



Photo: Steven Probert

ARTS

At 81, Artist Suzanne Jackson Finally Gets the Major Museum Retrospective She Deserves

BY STEPHANIE SPORN

October 1, 2025

Suzanne Jackson was 75 when she had her first solo show in New York at Ortuzar gallery in 2019. It proved to be a watershed moment for the Saint Louis, Missouri-born, Savannah, Georgia-based artist, whose experimental oeuvre began in the 1960s with ethereal watercolor-esque figurative paintings referencing the natural world around her. More recently her work has transported acrylic paint from the walls to the air in captivating constellations that incorporate found materials, such as nets, bamboo, and lace. These suspended sculptures, or “environmental abstractions,” as Jackson calls them, made a splash at the [2024 Whitney Biennial](#) and garnered further attention in “[Suzanne Jackson. Somethings in the World](#)” (2023-24), a collaborative exhibition by Fondazione Furla and Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Milan.



Suzanne Jackson, *Wind and Water*, 1975. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the generosity of the Modern Women's Fund, Alice and Tom Tisch, Anne and Joel Ehrenkrantz, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, Michael S. Ovitz, Ronnie F. Heyman, and Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida. © Suzanne Jackson, courtesy Ortuzar, New York; photo: Ruben Diaz

Off the heels of this survey—the first European exhibition dedicated to the artist—Jackson's first major museum retrospective has just opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). Titled "Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love," the show is co-organized with the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, where it will travel in spring 2026 before concluding at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Featuring more than 80 works, the exhibition is organized chronologically, following Jackson's singular life and career across coasts and myriad art forms, from dance and theater design to painting and sculpture.

"The past five years Ortuzar gallery has had me all over the world and places I never expected to be. When I was in art school at San Francisco State College [now University], we were taught that one wouldn't receive all this wonderful attention until you became my age, and the work is mature enough," Jackson, as humble and gracious as she is endearing and self-assured, tells *Vogue*. "I don't believe that I'm the age that I am right now."

Jackson calls the show, which was five years in the making, a “gift”: “San Francisco is my city. My parents brought me here when I was nine months old, and it’s where I had my first art classes in college. It also makes me really proud because this is the place where my parents excelled.” During the Great Migration, Jackson’s parents moved from Saint Louis to San Francisco, where they were active in their community. Jackson’s father was a realtor, as well as a trolley and cable car driver, while her mother was a seamstress who also had a penny candy store.

When she was eight, Jackson’s family moved to pre-statehood Fairbanks, Alaska, whose wild landscape left a lasting impression on her, ultimately informing both her painterly subjects and her lifelong devotion to environmentalism. In 1961 she returned to San Francisco for college, where she majored in painting, minored in drama and dance, and did coursework in scenic design and acting. She also studied with Pacific Ballet during this time and modeled professionally.

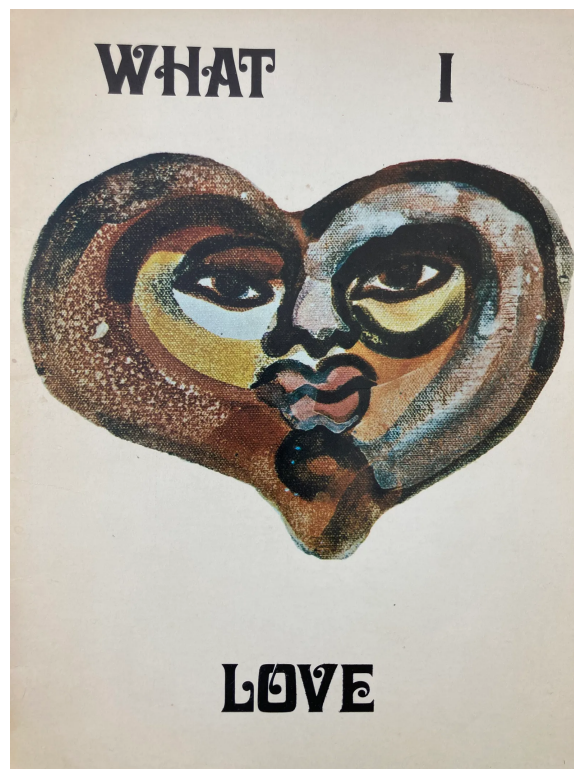
After obtaining an MFA in theater design from Yale in 1990, Jackson returned to San Francisco yet again, where she worked for several years as a successful scenic and costume designer to support her “first wish,” painting. “Working in theater or dance, you’re in a space which is cooperative, and you also may be working on someone else’s choreography, so the control is not yours completely. As a painter, the studio is my place that I can experiment and have a good time,” says Jackson. (Writing has always been a similarly fulfilling enterprise: SFMOMA’s exhibition title riffs on her first book of poems and paintings, *What I Love*, which she self-published in 1972.) Music and movement are still key inspirations in her visual art: “When I’m putting down paint, there’s a beautiful rhythm, and it’s almost as if I can combine dance, literature, and poetry in the work.”



