

ART PROBE

ISSUE #5

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Exhibition : *WITHIN REACH* (19th February 2020 - 3rd January 2021)

Artist : *Jordan Casteel*

Venue : *New Museum, New York City*



Serwaa and Amoakohene (detail), 2019

Source : *New York Times*

Jordan Casteel is an artist who lives and works in New York, NY. She was born in Denver, Colorado (USA, 1989) and completed her masters of fine arts in 2014 from the Yale University of Art.

Bringing together nearly forty paintings spanning her career, including works from her celebrated series *Visible Man* (2013–14) and *Nights in Harlem* (2017), along with recent portraits of her students at Rutgers University-Newark, “*Within Reach*” will be Jordan Casteel’s first solo museum exhibition in New York City. Casteel’s subjects are frequently black men looking directly at the viewer. She poses questions about gender and the definition of masculinity, social structure i.e class while investigating relationships that tie together intimacy and distance, familiarity and otherness.¹

¹ *Jordan Casteel : Within Reach, 2020*

Some of my favourite pieces from the exhibition, '*WITHIN REACH*' were:

1) *Within Reach*, 2019



Source : Brooklynrail

The first pick of the lot is *Within Reach*, painted by Casteel in 2019, synonymous to the exhibition. It is particular piece is based on the series in which Casteel took photographs on the subway. In this series the subject will not be found gazing directly at the viewer. Subjects are therefore, are anonymous and her interaction with them is of a different kind as compared to the other portraits she is known to exhibit (black, male body gazing directly at the viewer).

What is seen in front of us is an image of a child, leaning against a paternal figure. The child is reaching for something that may be in his pocket, while the paternal figure holds him with his right hand with affection. The gesture is supportive and filled with endearment. On the extreme right hand side of the image, what can also be seen is another child who is likewise held by the man in the middle. The piece expels paternal love, which is rarely showcased in paintings. We have seen motherly adoration for her child in multiple images, throughout history. But this artwork is specially engaging as its not only visually sound but also highlights an inkling of society rarely spoken of.

2) Baayfalls, 2018



Source : AfroPunk

With *Baayfalls* (2018), Casteel moved into representing women explicitly. Casteel, as mentioned is known to paint black male bodies but this particular piece has gender play. What became important for her were shedding light on presumptions made when an image is received by a viewer. She wanted to address questions such as — what it means for a woman to paint a black man, who is allowed to paint whom and so on. This is one reason why this painting intrigues. It not only strays away from the usual Casteel portraits but also strips it off bias that may follow.

Other reasons this painting catches interest is the prominence of her process, revealed to the viewer. With the baseball caps and store fronts seen in backdrop, one can see the underpainting in different ways. Lastly, the black t-shirt of woman reads, “I am not interested in competing with anyone. I hope we all make it” makes this a political image. The woman next to a male figure dressed in tribal wear, in contemporary times of the BLM movement, advertising a non-violent message, oozing tolerance and acceptance transforms this image into a strong one with high equilibrium.

3) Miles, 2014



Source : Jordan Casteel

Finally, my last pick of the lot would be *Miles*, painted by Casteel in the year 2014. It is an oil on canvas, measuring 42 x 36 inches. What is seen on canvas is a solitary black male body, gazing at its viewer. The body is painted blue, with his arms showcasing a relaxed attitude. His expression stands unaffected, rather than proud. He is dressed informally; with a casual white vest, monochrome basketball shorts and black sneakers. His arms, neck and chest are covered in tattoos. The subject sits on a pouffe detailed with delicate African embroidery, resting on carpeted flooring. Another piece of furniture seen is a leather green sofa, on which the subject rests his back.

What makes this piece interesting is — firstly, the presence of tattoos as well as the detailed pouffe to show the subject is fond of self-expression through his anatomy as well as the pieces of furniture he keeps. Casteel uses details within her portraits to tell a story in subtle ways, she reveals temperament. Secondly, the surreal quality of the skin the subject holds up. Blue is seen as a colour of royalty in art history as there was once a time it was extracted either out of indigo or lapis lazuli, both, expensive to retrieve. The subject drenched in regal colours poses in sheer contrast when compared to the history of portraiture; where the subject stood with grandiose. Here, it is seen that the subject is at ease and instilled with a calm-confidence in himself.

REFERENCES

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