

ARTnews

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At Frieze L.A., Suzanne Jackson Talks About Liberating Paint from Canvas and ‘Having a Good Time with It’

In recent years, following the death of her son, she has recommitted herself to abstraction.

BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN** 14 MINS AGO



Suzanne Jackson, *In A Black Man's Garden*, 1973, installation view, in Ortuzar Project's booth at Frieze Los Angeles 2022.
PHOTO: RUBEN DIAZ/RUBEN DIAZ

Suzanne Jackson can trace her artistic practice right back to the earliest parts of her childhood. As a kid, she would write letters and draw pictures to send to her grandparents. Then, in second grade, her teacher placed one of her paintings in the class display case. “She let me come out and watch her hang it,” Jackson said in an interview. “I think even then I knew the painting was good—I felt really proud of that.”

Over the years, this sense of pride has not left the artist, who is now in her 70s. Speaking at Frieze L.A., where she is currently the subject of a small survey at the booth of her New York gallery **Ortuzar Projects**, Jackson seemed to take pleasure in all that she had on view. Spanning her 50-year career, the booth includes early figurative pieces from the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as recent experiments in abstraction with suspended acrylic paintings, in which layers upon layers of paint are piled onto each other to create floating objects that blur the line between painting and sculpture. “All along I’ve been learning how to paint and experimenting with what paint can do to get to what I’m doing now,” she said. “I just let the paint happen on the surface and then move according to the next drop of paint or the next brushstroke leads me to. It’s really about being in the studio and working and letting things happen.”

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Jackson was born in St. Louis in 1944. During her childhood, her family moved first to San Francisco, then to the remote Yukon Territory (some years before Alaska became a state in 1959). There, she taught herself watercoloring using how-to-paint books as her guide. She only began taking formal art classes while attending San Francisco State University for her B.F.A.

Jackson started out using oil, but she quickly embraced acrylic paints as they became more readily available while she was in college. When she moved to Los Angeles in 1967, she began using Nova paints, which dry more quickly than those of other brands. “It wasn’t until I had my retrospective [at the Telfair Museums in Savannah, Georgia, in 2019] that I realized my paintings document and trace the evolution of Nova paints—how they developed their paints and introduced iridescents and textures,” she said.

Her embrace of abstraction, as seen in assemblages like 2008’s *So Much To Do*, came about when Jackson moved to Savannah in 1996 to teach at the Savannah College of Art and Design. (She is still based

in the Georgia city.) “I just imagine people have immense, beautiful dreams and ideas, especially living in place with nature all around,” she said. “I was graduating from more simple ideas, and I was more romantic as a young person. I just started experimenting with what I had and having a good time with it. For a long time, no one was paying attention to what I was doing, so I had the freedom to experiment with materials.”

Over the past several years, Jackson’s work has seen a surge in mainstream recognition. In addition to her 2019 retrospective, her work has been included in major group exhibitions such as “Life Model: Charles White and His Students” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2019), “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” at the Brooklyn Museum (2018),” and the landmark traveling exhibition “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980,” which opened at the Hammer Museum in L.A. in 2011. She won a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant in 2019 and an Anonymous Was a Woman Grant in 2021. And last summer, Ortuzar staged “You’ve Come A Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show,” which revisited a storied 1970 group exhibition at Gallery 32, the short-lived space that Jackson ran in L.A.

In the past three years, after her son died following two heart attacks, she has recommitted herself to abstraction. “Instead of going into a kind of mourning—I’m really accepting it now—it was a way to creatively process everything,” she said of her newest painterly mode. “My parents are gone, my son is gone, so it’s just me. And now I’m able to do this work.”

In *falling, flying fleeing, earth sault* (2020), Jackson applies layers of paint onto a sheet of plastic and then allows them to dry for extended periods of time. Once dry, she returns to them and continues adding more paint in places where she feels the composition could be more opaque or where the work’s physical structure needs to be strengthened.

The centerpiece of the booth, however, is a historical work, a triptych titled *In A Black Man’s Garden* (1973), which is currently on reserve by a major U.S. institution. The work, which Jackson stretched herself, was made in her L.A. studio on Jefferson and Main, a large space that allowed her the freedom to create at a monumental scale.

“I wanted to make a larger statement,” she said. “I wanted to make a statement that was another way of making a political statement. People used to say my work was apolitical, but for me, it’s political to make an artwork about peace and beauty. I wanted people, especially Black people, to see the beauty. People need beauty. It’s a way to get people to think or consider some other ways of being.”



Suzanne Jackson, *falling, flying, fleeing, earth sault*, 2020.
PHOTO: TIMOTHY DOYON/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ORTUZAR PROJECTS, NEW YORK