

November 8, 2022

The Music of Life: Suzanne Jackson's Listen' N Home at The Arts Club of Chicago

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Installation view, "Suzanne Jackson: Listen' N Home" at The Arts Club of Chicago. "Saudades," 2019-2022, acrylic, layered acrylic detritus, acrylic media, bag and deer netting, textiles, plastic, bamboo, bells, scenic Bogus paper, metal, stones, loquat seeds, chain, leather string, organic plant matter and metal barrel tops, dimensions variable, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects/Photo: Michael Tropea

Artist Suzanne Jackson has an enviable biography, spanning nearly eight decades and most of the Western Hemisphere. The St. Louis native grew up in territorial Alaska, studied painting in San Francisco, and toured throughout South America as a dancer. In the late 1960s, she took classes with Charles White at the Otis College of Art and Design, ran a renowned Los Angeles artist's space called Gallery 32 and, in the eighties, studied theater design at Yale with Ming Cho Lee.

Jackson has been Savannah-based since the mid-nineties. Referring to her as simply a "painter" fails to capture the unique scope and depth of her artistic accomplishments—not to mention her poetry, or the decades of teaching. Yet, as exciting and illuminating as her story is, it's Jackson's work, on view at The Arts Club of Chicago, that speaks volumes about what it takes to make not just a career, but a *life* in the arts and the dividends that kind of commitment can yield.



Installation view, "Suzanne Jackson: Listen' N Home" at The Arts Club of Chicago. "Da Wha Yu Sae," 2008, acrylic, linen, mixed papers, muslin, and canvas, 91 x 61 x 4 inches, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects/Photo: Michael Tropea

From the titles of the fourteen large-scale works on display, down to the physical stuff that they're made of, references to music, jazz and the blues abound. In fact, the show's title "Listen' N Home" is a reference not only to the artist's early childhood experiences of Chicago jazz on 78s—imported to California via the highly attuned tastes of her lively aunts—but also to the rich and important role music has, and continues to play in her life. Prior to the pandemic, Jackson was the co-host of "Listen Hear," a weekly jazz program on Savannah State University Radio.

In this mini-retrospective, the music of Jackson's life is born out in her works' staccato rhythms and a maximalist aesthetic that is the visual equivalent of John Coltrane's free jazz masterpiece "Ascension" played at full volume. Like the challenging musical idiom, her mixed-media works emulate the intensity and insistence on material diversity, and aren't always easy to take in. Indeed, many of the elements that comprise these luminous objects (metal scraps, dried and discarded paint, plastic netting) might have ended up as garbage had Jackson's keen eye for textural contrast and her ecological mindset not held sway.

Painting is often about its ability to suggest illusion, but in this show, Jackson expands its vocabulary in decidedly sculptural ways. Acrylic medium is poured, peeled and pressed together, unlocking its unparalleled versatility; while Bogus paper—a lightweight recycled paper used for a variety of applications, and first encountered by Jackson as a set designer—lends a layered and deceptively sturdy armature to many of the pieces.



Installation view, "Suzanne Jackson: Listen 'N Home" at The Arts Club of Chicago. "Bogus Boogie," 2001, acrylic, Bogus paper, flax paper, wood, and silk, 65 x 28 x 6 inches, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects/Photo: Michael Tropea

