

Frieze

The Paradoxes of Gallerist and Artist Suzanne Jackson

For two years, Jackson ran one of the most important galleries for black artists of the past half century

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In many ways, abstract artist Suzanne Jackson's childhood was idyllic for a gifted young black girl growing up in 1950s and '60s America. Somewhat isolated from mainland racism, Jackson had free rein to develop her imagination in the boundless expanse of Fairbanks, Alaska, where her family moved when she was just eight years old. That was in 1952. Harry S. Truman would have been in his second term, World War II was over, and Americans were looking for a Fair Deal. Although schools wouldn't be legally desegregated until 1954, Jackson was one of only two people of colour in her graduating class of 12. 'I grew up in a place where you were judged according to your effort and experience; people didn't put you into categories', she says from her studio in Savannah, Georgia, where she has lived since 1996.



Suzanne Jackson, Los Angeles, 1967.
Collection of Suzanne Jackson.
Courtesy: Telfair Museums;
photograph: Phillip Jackson

In Fairbanks, she taught herself to paint from books while simultaneously pursuing her passion for dance, denoting an early understanding of the world as one in which, with hard work, you could achieve anything. It was an optimism that Jackson attributes to her parents, who had survived the Great Depression and migrated west for new opportunities: 'It was an atmosphere of migratory children in this place where there are wide open spaces', she notes. 'It affects the way you work and the way you think.'

Jackson's work is currently the subject of a retrospective, 'Suzanne Jackson: Five Decades', at the Telfair Museums in Savannah. In addition to her visual art practice, the show includes ephemera from her cosmopolitan career as a dancer, costume and set designer and owner of Gallery 32. The last role on that list – gallerist – is the one Jackson is least comfortable with. 'I've never thought of myself as a gallerist, or even a curator. I'm an artist,' she says.



Slide of Suzanne Jackson in her Los Angeles studio with the painting *Directions*, 1976. Collection of Suzanne Jackson. Courtesy: Telfair Museums

Although Gallery 32 was only operational from 1968 to 1970, Jackson's name is closely tied to it and to the notable roster of artists – including Emory Douglas, David Hammons and Betye Saar – who showed there. It is almost a paradox: an abstract artist, disinterested in labels and unaccustomed to the race politics of the art world, becomes classified as a gallery owner and is, thereafter, perpetually associated with the Black Panther Party and with showing the politically engaged, figurative work of emerging black artists focused on distinctly African-American themes.

After graduating high school, Jackson attended San Francisco State University, where she was taught by one of only two black instructors she would ever have. He was tough, she recalls, and taught social science, a subject Jackson had no real interest in at the time: 'I didn't think social science was important, but it turns out everything in our lives as artists relates to what happens in the world'. In college, she took her first formal art classes and spent most of her time dancing, painting and writing, before participating in a State Department tour of South America with Music Theatre USA. The influence of the stage can be seen in her early paintings, which feature flowing movements and languid, abstract spirit-figures. Take, for example, *Flash* (1976). In it, the silhouette of a spritely figure emerges, seemingly frozen in the orb of a stage light. In the foreground is the profile of another figure, wearing what could be a headdress from a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607).



Suzanne Jackson,
Flash, 1976, acrylic
wash on canvas,
diameter: 120 cm.
Courtesy: © Suzanne
Jackson and Telfair
Museums;
photograph: David
Kaminsky

Eventually, Jackson settled in Echo Park, near downtown Los Angeles. When she arrived, it wasn't until friends encouraged her to take his class that Jackson realized renowned painter Charles White was teaching drawing at Otis Art Institute. Indeed, at the time she was only vaguely aware of White and other notable African-American artists from a flyer she'd come across while traveling in Honduras. It was in French and advertised an art festival in Dakar, Senegal. White's philosophy – that art could be an effective vehicle for community activism and social change – resonated with the messages that shaped Jackson's upbringing. Namely, that as a person in the world, you had a personal responsibility to yourself and to your community, whatever your chosen work. When she started working out of what would become Gallery 32, it was therefore natural for her to lend her space, which was originally intended to be a personal studio, to artist friends.

Unlike Brockman Gallery, launched by Alonzo and Dale Davis in 1967 in response to the dearth of representation for black artists – and run, according to Jackson, with the fine attention to detail of Davis’s academic and librarian mother and aunts – Gallery 32 was, she demurs, ‘just artists having a good time with one another and having exhibitions that people came to see’. Jackson is also quick to point out that, while the gallery served as a launchpad for many black artists, it didn’t show exclusively black artists. ‘We became involved in the Black Arts Council, which was trying to really let people know about African-American artists, but I showed everybody, people of all different colours. It was just a matter of any good work that was not being exhibited elsewhere.’ She funded the gallery herself, mostly with money she earned teaching.

