

Suzanne Jackson's majestic, suspended paintings are continuously unfolding, anchored by an array of found materials fused by layers of pure acrylic. The colours on their often translucent surfaces change as the light shifts. They move ever so slightly, underscoring an aliveness that traditional paintings cannot claim. Suzanne's art has evolved considerably since her early canvases, in which flora, fauna, and figures cavort against white backgrounds. The throughline is her enduring fascination with the nexus that exists between the natural world and her perception of Black and Indigenous histories in the many places she has lived throughout her peripatetic life. Suzanne started making these unusual paintings in the mercurial coastal city of Savannah, Georgia, where she has lived for the last 30 years. She feels the presence of her ancestors there, and locals have helped her to understand

SUZANNE JACKSON

INTERVIEW BY BERYL GILOTHWEST
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and permeate the community, from Carroll Greene, the legendary art historian, to Ike Carter, former director of the radio station WHCJ. Savannah frustrates Suzanne as much as it inspires her, a highly charged place that is as stunningly beautiful as it is thorny and complex. I grew up spending part of the year on Ossabaw, a massive, wild barrier island off the coast of Savannah where Suzanne has also spent time, and I first connected with her through that shared experience. Her work is part of an exhibition that I have co-curated at Telfair Museums in Savannah called *Off the Coast of Paradise: Artists and Ossabaw Island, 1961–Now*. On a hot day last June, I spent the afternoon with Suzanne at her large brick-red house in the city's Metropolitan District. She got right into it, skidding from one insight to the next before most people would have finished discussing the weather.





The last time I saw you, we spoke about your experience painting in nature on Ossabaw, and you brought up the trees. You said that spending time with them is like going to church. It made me think about how trees hold significance in some Black communities in the South as vessels for spirits, but also as connecting points between physical and spiritual worlds. What is it about trees, and especially the ones in this area, that capture your imagination?

The one rule I have for moving into a place is that it must have a deep, claw-foot bathtub and trees. I bought this property because of the two water oaks that were outside. When I was a little girl, I would sit and look at the

It feels heavy with something. Speaking of the people down here, I'm curious about your experience engaging with the community. Savannah is famously not the most accepting place. I'm still in culture shock. I moved to Savannah in 1996 to teach at the Savannah College of Art and Design, and you're in a bubble there. Meeting people in the community was another thing altogether. I grew up in Alaska before it became a state, and I'm from the West Coast. It's just different here in Savannah. There's this whole idea that you're either a 'been here' or a 'come here'. That's part of the cultural thing—the shock of being ignored, in a way, if you're not a 'been here'.



grasses on San Bruno Mountain in California. I still do that—I sit and look at the breeze. I'm always looking at the way the wind blows, and I think it's the trees talking with one another, especially the big water oaks here that maintain the rest of the garden. They nurture the whole yard, everything around them. People say, 'Why don't you have flowers?' It's because I'm trying to allow the indigenous plants and trees to grow and nurture the insects and creatures in this environment. You must have trees; trees are history. I'm leery of the Spanish moss, though, even if people here believe in the spiritual things within it. To me, there's something about the moss. There are too many spirits in it.

So it was rigid. I'm sure that was challenging. On the other hand, meeting Carroll Greene when I first came to Savannah was just incredible because he knew so much about local art history. For instance, we went to Vernon Edwards' trailer and inventoried his carved wooden canes, some of which are now in Telfair's collection. Carroll introduced me to several artists back then. We also inventoried Judith Wragg Chase's collection. I had done research on her things back in 1972, not realising I would ever be here. We went to Charleston, and her son, Alston Chase, gave us the key and let us go. I couldn't believe it. Meeting Carroll was really good for me because we'd have long





apartamento - Suzanne Jackson

conversations about what was going on here and what he had learnt and what he knew. When I was teaching at SCAD, I would take a break between classes and go to the Laurel Grove South Cemetery on Ogeechee Road, which is a historically Black cemetery. I found this one beautiful stone grave, which turned out to belong to a woman named Susan Jackson, and the person buried next to her was named Butler. My mother's family is Butler. Apparently, Susan Jackson was one of the richest women in Savannah.

