

How San Francisco shaped Suzanne Jackson's dreamlike art

By **Jessica Zack**, Contributor

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Artist and San Francisco State graduate Suzanne Jackson poses for a portrait in front of her large-scale installation at SFMOMA, part of her first career retrospective “What Is Love.”

Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

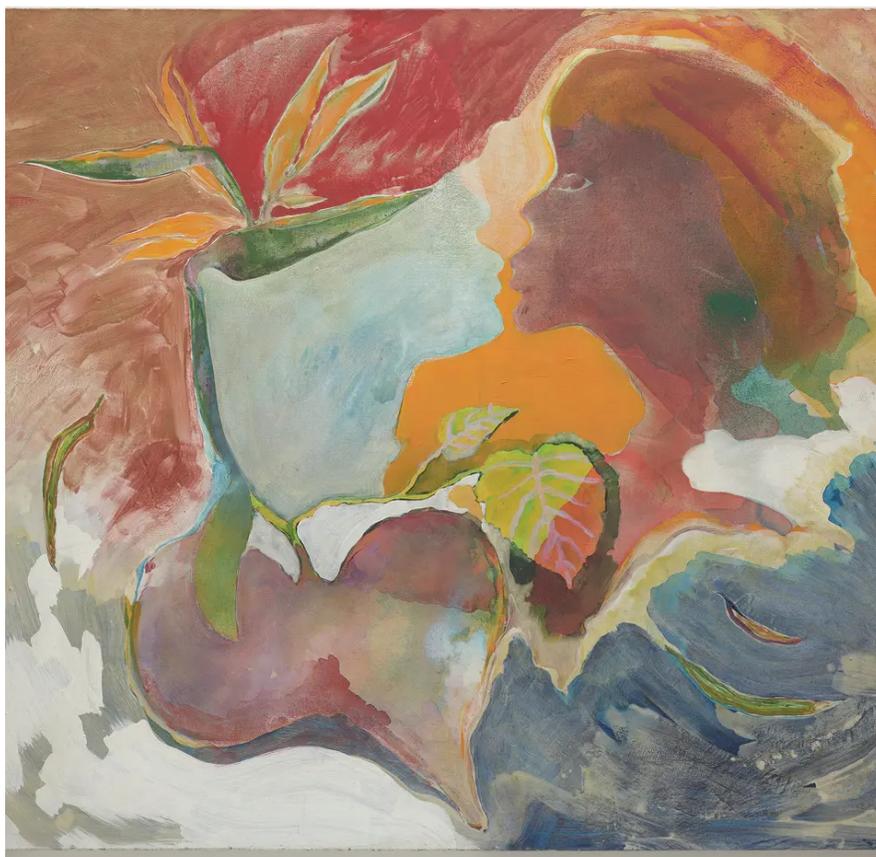
Though she left the Bay Area nearly 40 years ago, Suzanne Jackson says San Francisco never left her.

“This city has been just constantly beautiful to me,” said the 81-year-old artist, who spent her childhood in the Bayview neighborhood.

Jackson reflected on San Francisco’s “open atmosphere” and closeness to nature during an afternoon stroll through the seventh floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, crediting it with shaping her six decades of experimentation.

For the past few months, more than 80 of her color-drenched paintings, drawings and sculptural installations from the 1960s to the present have been on view at SFMOMA in “Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love,” her first major museum retrospective. Co-organized with the Minneapolis Walker Art Center, the exhibition caps a late-in-life resurgence of interest in Jackson’s vivid, personally expressive work.

After closing March 1, it travels to Minneapolis, followed by Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts — though Jackson said it was personally gratifying to debut “What Is Love” in San Francisco, which she still proudly calls “my city.”



Suzanne Jackson’s “El Paradiso,” 1981-84; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase, by exchange, through a gift of Michael D. Abrams.
Courtesy of Katherine Du Tiel

Jenny Gheith, SFMOMA's curator of painting and sculpture, recalled being wowed by Jackson's gestural 1981 painting "El Paradiso" in New York in 2019. Created in Jackson's signature mid-career style, the canvas is both figurative and abstract. It's painted in a thin, translucent wash that mimics watercolor, and features two faces in silhouette, caught in the moment before a kiss. The pair are surrounded by swirling color fields and tropical fauna, with the plants' roots twining into a heart.

