

Suzanne Jackson

by Barbara McCullough

Suzanne Jackson has been painting professionally for five decades. Starting out in the Bay Area in the late '60s, she went for the biggest surfaces right from the start—large canvases and papers as well as outdoor murals, including a section of Los Angeles's Crenshaw Wall. She has experimented with a three-dimensional "architectural" approach and "sculpted" painting ever since. Her more recent free-hanging painted works are profoundly original and attest to her audacious and intuitive spirit as an artist. Apart from art materials, her paintings include all manner of components, which she finds in nature or her studio, resulting in mesmerizing layered, at times assemblage-like textures.

opposite: *Hers and His*, 2018, acrylic, cotton, scenic bogus paper, and wood, 86 × 67 inches. All photos by Timothy Doyon, unless otherwise noted. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York City.



Red over morning sea,
2021, acrylic, curtain lace,
shredded mail, produce bag
netting, and wood, 65 x
84 x 4 inches. Courtesy of
the artist, Mnuchin Gallery,
New York City and Ortuzar
Projects.





I remember Jackson's early paintings in soft hues of pastels and saw her expanding into different modes of expression in later works, her palette changing along with the various materials used. Besides being a painter, Jackson has had a plethora of practices and experiences—among them dance, costume design, running an experimental gallery space, organizing and curating exhibitions, and teaching—all of which coalesced to influence her vibrant paintings. Honoring her tireless support of fellow artists, Ortuzar Projects in New York recently restaged *The Sapphire Show*, the first Los Angeles survey of African American women artists organized in 1970 in Jackson's famed loft space, Gallery 32.

Jackson and I were both part of Los Angeles's creative post-Watts Rebellion environment of the 1970s and 1980s. Black artists were there. Black music was there. But the larger world was unreceptive and unwelcoming. Still, Suzanne continued to paint, and never stopped being a community activist, wherever life sent her. Our paths crossed again in Georgia, where we both taught at the Savannah College of Art and Design. We participated in a radio program, *Listen Hear*, where we shared our love for jazz with a wider circle. Music punctuated pivotal moments in both of our lives and our work; it provided entry to and facilitated internal impulses enabling us to harness the energy to think and to do.

We are sisters in life with differing but converging influences, both compelled to embrace the light with our works. We recently spoke on Zoom between Georgia, where Jackson still lives and works, and my home in California, and reflected on our shared history and community.

BARBARA MCCULLOUGH:
Hi, Suzanne. How are you?

SUZANNE JACKSON: Hi, Barbara.

BM: I'm so glad we finally got a chance to get together.

SJ: It's Juneteenth tomorrow, but some people are celebrating already today. It's official! It's a national holiday!

BM: But I must say that I would like to get voting rights straightened out. The setup now is detrimental to too many.

SJ: It's in conflict with what we're all trying to do.

BM: Well, looking at your recent work at Mnuchin Gallery [*Off The Wall*, 2021], I'm going, This is so exciting!

I remember you saying that being in Georgia—teaching in the painting department at Savannah College of Art and Design—was keeping you from doing the things that you knew you were qualified and capable of doing. The shows weren't necessarily coming right away, but now all these projects are blossoming—it's wonderful to see.

SJ: Thank you. It is exciting for me too. My work in this group show was a change, a turn.

BM: We were in the same environment twice, first in Los Angeles in the early '70s and then in Savannah in the '90s. When I first met you in LA, I was seeking my identity, but you had already established yourself as a painter. I was in graduate school in film at UCLA, and I wanted to do things that were different. And I did. I was running around trying to understand certain things about artists' work.

SJ: When you showed up, I didn't even see you. You were recording David Hammons and Senga Nengudi under the freeway during the CETA project [the federally funded Comprehensive Employment and Training Act].

What was the title of your film?

BM: It's *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1979).

SJ: Did you ever come to the exhibitions at Gallery 32?

BM: I wasn't aware of the space until that wonderful show [*Gallery 32 & Its Circle*] in 2009 at Loyola Marymount University that had all your archival material. Seeing the archive, I'm going, How come I didn't know about Gallery 32 back then?!

