

# FRIEZE

## Suzanne Jackson's Rich Tapestry of Community Building

From Alaska to Savannah, the artist reflects on her six-decade career, innovative techniques and dedication to amplifying underrepresented voices in art

J BY JAMEY HATLEY IN PROFILES | 30 OCT 24



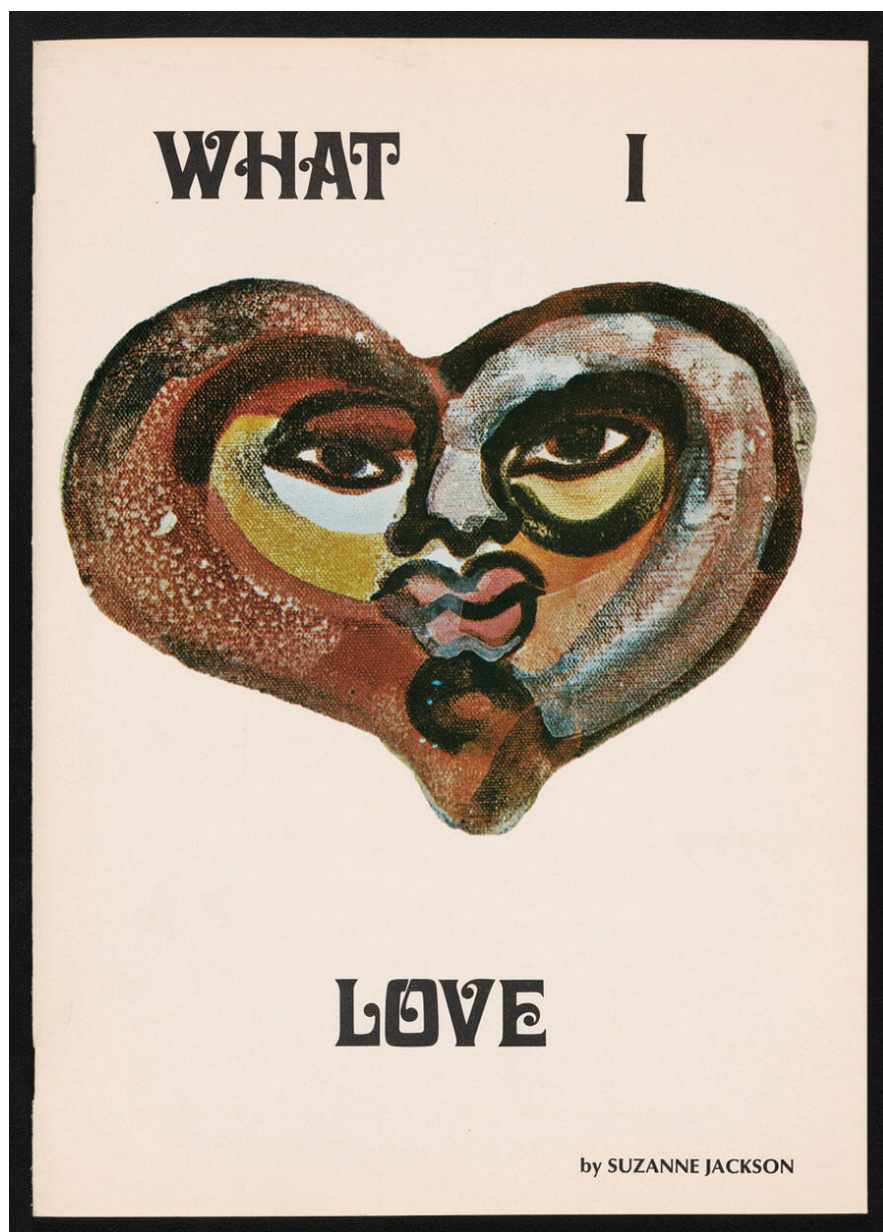
I needed to be quick, I was told, if I wanted to interview the artist Suzanne Jackson in her Savannah studio. In only a handful of days she would be travelling, her artwork packed up and shipped away for various projects. Our meeting had such an air of serendipity about it that it felt almost magical, even if I wasn't sure I could do justice to her remarkable life and 60-year career in just a short few hours.



