

Suzanne Jackson: light and paper

September 12–October 19, 2024

Opening Reception: Thursday, September 12, 6–8 PM

Ortuzar Projects is proud to present *Suzanne Jackson: light and paper*, the artist's second solo exhibition with the gallery. Ranging from 1980s drawings to recent monumental sculptural abstractions, the exhibition charts Jackson's engagement with paper across four decades of her practice. While drawing has always been a central, though under-examined aspect of Jackson's oeuvre, her broader use of paper is crucial to her departure from traditional distinctions between surface and support. Through significant and seldom exhibited works, the exhibition will follow Jackson's errant explorations of the ragged edge, raw matter as a container of memory and the layered accumulation and erasure of human history within the contemporary landscape.

Jackson equates her studio to a compost heap. It is a fitting metaphor, as her recent works break down discarded materials, re-composing them into dynamic, living forms that defy easy interpretation. After moving to Savannah, Georgia in 1996, her work shifted away from the melding of human forms and nature motifs. Instead of the traditional support of a stretched canvas, Jackson began using paper, leading to the development of her "environmental abstractions"—paintings that break free from the wall's two-dimensionality and engage with the surrounding space of the viewer. Recycling the detritus of daily life, Jackson crumples and assembles materials from her garden, papers and some textiles from her work as a costume and set designer and found organic matter. While undergoing fundamental formal developments, the arc of Jackson's six-decade career is characterized as much by its stylistic breaks as by its consistent development upon core conceptual principles. Through the layering of ethereal acrylic glazes and personally significant materials, as well as the blurring of boundaries between the human and inhuman, Jackson's paintings continually reflect the artist's attunement to her sense of place within the world.

In 1981, Jackson moved to the village of Idyllwild in the San Jacinto Mountains, two hours outside of Los Angeles. Without access to the industrial spaces she had worked in for over a decade, Jackson devoted herself to smaller-format drawings and paintings on paper. Not unlike her earliest paintings made as a teenager in Fairbanks, Alaska, this series took in the local plant life and landscape. Often working *en plein air*, her meditations on the natural world attend to both the mundane and the fantastic in equal measure: whether painting a fern or branch, a mountain top or a fleeting rush of autumnal air, the artist's subjects dissipate like morning fog into clouds of densely scribbled pastels or luminous pools of watercolor. In these observational studies, Jackson is not concerned with questions of figuration versus abstraction per se, writing at that time about her attempts to make visible the "aura" or spirit that surrounds matter. Rather, Jackson is preoccupied with more fundamental questions of color and light, vitality and gesture, as well as metaphysical concerns, such as the search for the ancestral through the act of painting.

Following this energetic burst of activity in Idyllwild, Jackson entered a quieter period of art-making while working as a set and costume designer in the theater. *Oakland Studio Light* (1992) stands as a monumental exception, the only work she completed over the two years she lived at the Oakland Cannery in the Bay Area. Narrative in scope and sweeping in scale, the work's visionary subject seems to morph between human, insect, bird and plant. Jackson began by tracing the light pouring through her studio skylight in white acrylic, the window frame's shadow the now-yellowed paper. This attention to the interaction between her work and the environmental conditions of the studio was a breakthrough, appearing again in works such as *Prayers* (2001), in which vertical strips of torn canvas and paper are coated with metallic pigments, the drab material transformed into undulating planes of reflected light. In *Ming's Line* (2010), Jackson goes even further, rendering in graphite the *trompe l'oeil* illusion of creases and folds, as if suggesting the memory or potential for dimensionality latent in the material.

Vivian on East 14th Street (1994–1998) portrays a vagrant woman, and was made during a particularly itinerant and difficult period of Jackson's life. Rendered in a distinctly gestural, angst-ridden style, the figure's face emerges from a field of black, marked by ripples and tears in the paper and the texture of the burlap on which it is mounted. Just as paper freed Jackson from the rectangularity and flatness of the stretched canvas, it also liberated the work from frontality. As early as 2003—with *9, Billie, Mingus, Monk's*—Jackson began making double-sided works, continuing her persistent interest in the Gemini trait of duality, or the universal theme of *oneness* versus *twoness*. Composed of disparate materials both cheap and fine, the work is a wobbled and warped altar to three of Jazz's greats (or, as she calls it, African American Classical Music). Like music, the work hangs in the air mid-breadth, its content and form inseparable amidst the innumerable painted and stained layers. The most recent work in the exhibition, *Mr. Mink's Confusion 2000, 2008, 2024*, dates to those three years, a testament to the open-ended and ongoing nature of Jackson's practice. The remains of an earlier painting on paper—torn in half and reoriented in space—are embedded in clear acrylic gel medium alongside orange and red netting and globs of dried paint. The work floats above a sheet of transparent blue plexiglass, its shadow subsumed by the latter's glaringly inorganic glow.

Since the beginning of her career, Jackson has seen her work as being about “memory experiences,” or as tapping into the lived and embodied histories of her ancestors. Through the titling of certain works, Jackson refers to Black histories often occluded by erasure. The raw materiality of her paintings speaks to her belief that Black people came to this country disenfranchised of everything except their bodies and the music and movement they held within them. While no longer conjuring ancestors through figurative means, Jackson's work still stages an encounter between the viewer and the organic and inorganic remnants of life lived. In her ongoing practice, this sense of memory is not only found in materials charged with the vestiges of the South's complex racial history that surrounds her studio, but in the shells and seeds from which the birds in her backyard feed, in the false starts and scraps of earlier paintings and in the potential held on the surface of paper glowing in the morning light.

Suzanne Jackson (b. 1944, St. Louis, Missouri) lives and works between Savannah, Georgia and St Remy, New York. She received an MFA in theater design from Yale University in 1990 and is a recipient of the Helen Frankenthaler Award for Painting (2024), Jacob Lawrence Award from the Academy of Arts and Letters (2022), and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant (2019), among others. She will be the subject of a retrospective being organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2025–2026). Recent solo and survey exhibitions include *Whitney Biennial 2024: Even Better Than the Real Thing*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2024); *Suzanne Jackson: Somethings in the World*, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan (2023); *Suzanne Jackson: Listen' N Home*, Arts Club of Chicago (2022); *Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2022); *Suzanne Jackson: Five Decades*, Jepson Center/Telfair Museums, Savannah, Georgia (2019); *Life Model: Charles White and His Students*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2019); *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, Brooklyn Museum, New York and the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (2018–2020); and *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, MoMA PS1, New York, and Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (2011–2013). Her work is held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art; MCA San Diego; California African American Museum, Los Angeles; Baltimore Museum of Art; and Art Institute of Chicago, among others.