SJ: When Gallery 32 closed in 1970, I went to San Francisco for a few years, after being married and having a baby. You and I met when I was back in Los

Angeles again in '73. That was when I had the studio at Jefferson and Main, that big five-thousand-square-foot loft. I had it for two years, and that's where we had the Just Above Midtown Gallery fundraiser with David Hammons making Body Prints.

In 1976, Alonzo [Davis] hired me as the artist coordinator for the CETA Project, and that's when I became more familiar with Senga and her work. So probably the reason you didn't see me when you were filming, was that I was coordinating all the other artists. I was also working on the two-story New Health Center wall on Western Avenue, and another painting about fifty-eight and a half feet long on the Crenshaw Boulevard wall.

Alonzo Davis, David Hammons, Dan Concholar, Timothy Washington, and I were the first artists to paint on the Crenshaw Wall. And then in 1976, Brockman Gallery Productions—which Alonzo organized as a separate project within Brockman Gallery—was able to get the grant for artists to create works for the CETA Public Art Program. As the program coordinator, I have all the notes and I recently discovered a four-page resignation letter by Senga that outlines her early motivations for and reflections on what she is doing now. There were notes for everybody. I can see the path we were all taking—where we started, and where we are now. It's quite amazing.

BM: I met Senga at Studio Z, David [Hammons]'s space on Slauson Avenue when they had this jazz performance by the Art Ensemble of Chicago. That's when I first talked with Senga, and we discovered that we both had small children—babies, really—and I was fascinated by the type of work she was doing, but also by the fact that here was an artist who was, you know, conscientiously working to continue with her art practice.

And then I became aware of Betye Saar's background, and looking at a photograph that was taken for an event you were involved in or organized, I saw your son Rafiki running down the steps.

SJ: That photo was taken by Harmon Outlaw at the *Contextures* book party at the Hobart studio. I loved that 1880s house. It was gorgeous—painted

blue-black with the soffit underpainted in Chinese red. David brought Sun Ra around one day to look at my house, but I missed him, probably because I was up on the scaffolding painting the wall at the New Health Center.

BM: I remember the Hobart house. There were certain people who were collecting art. Al Ryan was a collector, and I remember seeing Dr. Hobbs and thinking, What is my dentist doing here? They were Black professionals buying art by Black artists, which was pretty great. Who else was going to buy the work?

SJ: All of our doctors collected: Dr. Payne, Dr. Banks, Dr. Hobbs, Dr. Jackson... The New Health Center was Dr. Jackson's building where I painted my biggest wall and was able to get him to sponsor it. Eventually, once the wall was done—it took two years—he bought the property next door, the old house, and landscaped the whole parking lot. That was really beautiful. That wall was up for four years without a scratch on it. Those collectors were very supportive, and that was decades before others bought our works. It was the late '60s, early '70s. I was back and forth between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Sometimes I'd see group photos and think, Wow, I missed that gathering. I was always someplace else.

My wedding in LA was a big event, "a happening." Everybody showed up for it in the park. It was great fun. Not a great marriage though. (*laughter*) By the time I was pregnant and things were falling apart, my dad had to come and get me because it was a mess. I admit that out loud. My son was born in San Francisco in '71, and then I went back to Los Angeles to perform in the play *Cinderella Brown* by Elizabeth Leigh-Taylor. So here I am, I've just had a baby, and I had to exercise and get my body back in shape so I would look like the Angela Davis character in the play. That's when I found the studio on Jefferson and Main. I looked at it and thought, This is the kind of space I want.

