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FALL 2023

COVER ARTIST: SUZANNE JACKSON

# Art in America



# Don't Call It a Comeback

Back in the spotlight, Suzanne Jackson pushes the boundaries of what paint can do.

by Sarah Douglas

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photography by Peter Frank Edwards



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he day after Donald Trump was elected president, Suzanne Jackson's son, an actor and film producer named Rafiki Smith, died. He had suffered a heart attack earlier in the year, but he had still been running around Savannah, Georgia, where he and Jackson lived, to help get out the vote. The two of them watched Hillary Clinton's concession speech, and that night, as the gloom descended, he had a second heart attack. He was 45. "A lot of younger people, and older people, went out at that time," Jackson told me, mentioning the husband of an acquaintance who crashed while flying his plane and a woman in Savannah whose three sons overdosed, one after another. "It was a dark time, a terrible time." What saved Jackson in the short term, she said, was that her son "was such a silly joker, and within an hour all his friends were calling and were on my front porch, and I was consoling them." What saved her in the longer term was her art.

Jackson's home and studio are in a rambling 19th-century house near Savannah's historic district. In the front yard, behind an old iron fence, stands a memorial to her son, set up by his friends. She recently had to put up a sign warning people to keep out, after someone went in there to use her water spigot and managed to upset an arrangement of shells. Jackson said an interviewer lately asked her what had been the chief creative sparks in her life. Her answer: "When my son was born, and when my son passed away."

She mourned his loss by throwing herself into her work: abstract paintings in which she coaxes acrylic paint to act more like sculpture, in a scale that has grown larger and larger. In early 2017, she attended a presentation about artist Nick Cave at the Jepson Center, the major contemporary art museum in Savannah; at the end of the talk, the speaker, Jepson curator Rachel Reese, mentioned that she was looking for big work, like Cave's, for future exhibitions.

Walking through that Cave show before the talk, Jackson had noticed that he referenced the Rodney King beating. At the time, she happened to be wearing bracelets she bought in Los Angeles, in Watts, the day King died.



Feeling empowered by the coincidence, she spoke up: "I'm Suzanne Jackson, and I make big paintings."

Jackson had been making art since the early 1960s, but her peak success in the '70s was long past, and she'd become better known for Gallery 32, which she founded and ran in Los Angeles for three years in the late '60s. She showed David Hammons, Dan Cocholar, Betye Saar, and Senga Nengudi, among others, in what was a groundbreaking space.

In 2006, while teaching at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Jackson received an email from a College Art Association (CAA) curator inquiring about Gallery 32. "I thought people had forgotten," Jackson told me. She wrote back, and was invited to that year's CAA conference in Boston, where she loaded up her old slides and gave a talk titled "Gallery 32: Risk, Innovation, Survival – Ending the Sixties."

A conference attendee subsequently organized a show about Gallery 32 at Loyola Marymount University in LA in 2009. "It was fine," Jackson said. "But then when people heard about Gallery 32, it was all they were asking me about." Later came the traveling

Suzanne Jackson: *Woodpecker's Last Blues*, 2013.



exhibitions "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980" and "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power," both of which included references to Gallery 32 as well as Jackson's older work.

The cumulative attention led to interest in Jackson's more current work: a group of recent graduates from Hunter College in New York invited her in 2015 to mount a show at Temporary Agency, their artist-run gallery in Ridgewood, Queens. It was there that Jackson debuted her 2013 tondo *Woodpecker's Last Blues*, in which acrylic combines with deer netting, woodpecker feathers, leaves, and tar paper.

Things moved quickly in 2019: a show of Jackson's work at the Jepson Center back in Savannah included *Woodpecker's Last Blues* along with 40 other pieces spanning the 1960s to the present, the most recent measuring some 18 feet across. The same year, a gallery called O Townhouse in the same building that had housed Gallery 32, put on a show of Jackson's recent work. Ales Ortuzar, an art dealer who had worked for mega-gallerist David Zwirner, visited O Townhouse to see work by another artist, and Jackson's work intrigued him. Having just opened Ortuzar Projects in New York, he flew to Savannah to

visit and offered her a show on the spot.