That Jackson’s own artistic career has remained relatively under the radar feels, in truth, less of a paradox and more simply a reflection of the times in which she was emerging as a black woman abstractionist – an indictment of the art world’s fixation on the very labels to which she has refused to conform. The story of another underrecognized artist, Mavis Pusey, who died this year at the age of 90, offers some helpful insight. Best known for her geometric abstractions inspired by the endless construction and demolition of Manhattan streets, Pusey’s work was included in ‘Contemporary Black Artists in America’ at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971. Her obituary in *The New York Times* addressed her lack of recognition in no uncertain terms: ‘It is not because Pusey’s work is any less groundbreaking, pristinely executed or formally and conceptually evocative,’ Melissa Messina, who had previously curated Pusey’s work, was quoted as saying. ‘Simply put: It is because she was black and a woman.’ Messina adds: ‘She was also working in nonrepresentational, hard-edge abstraction – a genre dominated by (and still shrouded in) mythic white masculinity – when figurative and narrative-based work was (and in many ways still is) the prevailing mode of expression for black artists.’

While Jackson doesn't point to any one specific incident, she recalls a dilemma faced by many black artists to this day: 'When I was working in the early 1970s with black figures, I was told "Well, OK ..."' she says, with mock dismissal. 'But now I'm being asked why there aren't any black figures in my paintings? As artists of colour [...] what we're not allowed to do is just paint.' She describes a double bind that Romare Bearden – who himself didn't achieve success as an artist until he abandoned abstract painting for figural collage – outlined in his 1946 essay 'The Negro Artist's Dilemma'. In it, Bearden posits that black artists are pressured to 'use art as an instrument to mirror the social injustices inflicted upon [their] people'.



Suzanne Jackson, *Saudades* (left), 2018–2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Telfair Museums

Composed of structural, suspended acrylic, Jackson's current works are large and dramatic, like colourful shards of opaque glass. One particularly striking piece, *Saudades* (2018–19), is a part of a series that grew out of an impulse she had to answer the question: 'How does one suspend acrylic paint?' It comprises a large, crystalized pane of acrylic paint festooned with bells, cloth and other detritus, calling to mind a spirit world of wind chimes, dream catchers and bottle trees. Like much of her more recent work, the elements of her personal life are integrated into the materials. Enmeshed in this acrylic structure are pieces of a silk tie her father use to wear, and pieces of fabric her mother, who was a prolific quilter, used in her patterns. Jackson says the bells are a nod to her only son, who died of a heart attack in 2016. 'His friends told me that he had this saying when they were all having a good time: rock the bells.' When her son died, she says she didn't mourn, she painted.

In 1981, Jackson was recommended by the artist Bernie Casey for a residency at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). Fortuitously, at around the same time, her work was included in a show at the Gibbes Museum of Art in nearby Charleston called 'Forever Free: Art by African-American Women'. Jackson ended up staying in the area for a month and decided to relocate to Savannah, where – like many artists clamouring for affordable studio space in America's gentrifying metropolitan centres – she could afford it. Jackson ended up teaching at SCAD until 2009, when she retired.



Suzanne Jackson,
finding joy in the mirror, 2016, acrylic,
wood veneer, Bogus
paper and Loquat
seeds, 139.7 x 171.6
cm. Courtesy: the
artist and O-Town
House; photography:
Riccardo Banfi

Located in the Granada Buildings where Gallery 32 once thrived, O-Town House hosted an exhibition in February 2019 by Jackson, 'holding on to a sound', which constituted a homecoming of sorts. Constructed as live-work spaces in 1927 by Franklin Harper, the Granada Buildings, which now have historic property designation, house many youth programmes, including a youth theatre company. 'There are also some guys who give advice about drugs and help out former gang members,' says Jackson. Having once hosted exhibitions in collaboration with the Black Arts Council and supporting causes like the Black Panthers' free breakfast programme, Jackson sees these engaged community organizations as a testament to the consciousness-raising that Gallery 32 seeded. Visitors to 'holding on to a sound' signed in to Gallery 32's original ledger, which featured the signatures of such art-world luminaries as Hammons, White, and the inimitable US politician Maxine Waters. Upon her return to the Granada Buildings, Jackson was struck by the trees that now landscape it. 'When I was there they were just weeds.' Thankful that Gallery 32's legacy lives on, and humbled by the recognition of 'holding on to sound', Jackson is nonetheless steadfast in her true purpose: 'My goals then, now, and forever, are to paint.'

'Suzanne Jackson: Five Decades' continues at the Telfair Museums, Savannah, USA, through 13 October 2019.

Main image: Ephemera and photographs from Gallery 32, operating in the Granada Buildings between 1968-70. Courtesy: the artist and O-Town House; photograph: Riccardo Banfi