How have the histories that you've come across in Savannah permeated your work?

Slowly learning and seeing the history here was a transition for me. When I started making works like *A Hole in the Marker—Mary Turner 1918*, I was just trying to put a figure in the acrylic in another way. And then, I read a story about a woman and her son who went around Georgia looking at monuments. She found the Mary Turner historic marker in Hahira that had bullet holes shot through it. People were still putting bullet holes through monuments that they didn't like. I did not know until I read Kellie Jones' essay for my exhibition at SFMOMA that Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller lived at the time of Mary Turner and made a sculpture of her. I finally got to see it when the Met did the Harlem Renaissance exhibition. That's what's weird: I do some things, and I have no idea why. That's why I think that I had to have been here before, my spirit or something.

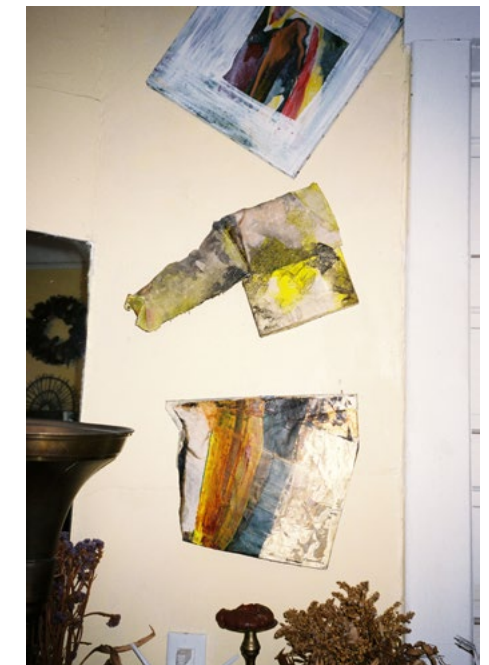
There were some major changes that happened in your work after you arrived here. You started taking the canvas off the wall. How do you understand that transformation?

I was just reading about this yesterday in a journal that I found from 1997. I thought it began when I moved here to this house in 1998, but I had already started with an earlier piece called *Juditha's Door*. The building that I used to live in is right on the corner of Hall and Barnard, with the spiral staircase. The light came down through the windows there and hit this little wall in a corridor right next to a wonderful marble bathroom. I wrote that the light coming in from the streetlights at night caused a breakthrough in terms of how I apply paint on paper. I was also thinking about how I could take my paintings physically off the wall in order to see them from all sides. It shocked me to realise that I was considering

those things as early as 1997. In *Bogus Boogie*, I curved the paper I was using—bogus paper from the theatre, because it's really stiff—in order to shape sculptural elements. I was using the leftovers, the detritus, and then adding on pieces of acrylic. Somebody described my work as collage, but I've never used that word. It's assembled work. It has nothing to do with collage.

What about assemblage?

You know, I totally forgot about the word 'assemblage'. That's something you talk about when you're teaching painting—it's more sculptural. When you're painting flat on the



surface, then it's assembling. I assemble stray things and pieces that figure into the architectural structure of the work. In the journal that I was just reading, I was beginning to think about those structural elements. Actually, there is a piece called *El Paradiso* that I began in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Originally, it just had white paint in the background, which was common in my early work. Later on, I decided I wanted to layer and really try to build up the acrylic to give it the same quality that oil paint has. Acrylic can be so flat, so I was just layering and layering and layering. Eventually, that made the work want to come away from the wall.

apartamento - Suzanne Jackson

Since then, you've moved more and more towards sculpture.

