance is contested and defaced.

Gaines similarly reimagines the realm of representation with his *JET BLACK* series, which reworks imagery from the mid-century publication *Jet Magazine*. In the paintings *JET BLACK. 17 (The First Leap Took Courage)* and *JET BLACK. 19 (Wonderful World of Wonder)* (both 2025), Michael Jordan and Stevie Wonder emerge against uniform grounds with graphic elements. Suspended between portraiture and reproduction, these works foreground how Black identity has been framed and consumed, while reclaiming these images as sites of cultural authorship and self-definition.

Together, the works in *Fly in the Sugar Bowl* move between recognition and disruption, drawing on the materials and imagery of Black history to question how these narratives are constructed and encountered.

Julian V.L. Gaines (b. 1991, Chicago, IL) is a conceptual, multidisciplinary installation artist. His practice draws from various references. He reinterprets history through oil and house paint, found objects, and sculpture, embodying social mores and principles he expresses daily. His work has evolved to a larger scale, incorporating greater depth and social commentary while aiming to be both critical and constructive. This is best exemplified through projects released under Gaines’ independent creative company, “Ju Working on Projects™.” His



CRISTIN TIERNEY

“For Creatives, By Creatives” initiative and “Game Worn” campaign produced four signature shoes with Nike Sportswear, whose 2018 release in Chicago and subsequent proceeds funded 500 scholarships for creatives in his childhood Chicago community. Gaines's work has been exhibited in Portland, New York, Miami, and Chicago, among other cities. His work is in numerous private and corporate collections, including the Portland Art Museum, Schultz Family Foundation, Nike World Headquarters, and Soho House. His work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*, leading to notable brand partnerships with Nike, NFL, Jordan, Maker’s Mark, McDonald’s, Jet Life Recordings, Kiwi, Levi Strauss & Co., amongst others. His studio is located in Portland, OR.

Founded in 2010, **Cristin Tierney Gallery** is a contemporary art gallery with a deep commitment to the presentation, development, and support of a roster of both established and emerging artists. Our program emphasizes artists engaged with critical theory and art history, with an emphasis on conceptual, video, and performance art. Education and audience engagement are central to our mission. Cristin Tierney Gallery is a member of the ADAA (Art Dealers Association of America).

Image

Julian V.L. Gaines, *Bullet Proof*, 2025. Painted metal, LED lights. 39 x 42 x 3 3/4 inches (99.1 x 106.7 x 9.5 cm).

Julian V.L. Gaines in his studio in Portland, OR. 2026. Photograph by Evan Luecke.

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