Jackson's first New York solo outing with an established dealer opened in the fall of 2019 to rave reviews in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Art in America*. Ortuzar managed to place paintings with the Museum of Modern Art, SFMOMA, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Walker Art Center, as well as with collectors like Pamela Joyner and Komal Shah. More shows followed, including one at Mnuchin Gallery, where Jackson appeared alongside four of her male peers: Sam Gilliam, David Hammons, Al Loving, and Joe Overstreet. "I was so happy about that show because I was with the big guys," she said.

Meanwhile, Jackson kept making new work. "I was in here, jamming like crazy," she told me during a recent visit to her studio. At age 76, she paid off her mortgage and, finally, her student loans. Her first institutional exhibition in Europe – at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan – opens in September. At a time when painters are thinking expansively about the future of their medium, Jackson stands as a model. As Glenn Adamson wrote not long ago in *Art in America*, "Jackson feels at once like an elder stateswoman and ... a new arrival on the scene."



Photo Peter Frank Edwards

Top: Photo David Kaminsky; Suzanne Jackson; Courtesy Ortuzar Projects, New York; Bottom: Photo Peter Frank Edwards



“I didn’t have any money. I was doing it on my own.”

**Around the time of her museum show in Savannah in 2019,** Jackson finished one of her most ambitious pieces to date, *Saudades*, which has not one but three hanging parts. The title is a Portuguese word that refers to a feeling of longing, melancholy, or nostalgia. To make the work, Jackson incorporated fabric from one of her son’s T-shirts and one of her father’s ties, as well as the metal tops of the 1930s-era barrels her mother used throughout her life to move her pots and pans to a new house.

For a show last year at the Arts Club of Chicago, she added another element to *Saudades*, a section of acrylic painted a shade of green that she repurposed from a group of

works she had made for a show in Glasgow. The new component represents a cat her son gave her in 2010 that had recently died. “I can still see him standing there,” she told me, gesturing toward the door of the kitchen, “holding that cat.”

In 1990, Jackson suffered a loss of another kind entirely when she was finishing graduate school at Yale: boxes upon boxes of artworks, clothing, antiques, and books (including her son’s baby book) that she had kept in a storage locker; she had to let it all be auctioned off when she failed to pay a month’s rent. The man at the storage space brought one box of books back to her, old paperbacks from the

’60s and ’70s – *Siddhartha*, *Franny and Zooey* – that she keeps on a special shelf in her office today. Jackson remembers the storage guy telling her, “Yours was a primo auction,” in reference her other possessions; they included a tiny Peter Voulkos ceramic she had made into a necklace, and an elaborate costume she wore when she danced striptease briefly to make money while running Gallery 32. The man who designed the costume had worked on the vaudeville circuit and knew how to craft stage wear that gave the persuasive illusion a performer was paring down to nothing. “It had all these parts that you take off or that fall apart,” Jackson said. “Striptease really is an art.”

Suzanne Jackson at her home studio in Savannah, Ga.

Photo: Peter Frank Edwards

Jackson remembers the experience of Gallery 32 as a struggle that made striptease necessary. She once organized an exhibition of art by a mailman. “Everybody in the city showed up, because of him being a mailman making art,” she recalled. “I had to go work at the club. I thought, Wait a minute – I’m having to go out dancing in clubs in order to keep this space open, for other artists. Nobody’s helping me. I didn’t have any money. I was doing it on my own.”

**Jackson was born in St. Louis in 1944,** and her family moved to San Francisco when she was nine months old. Her father was light-

skinned, and easily mistaken for Italian or Mexican, which gave him a certain measure of entrée (he joined the fraternal order of Masons, where he rose to the highest rank), and afforded him opportunities, like driving a cable car. Her mother was a seamstress.

When Jackson was 16, her father gave her a set of oil paints. By then, the family was living in Fairbanks, Alaska, where her father worked on the railroad. Pre-statehood Alaska was a wild place, full of people with checkered histories who went there to hide out. The small population was a mix of races and nationalities. Canadian Mounties rode their horses along the Yukon River. Kids skied at the hot springs near the Arctic Circle. As part of the 4-H youth development program, Jackson traveled to an annual conference in Chicago. *Jet* magazine took a photo: she was the first Black girl ever to attend.

After finishing college in San Francisco and touring South America with a ballet company, Jackson moved to Los Angeles. But the only good ballet company there was in Beverly Hills, too far a ride on the bus. It was easier to make art, so she started studying with celebrated Black figurative painter Charles White, and persuaded a rental agent to let her take space in the Granada Buildings, allegedly for use as a gallery (artists’ studios were somewhat suspect at the time). Two good friends, David Hammons and Dan Cocholar – “they called us the Three Musketeers,” Jackson said – encouraged her to open a gallery. So she did, and starting in 1968, ran Gallery 32 in her own unique way. “I remember she had her own style,” Betye Saar later wrote in an essay, “and she drove a hearse.”