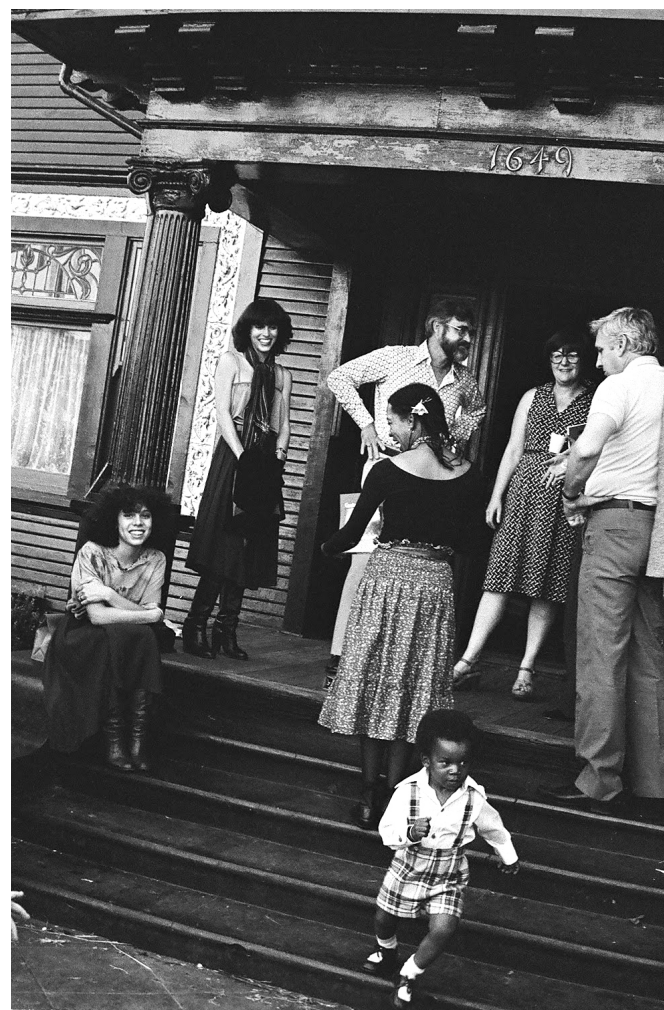
BM: When I lived on 59th and Main, we got broken into. It was scary, because I would periodically leave my two kids. The space was very large, three side-by-side storefronts, plenty of



left: *Spirit*, 1979, mural (destroyed), 28 x 58.5 feet, The New Health Center (24th Street and Western Avenue), Los Angeles. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the artist.



above: Portrait of Suzanne Jackson in her Los Angeles studio with her painting *Directions*, 1976. Photo by Wayne Leonard. Courtesy of the artist and Ankrum Gallery, Los Angeles.



right: Book launch for Linda Goode-Bryant's *Contextures* at Hobart House, Los Angeles, 1978. Left to right: Alison Saar, Lezley Saar, Suzanne Jackson, three unidentified guests; at lower right is Jackson's son, Rafiki. Photo by Harmon Outlaw. @Harmon Outlaw.



studio space, and it was a good space for gathering people and for the kids to run around.

SJ: So were you at street level? I was all the way up on the third floor, and it meant there was room for Rafiki to ride his little giraffe thing up and down. He couldn't really go out to play, but I think it was a safer environment than yours because people could not break in easily.

BM: It was also by the East Side. Not East LA, but the East Side, which was the first section where Black people lived when they came to LA. They were prohibited from living in other parts of the city. At night you saw little packs of junkyard dogs and juke joints—bars where the elderly folks were shooting the breeze. It was real neighborhood stuff that I never experienced in any other part of LA. I was taking a photography class with Robert Heinecken at the time, and that propelled me to take photographs in that part of town. I really loved capturing the textural

quality of life in black and white. It reminded me of a small Southern town.

SJ: You were seeing more of a community because you were farther south. I was in the warehouse district closer to downtown. Jefferson and Main was still an industrial area. There wasn't much neighborhood. I don't think there was even a grocery store in that area. My mother, who is from St. Louis, used to say, "Los Angeles is a big country town." Now that I've lived in the south, I realize Los Angeles definitely had that Southern feeling to me. I also realized the effect of migration; many people in LA were actually from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi—the true South.

BM: There were a lot of people from Louisiana in LA when you and I met. Unfortunately, my mother wanted us to get away from that. When she walked to this school to register us and saw some of the same people we knew from New Orleans, she was like, No! When we came, my father was a musician.

In New Orleans, he was the secretary of the musicians' union. In LA, he didn't have the opportunity to be a musician anymore, but he instilled an affinity and appreciation for music in me which led me to my film about Horace Tapscott. Which brings me to, when you and I were in Savannah in the '90s, one of the things that we joyfully did was record our radio program, called *Listen Hear*.

SJ: Yes, we recorded on Wednesdays and the show would play on Tuesday nights from 9:00 to 11:00 and then repeat on Fridays, from 3:00 to 5:00. They have been programming all the repeats during COVID, and we all are thrilled whenever we hear your voice.