Yeah, even though I believe in *painting*. I wanted to prove that painting is not dead. The thing is that painting is hard—most people don't want to do it. I learnt from scratch. We had to build our own miter box. We had to have a hammer and a saw. I used tacks if I stretched canvas. I was in the conservation lab at MoMA in New York recently, and I'm looking at how things are stretched with staples. I'm thinking, this is horrible because when you take that off the stretcher bar, you're going to rip the canvas. We learnt to use copper tacks. I don't work on stretched canvas anymore, but I still believe in that.

the midst of things when you're really young. People ask me, what was it like? And I think, well, I don't know. I was a teenager in college, dancing and painting and writing and just having the best time.

You started incorporating found materials in your work again after you moved to Savannah. How did that come about?

Right after I started getting to know Ike Carter in 2013, he invited me to his house to drink some wine in front of the fireplace. He had these red fireplace bags, and for some reason, I asked if I could have them. They were lying around here for years until the curator



Also, I was a sculptor in undergrad. There's one photo of me in a little mod outfit in my parents' house with my two pieces of sculpture. There's one piece that my mother liked, which was a plaster sculpture made in the style of George Segal and Manuel Neri, who were popular sculptors in the Bay Area at that time, and a sculpture made of plaster and paper towels wrapped around an armature. It was a figure. That one stayed on her porch forever; I don't know what happened to it. I was studying with Mel Henderson, and we would go to the dump in San Francisco to construct things. There was that whole funk period in the Bay Area. I guess it was by osmosis—you don't realise you're in

Rachel Waldrop happened to drape them over the rolled paper rack in the studio there. I decided to see what would happen if I put acrylic on them. Basically, the idea to really suspend something started with those red bags and resulted in *Crossing Ebenezer*. When I was first taken to Ebenezer Creek, I was just told that it was a big river. That was it. And then I heard the story—the real story—of the massacre that took place there in 1864. Somehow that became the title of the piece, but I wasn't thinking about it when I made it.

You've brought this up a few times in this conversation—these coincidences, strange things





that recur across moments in your life and places where you've lived. What do you think it means?

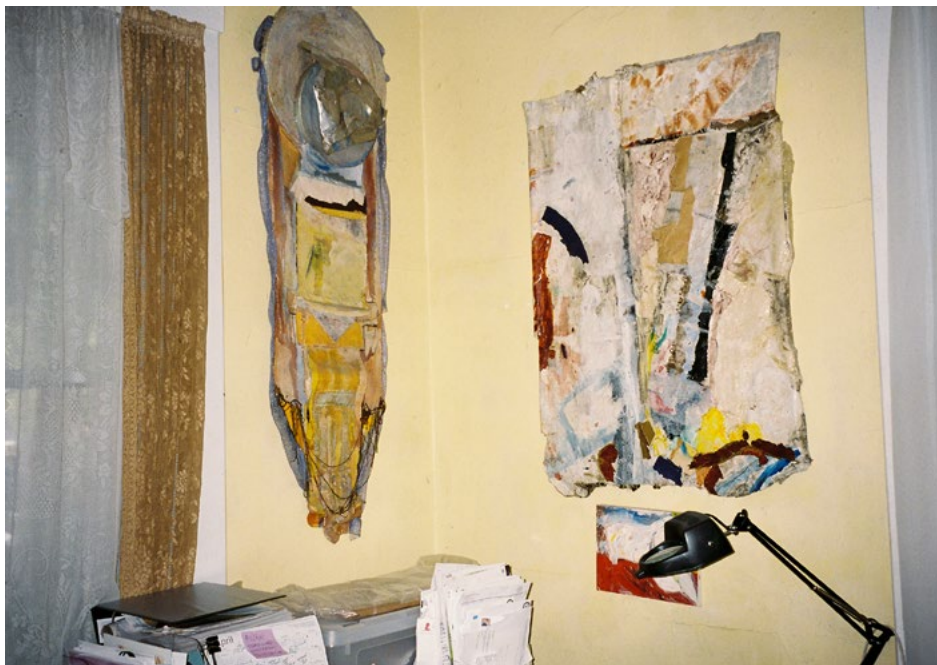
Things like this come up often. I anticipate things before they happen. There's a DNA line of mine that's mysterious—it goes all the way down to Brazil. When I went there, I felt really at home. It felt very close.

