



Jordan CASTEL:

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THE ACCLAIMED PAINTER OF PEOPLE— AND NOW PLANTS.

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JORDAN CASTEEL shot to fame painting portraits of her New York neighbors. So why did she move upstate and start painting flowers?

A reproduction of David Hammons’ “African-American Flag” stands guard over painter Jordan Casteel’s sweet, one-story home in the Catskill Mountains of New York. A reinterpretation of the American original in the Pan-African red, black and green, the flag can be read many ways: affirmation, art history lesson, political statement.

For Casteel—a recent transplant from Harlem—it is a sort of placemaker. She became a headline name in New York City’s contemporary art scene, and the flag conjures the Black and brown community she left behind and summons a version of it that she hopes to build upstate. It’s the same flag that appears on the facade of the Studio Museum in Harlem, where she was an artist-in-residence in its career-making studio program between 2015 and 2016.

Casteel and her husband, photographer David Schulze, bought this property in 2020. Shortly after, they added a freestanding

studio building (she’s upstairs, he’s down) and decided to call this place home. Casteel welcomes me at the door of the studio on a bright winter’s day in February wearing a multicolored patchwork sweater and a smile. “One of the first things I did when we got here was put up the flag,” she tells me, sitting at the kitchen table on the first floor of the studio. “If this is a home that I’m going to be a part of, like the Studio Museum, what this flag is and represents, all of these things are true to the identity of what this house is going to be.”

The interior of the building has an industrial feel with its high ceilings and hard angles, but it’s softened by white walls, unfinished wood on the stairs and hallways and lighting over Casteel’s workspace that is specially engineered to imitate natural light. It’s a peaceful, domestic setup. Her studio manager is tapping away upstairs. Schulze pops in to get carryout lunch requests.

How Casteel came to live high on a grassy hill 100 miles from the city is a study in being and becoming: being an artist and becoming a public figure, with all the demands that come with it. The inflection points of her meteoric rise are well-documented: Her first major solo exhibition, *Visible Man*, in 2014 (the same year she finished an MFA at Yale); the Studio Museum residency in 2015 which led to increasingly impressive showings at galleries, museums and on “One-to-Watch” lists; a portrait of her mother selling at Christie’s in 2020 for \$666,734, more than twice the high estimate, setting an auction record for Casteel. Days later, her first major solo show opened at the New Museum, exactly one decade after she took her first oil painting class while studying abroad in Italy as an undergraduate. Next came an event that cemented Casteel’s status as an art world phenomenon. In 2021, she received the prestigious MacArthur Foundation

Set Designer: Sally Morris Clark. Hair & Makeup: Magdalena Major

(previous) Casteel wears a dress by ISSEY MIYAKE and shoes by CROCS.
(opposite) She wears a top by ISSEY MIYAKE.

“Genius Grant,” an unrestricted \$625,000 award given to “extraordinarily talented and creative individuals as an investment in their potential.” She was 32 at the time.

“I remember finding out about the MacArthur, and actually the first thing I felt wasn’t excitement but a sort of fear of what it meant to have something that big at this point in my career,” Casteel says. “Of course, it’s amazing. But the pressure of [the award] got me first. And I felt that as the pressure was growing, I was losing sight of the thing that got me here in the first place.”

The “thing” that got Casteel here—aside from her extraordinary talent with a paintbrush—is her community. Casteel’s people—her subjects—are the ones right in front of her: family, her students at Rutgers University–Newark where she taught from 2016–2021, other grad students at Yale and, after graduation, the New Yorkers who were fixtures of her every day—in the subway car, or milling about under her window at the Studio Museum.

She explains her thought process at the time. “I wanted to highlight people and make paintings that [brought] them into this museum that I’ve come to know and love, to find a way of bringing the street that was so pronounced to me into the space,” she says. There is something very full and true about thelives on display in a Casteel portrait. These are whole people and whole worlds. Calling herself a “referential painter,” she works from multiple photographs that she takes of her subject, collaging them together to forge one rich painting that encapsulates the totality of her experiences with the person. From many images emerges another more true than the sum of its parts. In Casteel’s paintings, you feel the heat

emanating off a charged body or from the pavement on a summer day. You hear the whine of a restless child, sense the love between a hand-holding couple or the unbreakable pride of a man sitting spine-straight. Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum described it as Casteel’s



(above)
Casteel wears a dress by MARA HOFFMAN.

ability “to capture a sense of spirit, a sense of self, a sense of soul.”

Not surprisingly, Casteel tries to build intimate relationships with her subjects. At a minimum, that engagement involves sharing a signed print of the finished painting, keeping the subject abreast of whose collection it joins and where it shows. She insists on that. But some people are open to going all in. Like James, a man she has painted three times since meeting him in 2015 in front of

the famed soul food restaurant Sylvia’s—once on his own, then with his wife, and again since his wife has passed. When asked about the community she has left behind in New York, James is among the first people she mentions.

Casteel describes herself as an introvert, but the desire to know and paint her community draws her out and keeps her going. “Although I perform a certain extroversion, my soul is soothed by time alone,” she says. “I could be inclined to be quiet and go off in the woods and completely disappear.” So, the move to the Catskills. Although Casteel says there was some trepidation about leaving the city and its rich diversity, it appealed to the part of her that craves seclusion—as well as to her inner “Colorado girl.”