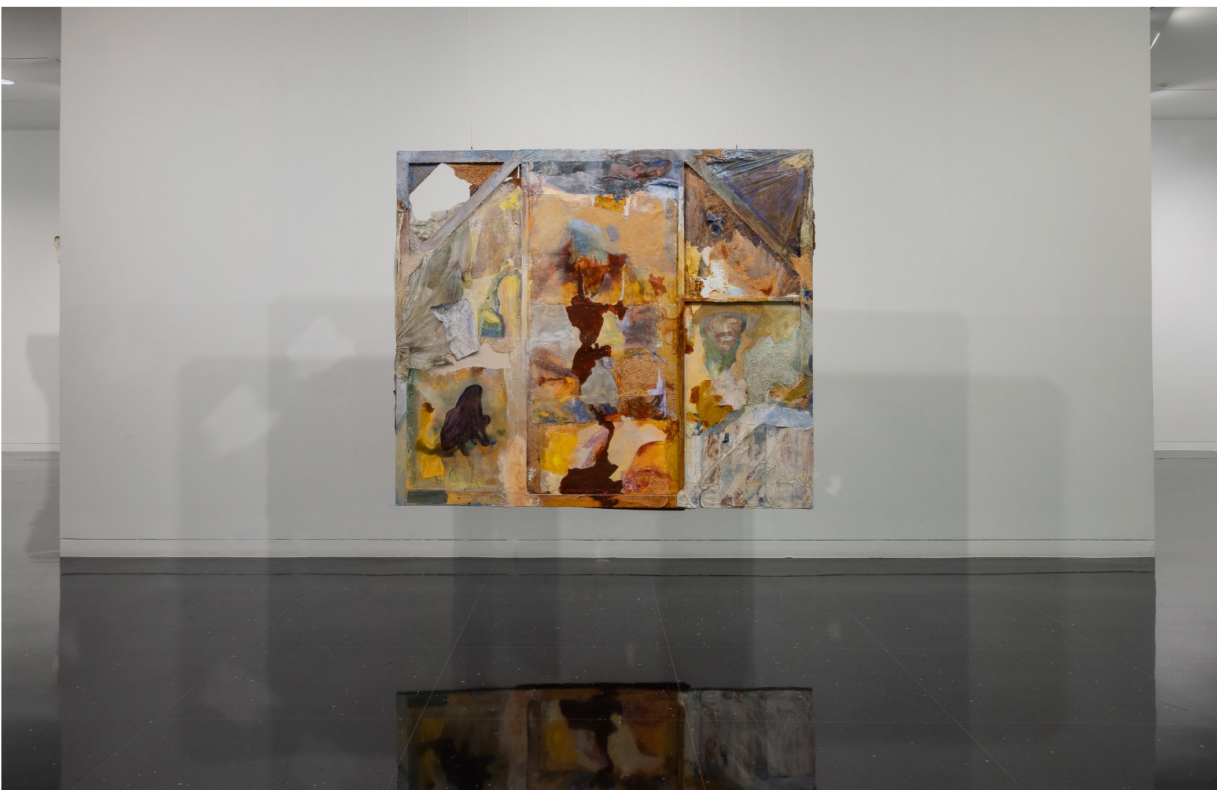
For example, the irregular, cream-colored contours of 2001's "Bogus Boogie" appear substantial and heavy. Yet even subtle changes in the Arts Club's physical environment (a door opening or an attendant walking past) provoke delicate jitters of movement within the work. At one point, the long, tendril-like fibers that descend from the piece's upper register softly vibrate like the gently plucked strings of a classical guitar. The contrast between the superficial appearance of the object and its deeper reality is a theme throughout the show.



Installation view, "Suzanne Jackson: Listen 'N Home" at The Arts Club of Chicago. "Hers and His," 2018, acrylic, cotton, scenic Bogus paper, and wood 86 x 67 inches (left) and "Red over Morning Sea," 2021, acrylic, curtain lace, shredded mail, produce bag netting, and wood 65 x 84 x 4 inches, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects/Photo: Michael Tropea

The standout track “Red Over Morning Sea” features a smoldering cadmium red stroke that travels at warp speed across the painting’s surface. Both sunrise and sunset, it crackles within a translucent veil of interference-inflected acrylic tides. The total shape of the work takes on the character of the United States’ geographic dimensions. Brimming with light and clarity, “Red over Morning Sea,” like its majestic brethren, is hung from the ceiling rather than on the wall, and transcends the pull of gravity without effort. The musicality of these shimmering visual relationships within and among the works are a joy to behold.

With few exceptions, Jackson's work is without the obvious narrative structures, compositional strategies, focal points or visual hierarchy that defines both traditional, historical painting as well as painting after the postmodern turn in the 1970s. But a few tantalizing painted and drawn figurative references can be excavated.



Installation view, “Suzanne Jackson: Listen’ N Home” at The Arts Club of Chicago. “Bilali’s Dream,” 2004, acrylic, mixed-media, wood, netting, and papers 80 x 86 x 8 inches, courtesy of Ortuzar Projects/Photo: Michael Tropea

Within the mixed-media skins of “Bilali’s Dream,” a man’s face hovers spectrally on the lefthand side, shrouded in blue-green strokes that dissolve into the cream-white of the nebulous space he inhabits. Less obviously, the lower left is occupied by rich red-violet swirls of translucent acrylic paint that suddenly cohere in the form of a crouching figure with arms outstretched. It is a small moment of glistening magic in a show replete with them. A quiet reminder of paint’s unsurpassed ability to assume new forms, to be both itself and something entirely different.

Jackson has a superior sense of materials and a feel for how to bring them together in ways that fuse disparate elements into seamless wholes that feel right. The works strike perfect pitch when the artist sustains the relationship between the painterly and the sculptural qualities of her multifarious media in the most indeterminate ways. This is a skill honed by years of effort and it's borne, in part, out of seeing one's own life as a work of art that can be shaped and molded through time. We've become so used to the ceaseless merry-go-round celebrating the latest and greatest freshly minted MFA that to encounter the work of an artist who has lived a life and has an approach to the craft that is not only self-assured, but contains the maturity, experience and credibility to back it up feels like an all-too-rare treat. As rich and vital as the music that animates it, "Listen' N Home" rewards repeated visits.

"Listen' N Home" is on view through December 23 at The Arts Club of Chicago, 201 East Ontario.