When I first moved here, Carroll Greene and I went down to Harris Neck to hear a man speak whose name I am forgetting. He had traced a song from there—one that passed from mothers to daughters—to a group of people in Sierra Leone. They sang the same song in both places.

making work there, I almost panicked because it's cooler and my paintings were not drying in the same way.

I saw the artist David Kaminsky the other day, and he was describing the experience of documenting your suspended acrylic pieces. He said that they move and change every time he turns his back. They're kind of alive.

They are alive. Originally, that was the whole point. They move. But also, if you crumple them up or roll them up to transport them, they will eventually go right back to their shape. The one that's on the table right now used to hang, but it's been smooshed up so much that



Do you find that the physical realities of the places where you've lived come through in your work in any way? For instance, I haven't been down in Savannah during this time for several years. I forgot how overwhelming the weight of the air is in June, not to mention the heat. Even this piece in here is affected by it—the acrylic expands in the heat. When I looked at it yesterday, I thought, oh my gosh, this painting is about 12 inches longer than it was. After a collector bought the Mary Turner piece a few years ago, the painting kept growing and growing on its own over time. That painting has got to have a spirit in it. It was really weird. When I started living up north part-time and

it has transformed. I don't mind that because it produces another kind of texture. I can do something else with it.

I'd love to talk with you a bit about Ossabaw. The show at Telfair looks at the diverse ways that the island has inspired artists over the last 65 years. How did you first learn about it?

David and his wife, the painter Betsy Cain, hosted me when I came to SCAD as a guest artist in 1981. They introduced me to other artists in Savannah, and everybody was talking about how there was a residency at Ossabaw Island. Much later, Betsy and I spent 10 days there in 2010 as part of the Ossabaw Island Founda-





apartamento - Suzanne Jackson

tion's Visiting Artist Program. I remember the boat captain warning us that a bad storm was coming. On the ride over to the island, there was so much white fog that we couldn't see right in front of us. It was really something. Then, one night, we all went out on the pier with pots and pans and utensils. We made music to the full moon together. Those spontaneous things can happen in nature. I think it's important for us to have those experiences. The islands are so beautiful to me, all of them, but my favourites are Ossabaw and Sapelo. Ossabaw is denser than the others, and there are animals that come out and greet you.

My grandmother, Sandy West, who you knew, was the only full-time resident on Ossabaw for many years. She used to say that the fence around her house didn't keep the animals out. It kept the people in.

Yes, it belongs to the hogs, the donkeys, and the birds. It belongs to nature still. I recently made the connection that your grandmother and my mother were both born in 1913. I remember the last time I saw her, standing on the side balcony off her bedroom like Juliet. I loved her house. It's my kind of home, with so much history. The architecture reminds me of the adobe style from the Pacific Coast. It wasn't in good shape back then. I remember looking up and seeing pipes sticking through the ceiling. I'll miss those things now that the house has been restored. I love the ruggedness of a house that has been taken over by nature. It was built around 1925, right?

Yes, it was completed in 1926. I also have mixed feelings about the house being restored, but I keep reminding myself that this is a new beginning. Artists and scientists will be able to stay there again, just as my grandparents imagined when they founded the Ossabaw Island Project in 1961. For more than 20 years, they invited multidisciplinary thinkers and creators to stay in the house and work on projects of their choosing.

There are artists I know in the South who have been working on their own for years and struggling. They're not recognised. Artists need a chance, even if it's just a few days off from work. That's why I decided to start offering artist residencies in this house and support ARTS Southeast's new residency on Ossabaw. There are so many small things we can do, like supporting organisations that are artist driven.

What was your experience working directly in the landscape on Ossabaw?

When I was in seventh grade in Alaska, our art teacher wanted us to draw from *National Geographic*. Instead, I looked out the window and saw a beautiful ptarmigan; that kind of experience transports me to Ossabaw, where you can't help but want to experience living trees. The pieces you took for the show from my sketchbook are done on handmade rough paper that is all wobbly and strange. I think Telfair's registrar was worried that there was something wrong with them. But that's the way that paper is made. To me, that element of the paper is also reflective of the environ-



ment. When you and I were looking through my sketchbook, I really appreciated that you could recognise and name places that I didn't even remember.