I was happy when you moved to Savannah, because you were bringing some of California back to me, and the

Sundown, 1974, acrylic wash on canvas, 9.25 x 12.25 inches. Photo by Ed Glendinning. Courtesy of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Ortuzar Projects.

music we used to experience at Leimert Park, like Jack DeJohnette, Horace Tapscott, Hiroshima, and others. All these people were outstanding, playing freely in the park, and we were there. I missed that after moving to Savannah in 1996. Our radio program brought this music back into my life. Of course, I was also missing out on local concerts because I was teaching 24–7. But I realize now that Savannah was a sanctuary, and it still is. I was making a lot of work and not even realizing how much I was accomplishing because nobody was bothering me. Nobody knew anything about what I was doing.

BM: When I visited your studio in Savannah, it was the first time I had seen you work with darker hues. You used less watercolor and you worked on unstretched canvas.

SJ: That had to do with moving around. It changes the work. The going off the stretcher happened when I moved back from the East Coast after grad school. I earned my MFA in design at the Yale School of Drama in 1990. Then I moved to Oakland and had a big studio there. But I was working freelance as a costume and scenic designer back and forth from the East Coast to the West Coast, and up and down California. Sometimes I was working on three theater jobs at the same time. I was invited to exhibit at Bomani Gallery in San Francisco but I had no way to get the work there except on the BART. So I took a big painting on canvas off the stretcher to take it to the gallery. That started me working off the stretcher. I also made graphite and colored-pencil drawings that could be framed. The acrylic-wash paintings that most people are familiar with were made in the early '70s when I was young and romantic. Then, life grabs you and the work changes.

When I was teaching in southern Maryland, they would throw away the bogus paper that was put down to protect the stage when painting the sets. I see these big sheets of paper—109 inches—in the dumpster and I'm thinking, I have no supplies! So I started retrieving that paper and saving it.

My current gallery, Ortuzar Projects in New York City, just found a painting I did in 1969. It is graphite and

watercolor/acrylic on canvas. It must have been from my transition period to the Nova Color acrylic paints. The pigments are very creamy with intense color in them. That's why those washes and that soft color could happen almost like watercolor, just by layering and layering it. Having a five-thousand-square-foot loft space also made a big difference and changed my work.

When you were in grad school, working on film, did your studio space affect your work?

BM: No, not there. See, the people that went through film school when I did were dubbed the LA Rebellion. We were not a collective, though. The only thing that joined us in terms of context was that we wanted to do different images. We wanted to get away from the stereotypical Blaxploitation and take a look at what's going on in the community where we lived. I was intrigued by the artists in our community—David and Senga, Houston and Kinshasha Conwill, Betye, of course. I saw that there was a spiritual context, and I wanted to ask about that through film.

While I was in film school, I wasn't considered a filmmaker. I was considered a film buff. What in hell is a film buff? (*laughter*)

SJ: I remember people in film constantly talking about distribution. Black filmmakers were struggling in the same way that Black painters were not being considered for showing their work. As if it was a favor to allow people of color to go into film studies. Just the struggle that we were all having at that time . . . It was all about determination and persistence. In recent years, looking at the LA Rebellion films, I thought, These people have been making incredibly strong visual statements that influenced us as painters. You used David's studio on Slauson?

BM: I shot one thing there: Joe Ray had done these beautiful acrylic planets. I don't know what happened to that footage, unfortunately. I went there with a group of folks from my UCLA environment, including my cinematography professor. That shoot was a wonderful experience because we could do whatever we wanted. Particularly for young

Black filmmakers, that was great. It was a certain level of benign neglect, "Just go do." The underlying goal of everybody's work was a different image of African Americans.

My work has gotten around in the last few years, whereas before nobody wanted to show it because it was a little bit explicit. I said, Okay, fine, I'm not interested in distribution other than what could put me in a gallery or a museum. But luckily, Third World Newsreel—they were the distributor for my projects except the Horace Tapscott film—was very helpful in negotiating with institutions, galleries, universities, whatever. They were like my agent.

SJ: I was just at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where they installed a whole room on Studio Z as a part of Senga's phenomenal exhibition there. I remember in the CETA Project, she was on the top of a building, trying to put pantyhose up on one of those big advertising grids, and the wind was blowing like crazy.