Commissioned photograph by Kaylin James.

'I'm 80 now, but I was always the baby of the family,' she says of her early school days in Alaska through her time in Los Angeles. 'I thought I was the same age as all the artists I was hanging out with. Turns out I was the youngest.' Jackson tells me of the time she was featured in *Jet* magazine, aged just 16, as the first African American girl to attend the annual 4-H youth development programme congress in Chicago. There were 1,359 delegates that year. When I locate the photograph, I see her confidence has always been palpable: Jackson is standing in the middle of her two companions, wearing a dazzling white parka, staring daringly into the camera.

Jackson and her family lived in Alaska before it became a US state in 1959. Although there were very few African Americans in the area at that time, the artist recalls a great sense of creative freedom: 'Nobody told me that I couldn't do what I wanted to do,' she tells me in her sunlit studio. The Jackson I meet in June 2024 is just as stylish as the young woman who appeared in *Jet* magazine all those years ago. She moves around the room with the grace of the dancer she used to be, as she picks up certain items to show me.



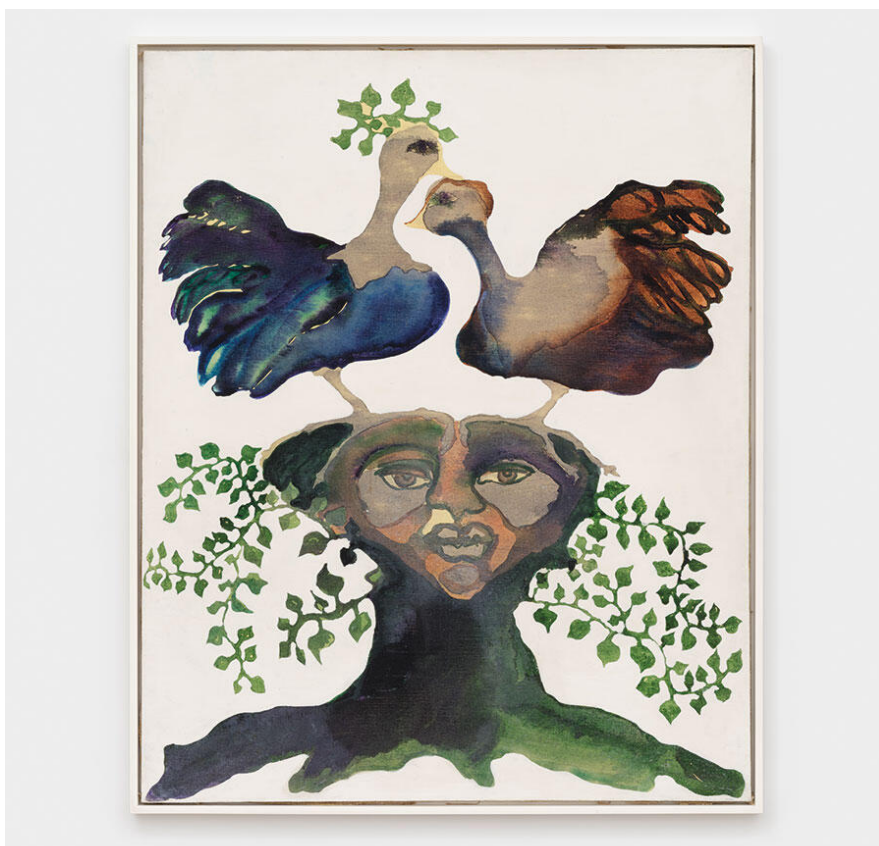
Suzanne Jackson, *What I love; Paintings, poetry and a drawing*, 1972, booklet cover, 25 × 18 cm. Courtesy: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Jackson has dressed up for the occasion; I have not. I was told that the artist would be painting in her studio all day, so I came prepared to sit on the floor if necessary. When I arrive, I can hear the surprise in her voice. 'I was expecting a blonde British woman,' she says. We both erupt into laughter since I am the opposite: a Black woman with a thick Southern accent. It is not lost on either of us that meetings such as these are all too rare. She walks me quickly through the studio space, where we settle in the kitchen. Urging me to select a glass from a beverage cart, she offers me sparkling water and fruit. The kitchen table – or counter in this case – is where Black women for generations have shared resources, burdens and dreams.