In 2021, the museum acquired the work, which ultimately sparked the idea for the full-scale show devoted to the breadth of her career.

"I was blown away by so much of Suzanne's work when I first saw it, and I still am by her adventurous spirit of experimentation," said Gheith, walking through the exhibition she spent five years planning. "I couldn't figure out how they were made, how she was continuing to push the boundaries of her materials."



"Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love" on view through Sunday, March 1, at SFMOMA.

Drew Altizer Photography

Organized chronologically, “What Is Love” examines how Jackson’s abiding fascination with materials — especially her experiments with acrylic’s tactile, sculptural qualities and with light itself — have been near-constant influences.

San Francisco trained her eye to see beauty everywhere, she said — in art, in nature and in the countercultural ideals of peace and love, rather than division or hate. It’s an outlook she believes the world still needs, and a theme that hums as an undercurrent through her entire retrospective.

Even when other Black artists in the 1960s and ’70s were feeling pressure to be explicitly political in their work, Jackson always felt that “love, peace and beauty were their own form of protest.”



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“San Francisco is where I learned to pay attention to nature when I was very young. See those little trees?” asked Jackson, who still moved with a dancer’s poise as she approached her monumental 1973 triptych “In a Black Man’s Garden.” It depicts a dreamlike garden inhabited by nude figures, amid plant forms blurring into abstraction.

She pointed out a recurring motif in several paintings of a row of small, broccoli-like trees. On one canvas they emerge from a Black woman’s head as if being dreamed, and in another above a stylized swan.

“The inspiration for those was driving from San Francisco to Stockton and watching the rolling hills and cows through the car window,” Jackson explained.

She also remembered being “fascinated with San Bruno Mountain as a girl, because I could see it from my bedroom window.”



Suzanne Jackson working on “Hers and His.”
Courtesy of James Gouldthorpe

Born in 1944, Jackson's family moved to California from St. Louis when she was 9 months old. They settled in the Bayview where her parents ran a restaurant, Susie's BBQ, and her father drove cable cars and trolleys.

Jackson's family moved to pre-statehood Alaska when Jackson was 7, but she would return to the Bay Area at 17 to attend San Francisco State University, where she took her first real art classes. From there she began a remarkable multi-hyphenate career as not only a painter but stints as a poet, dancer, activist, gallerist, model, educator and theater scenic designer.

But it wasn't until age 75 that Jackson, who lives in Savannah, Ga., had her first solo show in New York. Exhibitions in Europe in 2023 and her inclusion in the prestigious 2024 Whitney Biennial brought her work even greater attention.



Artist Suzanne Jackson in front of her 1975 paintings "Wind and Water" at SFMOMA.
Yalonda M. James/S.F. Chronicle

Today, Jackson speaks with a kind of pinch-herself awe about the who's who of 20th- and 21st-century artists she has gotten to know during her career.

She was appointed by California Gov. Jerry Brown to serve on the California Arts Council with [Ruth Asawa](#). She gave [Betye Saar](#) one of her first shows when Jackson ran a Los Angeles gallery. Her work was collected by [Bill Cosby](#) and Cannonball Adderley. Sonny Bono even commissioned the stunning 1975 wall-size diptych “Wind and Water.”

Jackson sounded especially proud of having organized the art component of San Francisco’s historic Black Expo in 1972, bringing more than 175 artists to the Civic Center, including Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White.

“Wow, it was such a big thing to have all these artists here together at the Civic Center for a weekend,” said Jackson.



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More recently, she has been experimenting with suspended “anti-canvas,” sculptural hangings of acrylic paint that defy the expected properties of paint with their lack of a canvas backing.

“There’s no glue. That’s a dirty word in my studio,” said Jackson with a laugh. “I’ve just been trying to escape the flatness of acrylic, and to play with its properties.”