So basically, we have slowly and gradually all come around to this age, still viable and capable of making work. We were like a supportive family. We could not help but take each other along. Your *Freeway* film traveled along with us. You are the person who documented what was going on back then. People would not even know certain aspects without you. Just seeing David [Hammons] throwing rocks around and trying to make an installation thing, was a first thought.

BM: That was such fun.

SJ: You picked up the sense of humor, this gathering of our energy. I always saw your film as a spiritual ritual and not explicit.

BM: Thank you.

SJ: People were projecting on all of us—on film people, sculptors, painters: You are a Black artist, so are you making Black art or not? And it never came to any answer of what is Black art.

BM: I had to go through experimental film studies and that environment at UCLA was highly politically charged at the time. If you did not have an overt

political message, your contribution had no real value. As a filmmaker, why did I have to conform to someone's understanding of what a film is? I had taken my inspiration from music and from artists like you, Senga, and Betye. I knew they existed, and I knew their work, and I knew they were mothers, like me. In my film *Shopping Bag Spirits*, I asked, Are artists the new shamans? Are they providing a spiritual direction? I read an article recently that talked about ritual and contemporary art as this new thing. But it wasn't a new thing. It's been there all along!

I look at your work, and I'm wondering what kind of narratives are embedded in it. What are some of those stories?

SJ: *A Hole in the Marker—Mary Turner 1918*, a painting from last year, is a long gold column, which originally started with a figure. Then I read this story about Mary Turner, who in 1918 was lynched with a baby in her belly and they defiled the baby. I kept building up the column on both sides, with a blue circle at the top. Without the title, you see a piece of abstract art.

The piece that I called *Crossing Ebenezer* came about when I first met Theron "Ike" Carter at your Horace Tapscott film screening. He started inviting me for conversations around the fire. The logs he bought came in these red bags and I said, "Would you please save those for me?" That piece was built up with the gauze from the firewood bags. A friend had taken me to Ebenezer Creek—

BM: In Savannah?

SJ: Yeah, it's close to Savannah. Until I did the painting, I had no idea that's where Sherman's troops marched across Ebenezer River, and one of the generals burned the bridge, and all the Black people had no choice: they could either stay there and be captured and reenslaved by the Confederates, or they could try to cross that very wide river. But there's no way to cross that river. That's how I developed *Crossing Ebenezer*.

BM: Your early works had direct references to ancestry. Can you talk about those references?



A Hole in the Marker—Mary Turner 1918, 2020, acrylic, curtain lace, produce bag netting, metal rods, and S-hooks, 114 x 28 x 2 inches. Photo by David Kaminsky. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects.

opposite: *Crossing Ebenezer, 2017, layered acrylic, bag netting, peanut shells, 92 x 67 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects.*

SJ: After organizing the 1972 Black Expo at the San Francisco Civic Center, I was asked to be the principal researcher for "Black Masters, African Retentions in the Americas." The Los Angeles County Museum used our proposal for the *Two Centuries of Black American Art* exhibition. In the mezzanine of the UC Berkeley Library, I discovered the huge original book of the 1897 British punitive expedition of the Benin. And I absorbed a lot about the essence of African art—ritual art that should never have been taken out of the villages and the spiritual places. And then connecting that to the retentions in the indigenous Americas, Suriname, Central America—those things we hold and we don't even realize we're still practicing, you know, what came to us originally from where we came from.

I've been saying all along that I'm following the paths of ancestors. I've been learning more about my history since I've been here in the South. You're right next to your history, or it's right on top of you. The land is full of our ancestors. I visited a family in Harris Neck and heard voices in the trees. When I first moved here, I could hear things in the trees, in the moss—it was overwhelming for me. And that has brought in a lot of the heavier aspects to the work.

BM: In what sense?