You captured places in those paintings that are seared into my memory. But it's also because you painted the trees. I think of Ossabaw's trees as landmarks. In New York City, you look for the Empire State Building on the skyline to situate yourself, but on the island, it's a particular live oak. That's not to say that there aren't existing buildings and remnants of others on Ossabaw. People have lived there for thousands of years.

apartamento - Suzanne Jackson



I remember the buildings on the back side of the island that were built by hand in the 1970s. You can feel the spirit of the times there. I also discovered an old tabby that was all overgrown nearby. All this stuff—these aspects of the South—is in the work.



Suzanne Jackson with two of her sculptures at her parents' home in San Francisco, c. 1965. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar, New York.

There are all these structures from different moments in time. You have the mansion where my grandmother lived, which connects to northern industrialists coming down and buying these islands at the beginning of the 20th century. You have the tabby cabins, which were built by enslaved people in the pre-Civil War era out of a historic concrete made from lime, sand, water, and oyster shells. And then there are the buildings you mentioned. They were built by members of Genesis, which was a residency programme that my grandmother ran on the site of the former Middle Place Plantation from 1970 to 1982. Participants were cooking, farming, and fishing, in addition to working on their academic, scientific, or artistic projects. They developed very close connections to the land.

It goes back to Mary Musgrove, the Indigenous woman who fought for her claim to Ossabaw in the 18th century. And it goes back even further than that. I've always felt that there are still secrets on Ossabaw that are not yet told.

In your painting *Origins*, which is in the show, you planted a photograph of a man in the centre of the island's landscape. What inspired that choice?

Oh my goodness, I didn't realise you had chosen that piece for the show. That is Lawrence Campbell, who is part of an old family from Hilton Head Island. His family sort of adopted me, and I felt very proud because they have a lot of history. The matriarch is Mary Young, who told me about how the older people would walk from the back end of Hilton Head over to Daufuskie Island when the water was low. The islands were connected, and they used to move back and forth. I invited Lawrence to go over to Ossabaw with me, and it was an incredible experience for him. I told him that his uncle, Emory Campbell, translated the New Testament into Gullah and had won environmental

awards for preserving Gullah culture on the Sea Islands. That was something I thought he should know. His family remained on Hilton Head after the Civil War. They took care of themselves. They knew what they were doing, and that's impressive to me.

There are so many things I want to talk with you about, but I have to ask about your experience on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. On Ike Carter's show, you mentioned having a powerful experience while driving over the bridge at night in the pouring rain.

Oh, yes. In 2016, a classmate of mine from Yale named Michael Sims invited me to judge an art competition organised by ArtsRevive in Selma, Alabama, where he was from. On my way into town, I realised that I didn't have any gasoline in my car. I was really worried because it was dark outside, and suddenly, it started pouring rain. There's a whole flank of filling stations just before you get to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, so I was able to get gas. Then I realised, this is the place that I saw on television during the Civil Rights Movement. There I was, going across the bridge at midnight in all this rain, and it was just incredible. When the police attacked Civil Rights demonstrators there in 1965, I was in a faraway place and only saw clips on television. I grew up in Fairbanks, Alaska, where the community took care of all colours of people. It didn't matter. And then coming to the States and then to Georgia?

I understand Kara Walker's work because of being here in the South. You know once you've seen the real history. People really resent the history that she puts into her work because they don't want to consider how people were complicit in some way with what was going on. You feel all those things when you're going across the Edmund Pettus Bridge; you feel the spirits. Every time I see a picture of the bridge—with Obama and John Lewis from several years ago, or the archival photos of Martin Luther King Jr or Harry Belafonte—there's just something about this whole group of people coming together. If you're alone, going across in the rain at midnight and hoping that you're going to get to the other side... You know what? The spirit was guiding me and taking me over.