She closed the gallery months before giving birth to Rafiki, an event that led to a creative spurt. She started making a lot of paintings, and

signed with Ankrum Gallery in LA. With their exquisite washy images of animals and figures, Jackson's paintings can seem jarring against the backdrop of that era's political unrest. When she moved to LA, just after the 1965 Watts Rebellion, she felt little connection to the riots there. In Alaska, as she remembers, racism wasn't much of an issue, and San Francisco was political in a less heated way. "I wanted to paint beauty," Jackson said, "even though that was a dirty word." Some reviews from the time read as if they're almost relieved by the lack of



*A Hole in the Marker*—Mary Turner 1918, 2020.

political content. "As comments on her own blackness, [the works] are remarkable for their lack of bitterness and protest," reads one from the *Los Angeles Times* in 1972.

Jackson was ambitious, and it paid off. A 1974 spread in *Essence* magazine featured her on a divan wearing a ruffled rayon wrap dress, and named Bill Cosby and Cannonball Adderley among those who were buying her work. Vincent Price bought a piece. She took a commission from Sonny Bono. One of her paintings appeared in the 1977 movie *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, gracing the walls in a scene with Diane Keaton and Tuesday Weld.

In the early '80s, Jackson moved 100 miles southeast, from LA to Idyllwild, in the San Jacinto Mountains, where she taught at the Idyllwild School of Music and the Arts until 1985; her studio was smaller, and her work followed suit. In 1987 she relocated again: to New Haven, to attend grad school for set design at the Yale School of Drama. "Connecticut was the first time [I] ever experienced people crossing to the other side of the street when they saw you coming," Jackson said of the racism she experienced there. Although she was 44 and already an accomplished artist, she said she always had the sense there were people who thought she was an affirmative-action admission.

After graduation, she spent six years as a freelance set designer. Back in the Bay Area, she also secured a studio in the Oakland Cannery building, which artists had been occupying since Abstract-Expressionist painter Arthur Monroe started living there in the '70s. In 1994, seeking stability, she gave it up and accepted a faculty position at Saint Mary's College of Maryland, teaching set design. A job offer came in 1996 from the Savannah College of Art and Design; unhappy at Saint Mary's, and, remembering a good experience in an exhibition at SCAD in 1981, when the school first opened, she accepted.

**In Savannah, Jackson moved into an apartment with a spiral stairwell and a picturesque view of Forsyth Park.** "It was just beautiful in Savannah. I thought I had died and gone to heaven," she said. Her mother soon joined her from New Haven, where she'd followed Jackson from San Francisco. The apartment wasn't big enough for the two of them, so Jackson found a rambling Greek-style double house built in 1890, in the Metropolitan District. There, she could live and work comfortably. "This was the 15th studio I'd had in my life," she said. "I decided I was going to stay for 30 years."

The classes she taught occupied her afternoons and evenings, so she'd get up at 5am to paint. It was in Savannah, Jackson says, that she "really started painting."



*Bogus Boogie*, 2001.

The light reminded her of the light in Los Angeles: long and sustaining. She'd brought some canvases with her from Maryland, figurative works, and she thought she would continue in that vein. She would sit in Forsyth Park and watch people walk from the east side to the west, paying most attention to older Black people, wondering what they were thinking, what it must have been like to be in Savannah during the Civil Rights movement and "segregation, which I never really had to go through."

She started experimenting with abstraction and "playing with paint." When talking about her studio practice, she still often uses phrases like "fooling around" or "misbehaving"; back then, she figured, no one was paying attention to her art anyway, so she decided to have some fun. She stopped working on stretched canvas and started experimenting with acrylics, with which she had been working since the 1960s, when they first became available. As she told members of a panel in Chicago last year, she "went through the good, bad, and evil of acrylic."