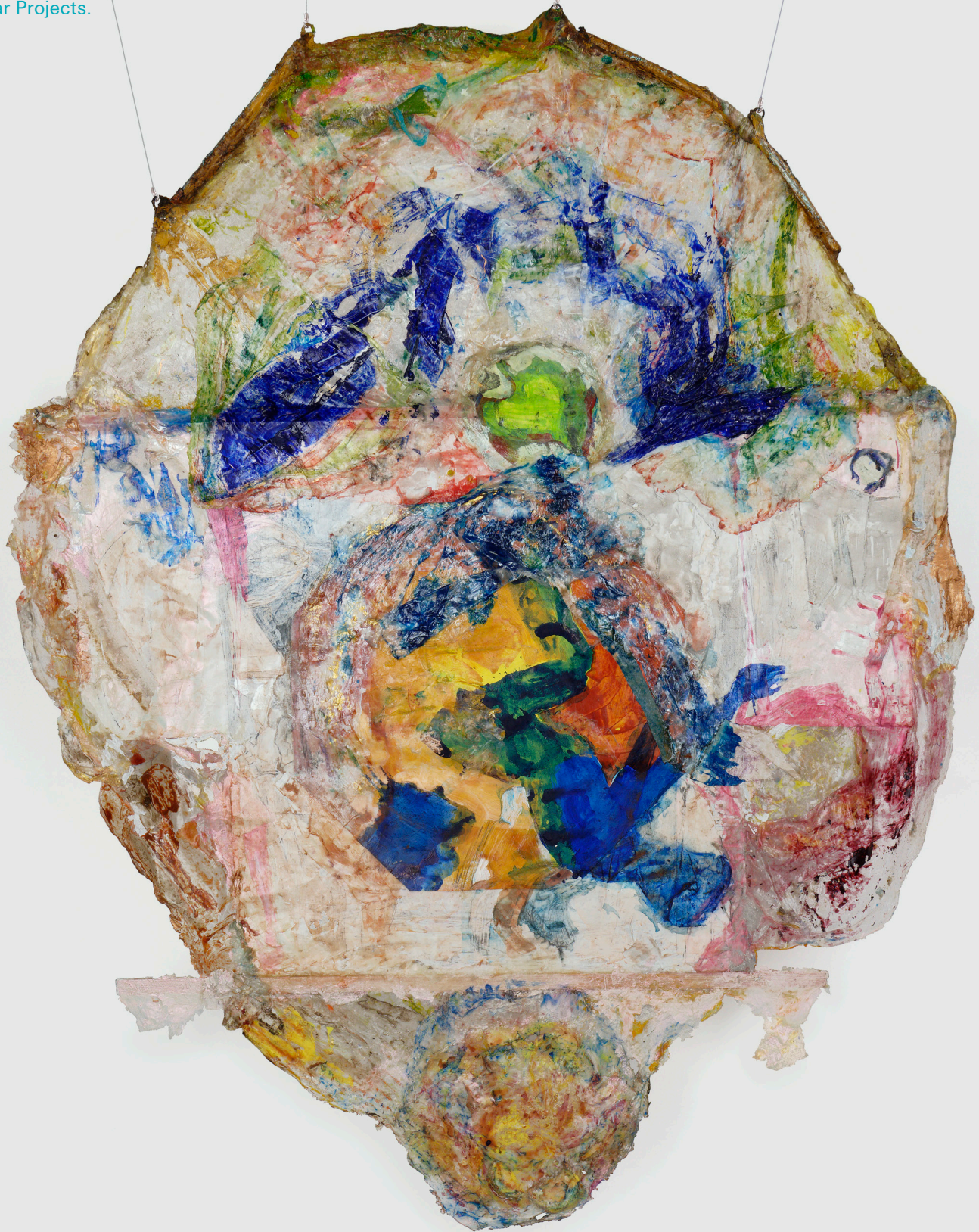
SJ: There's more color and texture in the paintings, and I started using things like leaves and the seeds from the loquat tree that grows outside. Also, I began using found stuff or whatever I had in the studio. Nobody was paying attention to me and nobody was bothering me. I don't know how I managed to do all the work that I did while teaching.

BM: Your schedule was pretty intense.

SJ: You were even busier as the chair of the visual effects department. I know you were going through a lot



below and opposite (detail):
*falling, flying, fleeing, earth
sault*, 2020, acrylic, graphite,
Stonehenge paper, wood,
PVC pipe, and D-rings, 82 ×
63 × 4 inches. Courtesy of
the artist, Mnuchin Gallery,
and Ortuzar Projects.





during those six years you were here in Savannah. And when you left, I was thinking, Barbara managed to escape.

BM: Teaching was one of those things that I had to do to survive.

SJ: Well, that's exactly how I got to Savannah. I was a guest artist in 1981, but was invited back to teach in 1996. I wouldn't have thought of full-time teaching. But I had no money, so after two years of doing scenic design in New Haven, I was ready to teach painting.

