

Below is a review of Jordan Casteel's exhibition *Within Reach*, previously on view at The New Museum in New York. Please note that the review was written in 2020 for Sotheby's online course.

Denver-born and now Harlem-based figure painter Jordan Casteel's standing in the art world perplexes her. "I have somehow found a way to weasel myself into a one-percent opportunity within the art market," says the painter in a behind-the-scenes video titled "Jordan Casteel: Stays in The Moment" for Art21. Contrary to her belief, Casteel has done more than enough work to make it in New York's elite art scenes. The Yale School of Art graduate paid her dues. It deserved recognition for her successful solo exhibitions at the Denver Art Museum, CO, and the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, CA. Her CV spans far back to 2017, when she submitted work to The Studio Museum in Harlem and Hunter College in 2014. She follows up her statement in the previously mentioned profile by saying, "With access comes responsibility."

Throughout her career, the artist has prioritized featuring her college classmates, university students, and Harlem neighbors in each oil painting she produces. Thus causing her to tap into a group within the black community that goes largely unnoticed. The community that Casteel creates in *Within Reach*, currently on view at The New Museum, is one that black and brown people can identify with because it shows them existing in the art world.

*Within Reach* is essentially comprised of three parts: Steel's past exhibitions, *Visible Man and Nights in Harlem*, and portraits of her former graduate students. In the New Museum's virtual tour, Casteel mentions that she draws inspiration from painters Bob Thompson, an abstract impressionist with a passion for vibrant and colorful canvases, and Alice Neel, who's also known for painting friends and loved ones. Casteel's overall color palette shares a few 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 her subjects facing forward and looking straight into the camera. The final results are pieces that essentially force exhibition attendees to soul gaze with the subjects in her piece. It creates this intimate experience and pushes the viewer to see who they are. She also uses the background setting to give the viewer a glimpse into the students' lives. In one portrait, the artist features a young woman with blond braids lounging on a desk chair. The student looks relaxed and displays her artwork, a handpainted piece with the Ghana flag, behind her. Her look feels familiar and normal to those within the community. She's an average girl who isn't always portrayed in the same beautiful light Casteel places her in. She embodies the idea of showing a member of the black community just existing and living in their truth.

Jordan also opts to use places and spaces in New York as the focus of her artwork. Like most of her work, the *Nights in Harlem* series starts with her photographing her subjects and transferring the image onto a large-scale canvas in her studio. A local Harlem hair braiding shop, Amina Hair Braiding, was the focus of one of her recent paintings. The color palette she uses consists mostly of rich earth tones, which helps offer a soothing depiction of the storefront layout. In the New Museum's virtual tour, Jordan reflects on her early days in New York City when discussing the piece in great detail. Located on 125th street, the shop and locals in the area made her feel at

home for the first time since deciding to make New York her permanent residence. The light, text, and imagery on the Amina Hair Braiding sign outside the building drew her to the store, prompting her to take a photo. The sign was filled with pictures of countless black women with braids in their hair, and the wording right under them reads, “We Make the Difference.” Casteel mentions in the virtual tour that the sign confirmed that black women make a difference. Black women and people in that community find ways to support each other by using language that uplifts those who look like them. To the artist, the Amina shop is a microcosm of Harlem. The energy and connectivity between people of color within that area are 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 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, and often being overlooked. As an introvert who forces herself to be an extrovert in social settings, she understands this experience far too well. She takes a unique approach to paint black men in *Visible Man*. In the series, Jordan takes private photos, which she transfers to canvases of nude black men in intimate settings. There are two paintings at The New Museum with 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 is richer than other subjects in the exhibition, as if to catch 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 looks like any other adolescent. When discussing the exhibition again on the online tour, she explains wanting to present black male figures as human and vulnerable. According to Jordan in a 2018 interview with *The Root*, it's a stark difference from 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 is apparent. The artist knows that she has a chance to show black men to a group that might not be accustomed to seeing them in this way.

Jordan Casteel has become one of the few contemporary artists who's carving out a place for people of color. She has made a conscious choice to acknowledge their presence 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 rarely 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 raw and genuine point of view.