## **Nobody told me that I couldn't do what I wanted to do.**

SUZANNE JACKSON

Jackson has worked across a dizzying number of disciplines. Though best known as a painter, she has also done significant work in costume design, scenography, dance, choreography and printmaking; she has even hosted a radio show. In 1996, she was part of the inaugural class of the Cave Canem workshop for African American poets. In addition to her own creative practice, Jackson has consistently amplified underrepresented voices through such ventures as Gallery 32, an art space she ran from 1968 to 1970 in MacArthur Park, Los Angeles. It was here that she famously organized 'Sapphire Show' in 1970, featuring Black women artists such as Senga Nengudi and Betye Saar.



Suzanne Jackson, *The American Sampler*, 1972, acrylic wash and graphite on gessoed linen, 122 × 99 cm. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: Steven Probert

Jackson and artists like her may have paved the way decades ago, but the struggle continues. To that end, the artist plans to convert her current studio into a multidisciplinary artist residency. 'The money we're getting now from the sale of our paintings is going into foundations to help other artists, because we've been living for so long on either a teaching salary or working at the post office, like everybody else, that we just want to help other artists.'

For 13 years, until her retirement in 2009, Jackson was a professor of painting at Savannah College of Art and Design [SCAD]. 'I don't know how I got so much painting done then because it was 24/7 teaching. The reason I was able to experiment and do the work that I'm doing now is because nobody paid any attention.' Savannah seems to have been both a stabilizing and provoking environment for Jackson's artmaking. 'There was this essence that I felt when I first came to Savannah, when I went out in the woods and I was walking down at Harris Neck [a national wildlife refuge]. I could hear voices in the trees. I could hear voices in the moss. The moss I'm not too fond of because I feel like it's dripping with all kinds of memories and weird stories.'



Suzanne Jackson, *Silencing Tides, Voices Whispering*, 2017, acrylic, acrylic detritus, bag netting, woven tapes, cotton, mixed papers, wood, 213 × 193 × 10 cm. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: Timothy Doyon

As we sit at the counter watching the light change through the windows, she tells me about the time she answered an advertisement in 2006 to do a 10-day residency on a farm in Kentucky learning Shibori textile dyeing techniques. She was fairly new to the South at the time but craved a breather from teaching at SCAD. Even though she was an established artist, she had no ego about serving as an assistant and learning something completely new, in a completely different place. 'So, you just do whatever you want to do?' I ask. When I listen back to this question on my recording, my voice sounds strangely insistent. Jackson's answer comes back to me calm and matter of fact. 'Well, just like you jumped on a plane to get here, that was the choice I made from seeing that little ad.'

**Jackson's pieces seem to change and morph before your eyes, exposing layers of found materials both manufactured and from the natural world.**

JAMEY HATLEY

We find ourselves talking at her counter about living in places that often disappoint us, about caregiving, our hair, sorting through the things that the dead leave behind, secrets, only children, making family, cooking, deep freezers, handwriting and how to mourn. By the time we finally make our way to the studio, Jackson and I have been talking for hours, the light is starting to fade, and the discordant experimental music from the bar across the street is kicking up. It's been a big year for the artist. 'Somethings in the World' at Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan – her first European solo show – closed in January and she was also featured in this year's Whitney Biennial, 'Even Better than the Real Thing'. When I arrive at her studio, work has already been dispatched for her solo show 'Suzanne Jackson: Light and Paper' at Ortuzar Projects, her gallery in New York. The remaining works are being catalogued for her first retrospective at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2025.