I was a mother, and I was also caring for my own mother. I painted at night until 3 AM. Because I was teaching, it felt even better to draw and paint all the way through. That's always what I wanted to do: paint and draw.

I think in this new work I'm doing, all these things come together. It all broke out like those images you saw from my survey show [*Five Decades*, 2019]. That exhibition was after Rafiki had passed away. It was a major change—first the birth of a child, and then, you know, to do this work. The beginning of my child's life and the end of my child's life, those were the two major changes in my work.

In the group show at Mnuchin Gallery [*Off the Wall*], there were two pieces that I didn't consider finished. I didn't even know where they might be relative to my thinking and completion. They were supposed to be for a show I'm having next year in Scotland, and the gallery scooped those up. Usually, a work stays in the studio a long time before a show, so I can rework and go back into it.

BM: Is it a part of letting go?

SJ: Yeah, well....

BM: Can you talk about the materials you use and how you proceed in the studio creating these three-dimensional paintings that are suspended in the space?

SJ: Since the late '90s, my paintings reflect my breaking away from the structure of stretched canvas or paper. I enjoy "ragged edges," using torn shapes and found materials. I don't predetermine or think about making

organic painted shapes. Sometimes, I begin by establishing a layer of heavy Artist's Acrylic medium as a flexible under-surface, brushed or palette-knifed onto a plastic-covered surface. Pure acrylic paint on its own, over mesh or produce-bag netting, creates a vibrant translucent surface. Overlaying acrylic glazes with different applied textures emphasizes the coincidental structural and architectural strengths within each painted foundation.

I use all sorts of studio construction leftovers. Sometimes I reuse the paintbrush water so the paint doesn't go down the drain, or I'll include paint residue or elements of studio detritus in the layering process. The temperature or humidity where the pure medium paint dries—or requires over-painting—allows the works to be suspended in space as sculpted paintings.

BM: And you can walk around and see them from all sides, which is so exciting.

I want to ask you: Moving from California to the South, what was your experience in terms of racism?

SJ: When you're thrown right into this racist environment that still lingers on both sides, it highlights the difference of place. What do you remember of when you lived in New Orleans?

BM: Walking down the street as a little girl, I remember these white college guys in their convertible VW Bug, screaming at me, "Monkey!"

We went to segregated schools and our books were secondhand cast-offs from the white Catholic schools. I never learned how to swim until I came to LA. There was no place in New Orleans for us to go swimming. Racism was overt, but you had the protection of your family.

SJ: I'm sure it's the reason my parents moved to San Francisco and then to Alaska. In my experience of Alaska, there was no overt racism. Of course, there were never more than three of us Blacks in the school that I attended. But the environment was more inclusive because Native people were there as well. Our parents protected us and so did our teachers.

BM: Tell me about your book collection.

SJ: I'm trying to collect all the books by friends, or people I've known. During my first years as a Cave Canem poetry fellow, we used to bring books in so people could share them. I'd like to leave a whole collection of books of our generation, books that are beautiful because they really represent us. Books and films that people can watch while they're temporary residents in this building. When I'm gone, this property I'm in will become an artist residency, a foundation.

BM: You must have a large archive.

SJ: I lost the whole file cabinet for Gallery 32 in a Connecticut storage unit. To me, it's got to be floating around somewhere. I can't imagine anybody throwing out all that stuff. I'm still searching for it.

Someone found a letter that I wrote to my father when he was still in Alaska. It says, "Tell me everything. I want to know it all!" I'm still like that. I'm curious about everything that everybody's doing.

When people list all this stuff in my history, like, "She was a dancer, a poet, a theater designer, a performer..." I feel that all these things are in the painting now. The poetry is in the painting. And so is the dance and theater design.

BM: I see physical movement in your work. I used to think it was music. But it's a combination of all those different things that formed you.

SJ: I want the works to be alive the way film is alive, so you see movement in them. Some of the pieces actually do move very slightly, and they may change their shape according to the environment. They're living things that change a little bit according to how they're hung. They are organic, and there are some organic elements that hold them together. But they're still archival. I'm big on making sure the work is not going to fall apart, even though I'm using these disparate materials and using paint in unusual ways. But it all comes together and it's so exciting.