The plan, however, is not to disappear. “I thrive on intimate relationships, and painting has become a way for me to interrogate that and secure it in my life,” she says. “When I do meet people and I am building relationships and I am sitting with someone and I’m hearing their story and I’m sharing mine, then something real happens. It’s like magic.” In fact, she and Schulze chose the Catskill region because of the number of people of color they saw around town, and therefore the prospect of being able to feel at home. A lot has been made of the fact that Casteel paints African Americans (especially men) and immigrants. To a certain extent it’s true. She has talked about how painting people of color is nonnegotiable for her as a Black artist. But she has also lamented that this is an idea that gets glommed onto and twisted (not to mention that the same observation would never be made of white figurative artists whose subjects are all white). For example, one erroneous version





of things says she started painting Black people after Trayvon Martin was murdered.

The problem is that stopping at the race of her subjects is reductive and obfuscates her motivation—which is more complex and quite beautiful. Yes, she has chosen to feature people, who like her, have traditionally not been seen as worthy of being on museum walls. But also, and before all else, she wants to do what she loves (painting) to honor what she loves. She has been exasperated by the mishandling of her story: “People’s capacity to understand the intention behind the work and my commitment to it and my commitment as a practitioner first, is so hard. All of the language becomes so important, in helping—as one of ‘the onlys’ in the space—to define other people’s relationship to it,” she says.

Case in point: Living upstate, Casteel has been drawn to the earth. Once she moved there full time, she found herself choosing time in the garden over the studio. Like the street vendors and neighbors who had enthralled her when she was working in Harlem, the landscape and her plot in their seasonal machinations became the focus of her loving attention. But, she didn’t think to paint them, she says, because the story that had been constructed around her (and by extension her newfound success), associated her with the figure, especially the Black one. And while she resents a narrative that “shrinks the breadth of the work that I do,” as she puts it, the voices in her head also made her question whether the value people placed on her as a painter might diminish if she ventured out to new subjects. “The whole narrative of what it means to be a painter and what people value as it relates to me as a painter in this moment was superseding the thing that I just wanted to paint.”

Ultimately, and with her husband’s encouragement, she said *screw it* and the result was liberating. “I’m now starting to paint landscapes and still lifes, leaning into the questions of light and space and form within the context of a still life or my immediate surroundings as they are changing,” she says. A few of those pieces debuted in *Jordan Casteel: In Bloom* at Casey Kaplan



“I have seen enough examples of institutions using, abusing and cycling through a person like me with no recourse.”

gallery last fall to great acclaim.¹ Casteel says landscapes and still lifes feel like self-portraits because the flowers she paints either have significance in her personal history or because they were coaxed to life by her own hand. Take the painting from which the show gets its title: In the foreground is a beautiful riot of zinnias in her garden. The flower was a favorite of her beloved grandmother and “nods to what’s important to me,” she says. “I see my own labor in it. It’s not about observing the things that are most true for *you* in this moment. It’s about observing the things that were most true for *me*.”

The branching out was so pivotal that she held on to the first painting in the series, *Woven*. It hangs in her home and reminds her, essentially, to stay free. “The practice has to be willing to stretch and grow. I don’t want people to define me. I need the practice not to be defined,” she emphasizes. The move upstate has been a catalyst for this process. “I just knew that I could potentially have more balance and sense of self, that the art world and the expectations around my growing name and career would need the grounding that the land could offer,” she says.

Casteel’s love of the city and her world there is still alive; she still owns a home in Harlem and was in the city last week for an exhibition opening. But she thrives on the life she leads between those visits, filled with time in the garden, “keeping my hands

moving in other ways than just the studio.” And she is slowly beginning to find her people here. She mentions a local writer friend and a family that owns a local restaurant who she plans to paint. She trusts that others will follow. “Now that I’ve been here full time, I’m finding that as soon as you sit somewhere for a period of time, people appear. It might take me a little longer to find them here. But there’s a whole world of people that can open up through one person’s introduction. And it’s already beginning to happen,” she says.

The need for a pared down life is born of a lot of success packed into a small number of years and at a young age. Add to that the tax of being a Black woman and the whiplash of being touted by institutions that have historically excluded people who look like you. It requires a lot of tightrope walking, triple guessing and holding up of the weight that has been placed on your shoulders—no matter how grateful you are to be chosen to carry it. Casteel is aware of the hazards. “I have seen historically enough examples of institutions using, abusing and cycling through a person like me with no recourse. There is real potential for that in my mind, regardless of the amount of accolades that I’ve had.”

For Casteel, the only way to be immune to that is to focus on the work and its meaning. At this point, that looks like tending to the cycles of life, be it a person or a blossom, or her own evolution. “That’s where the practice derived itself: from being in the world and being curious and discovering people and things,” she says. “I don’t want to burn out. I want to do this for a very long time.”

(1) The exhibition was name-checked by *Time* magazine when it featured Casteel on the Time 100 Next list in 2022. Her entry read: “In expanding her repertoire to the natural world, Casteel makes yet another inextricable connection, between people and the ecosystems they occupy.”

(opposite) Casteel wears a shirt by STINE GOYA.