Suzanne Jackson, *Oakland Studio Light*, 1992, graphite, acrylic and oil pastel on paper. 1.3 × 3.1 m. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: Dario Lasagni

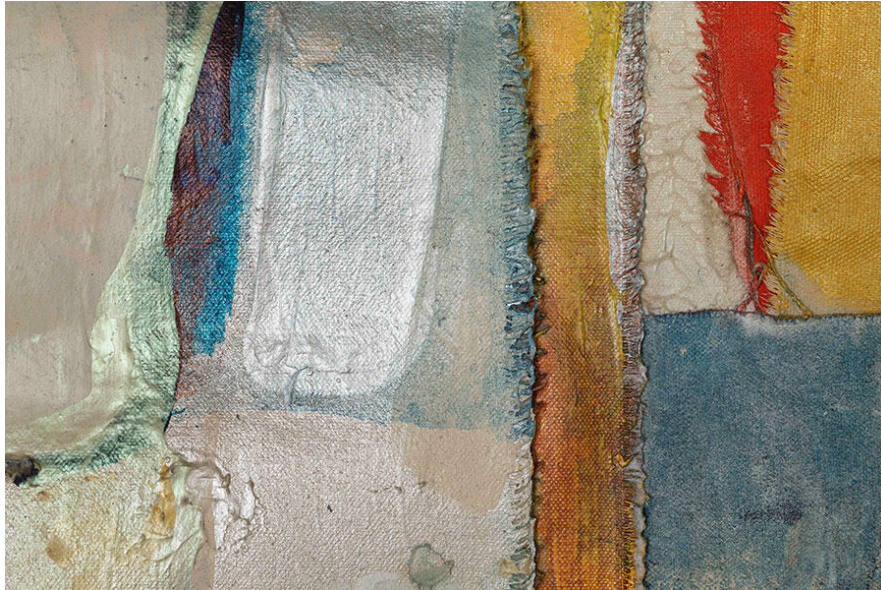
When I first saw photographs of Jackson's more recent tableaux, I was astonished by their scale. The artist tells me that 'all the acrylic stuff is gone, by which she means the gargantuan double-sided paintings that she sculpts with acrylic paint – a technique she developed sans any canvas support. 'There were no mediums – the additives used to stretch acrylic paint and manipulate the appearance to be more matte or gloss – until probably the 1970s. So, I had worked my way from watercolour to oil paint. And then I just lost my mind doing crazy weird stuff that nobody else was doing, especially these clear acrylic works, which feel very alive. Before that, I was just in this dead place and couldn't do anything,' says Jackson on discovering this new process. 'I don't know what happened to me. I just put down some curtain material and put some of this medium on it. When I came back from a trip, I pulled it off the table, hung it up and I kind of liked it the way it was. Basically, I began just playing around with stuff and nobody could tell me what to do.'



Suzanne Jackson, *Prayers*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, flax paper, 193 × 86 cm; variable. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: David Kaminsky

She points to a piece in progress hanging from the ceiling. It hovers above like a colourful, translucent sea creature as the evening light spills through it. Jackson's pieces seem to change and morph before your eyes, exposing layers of found materials both manufactured and from the natural world. Jackson even repurposes the paint she scrapes from her brushes. 'It all started with

these strips that were being cut off when I was stretching canvases. I put them in a piece called *Prayers* [2001].’ It was one of the few paintings still hanging when I came to visit. I had seen a photograph of *Prayers* before my visit to Jackson’s studio, but I didn’t immediately recognize it. What I did experience was a surge of emotion. *Prayers* reminds me of the quilts that my mother and grandmother made, but its looming shape also gives the appearance of a shroud. ‘It feels so empty in here. But almost everything would have been gone if you’d come any later,’ Jackson says. With so many recent pieces already shipped for exhibition elsewhere, however, much of her early work was unearthed.



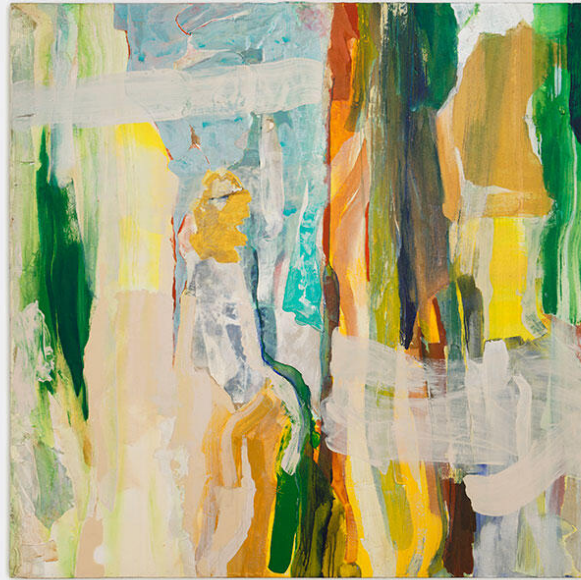
Suzanne Jackson, *Prayers* (detail), 2001, acrylic on canvas, flax paper, 193 × 86 cm; variable. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: David Kaminsky