Suzanne Jackson, *deepest ocean, what we do not know, we might see?*, 2021. Tanoto Family Collection. © Suzanne Jackson, courtesy Ortuzar, New York; photo: Patrick Jameson

In between her San Francisco stints, Jackson spent crucial years in Los Angeles, where she studied under Charles White, known for his powerful portrayals of African Americans, and the small mountain town of Idyllwild, California, where during the 1980s she replaced Françoise Gilot as a painting teacher at Idyllwild School of Music and Arts (now Idyllwild Arts). While growing her visual art practice, Jackson also worked to promote the careers of her peers, many of whom have since become eminent names in contemporary art.

From 1968 to 1970, she ran the self-funded Gallery 32 out of her Los Angeles studio, showing art by David Hammons, Betye Saar, and Senga Nengudi, among others. Her groundbreaking exhibitions included “The Sapphire Show: You’ve Come a Long Way Baby” (1970), credited as being the first survey of African American women artists in Los Angeles. (SFMOMA’s “What Is Love” features several artworks originally shown at Gallery 32.) Another advocacy milestone came in 1972, when Jackson organized the visual art component of Black Expo ’72—also known as “Black Quake”—in San Francisco. Over one weekend, visitors could view work by more than 175 artists, including White and Saar, as well as Jacob Lawrence and Elizabeth Catlett.



Cover of Suzanne Jackson's publication *What I Love: Paintings, Poetry, and a Drawing, 1972* © SuzanneJackson, courtesy Ortuzar, New York

To this day, Jackson remains a pillar of her creative community. In 2023, she established the Suzanne Fitzallen Jackson Foundation, which this year began offering fully funded residencies to early and mid-career artists, particularly underrepresented artists from the South. The program is run out of Jackson's home and workplace in Savannah, where her verdant backyard is registered as a wildlife refuge. The artist has resided there since 1996, when she accepted a job at the Savannah College of Art and Design, where she taught until 2009. (Jackson also has a studio in St. Remy, New York, where she plans to extend the residency.)

Jackson calls the move to Savannah both a “culture shock” and an “enlightenment,” giving her a lesson on the South's turbulent past. It's a context she's confronted in works like the suspended painting *Crossing Ebenezer* (2017). Composed of red acrylic paint, firewood bag netting, peanut shells, and wood, the work commemorates the hundreds of newly emancipated slaves who drowned while crossing Savannah's Ebenezer Creek, a tributary of the Savannah River, in 1864. “When I was taken to see a big river outside of Savannah, I had no idea what that river represented,” Jackson recalls.



Suzanne Jackson, *Crossing Ebenezer*, 2017. Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody. © Suzanne Jackson, courtesy Ortuzar, New York; photo: Timothy Doyon

Jackson's red and gold, 10-foot-tall, narrow hanging work *A Hole in the Marker* —*Mary Turner 1918* (2020), on the other hand, references the 1918 lynching of a pregnant woman. When visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2024 exhibition "The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism," Jackson was floored upon finding that in 1919, the artist Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller had created a harrowing statuette based on the same subject. Depicting a woman cradling her womb, with other Black victims seemingly clutching her dress, Fuller's *In Memory of Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence* drew uncanny visual parallels to Jackson's painting. "Sometimes in my work, there's almost this unconscious memory of something that I didn't know that happened that's transferred to me," says Jackson. "In that way, for me the work is a spiritual exercise."

The act of incorporating discarded and found materials is another important aspect of Jackson's sculptural practice. "It's come out of those days when I was working in theater, and big Bogus paper used to protect the sets would get thrown into the dumpster. I had no supplies, so I thought, well, that's really strong paper, I can use it." In time, however, Jackson developed her technique of using acrylic without additional backing. When combined with grocery store bags and other items she found that could "architecturally and structurally reinforce the painting," the paint's textures also shone.



Suzanne Jackson, *What Feeds Us?*, 2024–25 (in process, detail). Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © Suzanne Jackson, courtesy Ortuzar, New York; photo: Steven Probert

A fan of David Attenborough documentaries (nature programming is the only TV she watches), Jackson is appalled by the devastating impact of landfills on neighboring communities. Rather than contributing to that cycle, she consciously opts to increasingly use materials like Styrofoam and shredded mail in her work. Such is the case with her new commission for SFMOMA, *What Feeds Us?* (2025), a large-scale installation combining plastic and trash with organic materials, such as moss and bark, as well as scraps of African fabric, Indian sari curtains, and Korean and Japanese papers. The piece considers both the current global environmental crisis and state of migration. “It’s about how our garbage lands in places where people don’t have any trash, where they still live from the land the way they have for centuries,” says Jackson.

Jackson’s six-decade career is a story of metamorphous and resilience. Much like her journey with acrylic paint, layer by layer, the artist keeps getting stronger.

“Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love” is on view at SFMOMA through March 1, 2026.