

Jordan Casteel's Within Reach Portraits Offer Raw and Real Depictions of the Black Community

*A deep dive into her latest nineteen piece show at one of
New York's beloved contemporary museums*

By Shameyka McCalman

Vogue magazine stunned Harlem-based figure painter Jordan Casteel fans when revealing the artist's painting of Brother Vellies founder and activist, Aurora James, as one of their coveted September issue covers in 2020. This, of course, was not the first time Casteel's art has drawn attention this year. In her first solo showcase, *Within Reach* features oil paintings of her college classmates, university students, and Harlem neighbors. Her first solo exhibition is essentially comprised of three parts, which include Steel's past exhibitions *Visible Man* and *Nights in Harlem*, along with portraits of her former graduate students. In the New Museum's virtual tour, Casteel admits she draws inspiration from painters Bob Thompson, an abstract impressionist with a passion for vibrant and colorful canvases, and Alice Neel, also known for painting friends and loved ones. Casteel's overall color palette shares similarities to Thompson's. Both painters are not afraid to step outside of more subdued color choices and use shades like fuchsia or canary, when necessary. Like Alice, Casteel paints realistic and life-sized depictions of her subjects. She often has them faced forward, looking straight into the camera. The final results are pieces that essentially force exhibition attendees to soul gaze with the subjects in her piece.

Similar to most of her work, the *Nights in Harlem* series starts off with her photographing people or objects and transfers their images onto a large-scale canvas in her studio. A painting of a local Harlem hair braiding shop, Amina Hair Braiding, stood out amongst the crowd. The color palette, consisting mostly of rich earth tones, provides a soothing depiction of the storefront layout. Once more in the museum's virtual tour, Jordan reflects on her early days in New York City, discussing the piece in great detail. Located on 125th street, the storefront and Harlemites made her feel at home for the first time since making New York her permanent residence. The light, text, and imagery on the Amina Hair Braiding sign outside around the building enthralled her into taking a photo. The sign, filled with pictures of countless black women with braids in their hair, has wording that reads, "We Make the Difference." Casteel mentions in the virtual tour that she felt like the sign was confirming that black women *do* make the difference. To the artist, the Amina shop is a microcosm of Harlem. The energy and connectivity between people of color within that area is evident to her. She felt it when she first moved there and chose to translate her feelings into this artwork.

Casteel knowingly holds space within each series she produces for portraits of Black men. If these men aren't in her classroom, she sometimes finds men on the streets of New York standing to the side, keeping to themselves. As an introvert who morphs into an extrovert in social settings, she understands this experience far too well. She takes a unique approach to painting black men in *Visible Man*. In the series, Jordan takes private photos, which she of course then transfers to canvases, of nude black men in intimate settings. Two paintings at The New Museum feature Black male bodies. With one in a more dark blue-gray hue and the other in a deep dark brown, the complexion of these two males are richer than other subjects in the exhibition, catching the viewer's attention. The young boy, with a deep brown complexion, is posing in his

room with a stuffed elephant underneath his chair. He resembles any other adolescent. In the online tour, she explains wanting to present black male figures as human and vulnerable. It's a stark difference from, according to [Jordan in a 2018 interview with The Root](#), how the world "criminalizes, villainizes and sexualizes [black men], very explicitly in the way they are portrayed in media or in history."

The mindfulness she brings to every piece apparent. Her conscious choices acknowledge the presence of people of color, in an industry that caters to the white and affluent. The painter has combined three themes from past series into one multilayered view of the black experience. Black people can view each piece and see familiarity while everyone else just sees parts of humanity that are not as often celebrated in contemporary art. The beauty in this exhibition is that Jordan is painting what she organically knows and inspires her, people of color shown in a genuine point of view.