*Frozen Elsie* (2000) was also on display in the studio. ‘The title comes from the frozen woman they found in Canada or somewhere in New England – a 4,000-year-old woman’s skeleton buried in ice’, Jackson explained. The painting’s bright colours – blue, green and gold representing water, grass and sky – are intersected by swathes of white, creating the illusion of peering through ice. This piece seems almost conspicuous in its containment to the canvas. *Frozen Elsie* and *Prayers*, made just a year apart, showcase a clear departure in Jackson’s style, eschewing the canvas for making acrylic sculptures.

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SUZANNE JACKSON

Jackson points out another painting to me. ‘This was probably one of my first experiments with acrylic: it kept growing and growing and growing. It’s made from really good Belgian linen, which I lined with some ballet netting I had left over from costume design for a tutu, to contain it until it dried.’ Beside her, there are stacks of works on paper sorted on a huge table. She points to the edge of one in the middle of the stack. ‘Because of the humidity and the heat [in Savannah], the paper would get all wrinkled up and I’d think: Well, that’s not supposed to happen! But then I started to like it.’ So much of Jackson’s work has a playful surrender to an environment or situation.



Suzanne Jackson, *Frozen Elsie*, 2000, acrylic and paper on stretched canvas, 1.5 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: David Kaminsky

When the refuse from cleaning her brushes clogged her drains, she started reclaiming the paint for later use. Jackson's work requires many viewings from many angles. Earlier we had talked about pressing pleats, gardening, freezing and preserving food. The more I look, I see layers of the domestic in the form of salvaged netting from fruit, seeds and nuts from her yard suspended in her acrylic structures, and remnants of fabrics from previous eras of her life. The layers build a kind of map of many lifetimes at once.

The front room of the studio is serving as a sort of archive room. Paintings are wrapped and labelled for their next destination. Personal books and catalogues from past shows line bookshelves and are stacked on a table. 'When I was in San Francisco, I saw bootlegged copies of this,' Jackson says of the out-of-print catalogue *Suzanne Jackson: Five Decades* (Jepson Center / Telfair Museums, Savannah, 2019). 'I didn't know about it, but they had been photocopying and reprinting the catalogue, except you could tell from the embossing on the cover that it was fake.' Looking at the cover of *Suzanne Jackson: Five Decades*, she adds wistfully. 'But this is so beautiful. That's me in 1966, when I was still a dancer. How do I love it? That was just before I left to go to South America.'

As we prepare to head out to dinner, I start to think of an archive as a kind of community. During our conversation we keep surprising each other with the overlap of the people and organizations we both know. When a community has been under-explored or downright ignored by the mainstream, the loss of a journal, a house fire, or even a well-meaning cleaner can erase an artist from the record. Jackson's vast archives will serve as not just a catalogue of her work, but an essential expansion of the history of the many artistic communities that she has been a part of throughout the years.





Suzanne Jackson, *9, Billie, Mingus, Monk's*, 2003, acrylic on layered canvas, flax and scenic Bogus papers, linen, tissue, nursery burlap, orange mesh and wood. 163 × 165 × 14 cm. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: David Kaminsky

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 247 with the headline 'Suzanne Jackson'*

*Main image: Suzanne Jackson, 9, Billie, Mingus, Monk's (detail), 2003, acrylic on layered canvas, flax and scenic Bogus papers, linen, tissue, nursery burlap, orange mesh and wood. 163 × 165 × 14 cm. Courtesy: © Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects, New York; photograph: David Kaminsky*