Jackson stopped teaching in 2009. In the art market boom leading up to the recession beginning the year before, her students seemed to be getting wrapped up in the wrong things, their motivation shifting more to money and fame. Her own work was evolving, and now she was able to fully focus on it. Works she had made on Bogus paper, a strong recycled paper that she'd discovered during her set design years, and that she started layering in wrinkled scraps, had started to bend away from the wall, which she encouraged. She started pushing things further: maybe the acrylic could hold up on its own, and the paintings could achieve a kind of transparency, allowing light to flow



*Crossing Ebenezer*, 2017.

through them. Her eureka moment came when she realized she could pour a puddle of acrylic medium on a plastic-lined worktable, shape it, let it dry, and then hang it from the studio ceiling—just as she had rigged sets as a scenographer.

Hanging the paintings allows her to paint both sides and apply what she describes as "old-fashioned painterly qualities." One work with large brown brushstrokes features what she called "big chocolate slabs of acrylic." That her paintings are two-for-ones is not unrelated to Jackson's ecological outlook: if you send something out into a dying world, you might as well get the most out of it.

Throughout her life, she has invested in the natural world: she had her backyard in Savannah registered as a wildlife refuge. She made it lush as a jungle, nurturing saplings

into tall trees and cultivating fruits and flowers. There are peaches and pomegranates, and muscadine grapes growing among Cherokee roses on a trellis. Nature has always set a high bar for her art: in 1973 she wrote to her dealer, Joan Ankrum, about some tropical birds, whose "colors were fantastically bright and like nothing that I will ever be able to bring out of a jar of paint."

Living in Savannah Lowcountry—marked by estuaries, salt marshes, sandy beaches, and the wildlife that depend on them—made her more attentive to how paint can affect the environment, especially when her studio sink got stopped up and she watched a plumber scrape acrylic from the drainpipes. She didn't want her leftover paint destroying the earth, so she incorporated a peeling stage into her practice, scraping dried acrylic just as the

plumber did, from palette knives and jars, and upcycling scraps back into her paintings. "When I grew up in Alaska, you used everything," Jackson said.

While the ecology of the South has seeped into her paintings, so too has the region's painful past. "I've learned so many things since I've been in the South," she told me. "There are horrible stories of how people were treated here." Her 2017 painting *Crossing Ebenezer* features red produce sacks suspended in clear acrylic that reference the hundreds of newly emancipated slaves who drowned while crossing Savannah's Ebenezer Creek in 1864. Hanging in the studio when I visited was the nearly 10-foot-tall columnar work *A Hole in the Marker*—Mary Turner 1918 (2020); the title references a woman who in 1918 was lynched while pregnant. Its owner is collector Pamela Joyner, and it was back with Jackson for a conservation check. The painting is gold, with a dark blue circle near the top; Jackson painted out the original figure in it. Curtain lace is enmeshed in the paint, and, in a haunting coincidence, after completing the painting, Jackson learned that Harlem Renaissance artist Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller also commemorated the incident not long after it happened—also in gold paint.

These days, Jackson doesn't enjoy living in Savannah so much. Her neighborhood, now gentrified, has become a tourist attraction. Just across the street, what used to be a pleasant grassy passage is now a fenced-in area with food trucks and games (you need a credit card to enter) and a microbrewery in an old house from 1910. She likes the couple who run the brewery: they made a special brew, the Miss Suzanne, for her Jepson Center show. But she no longer enjoys hanging out on her porch the way she used to.

She thinks about relocating, maybe in 5 years—when she reaches the end of the 30 years she vowed to stay. Until then, she will contend with her house and her property, which she calls her "island of trees." Since her art started selling again, she's been putting money into a foundation, and hopes to turn the house into an artist residency. Her next step is to try to get the house on the National Register of Historic Places, after she found the remnants of a disused 19th-century rail line in her yard that once led from downtown out to Tybee Island.

There are also more immediate concerns. When I visited in June, there had just been a cold snap, and the plants needed some love. As for her artwork, which, at age 79, she continues to push and prod, Jackson said, "it's always a mystery, going into the studio. I don't know what's going to happen. It's different every time. Right now, I think I'm in another transition." ●



# Garden of Earthly Delights

Suzanne Jackson, whose work *a history drawing-cracked wall* (2016–19) features on the cover of this issue of *Art in America*—in a detail of the larger work shown here in full—is profiled in this same issue starting on page 50. From her home in Savannah, Georgia, Jackson told *A.i.A.* the backstory of her creation on the cover.

**The “history” in *history drawing* is the history of making the drawing.** Over the three years I was working on it—it’s a big drawing—the whole process just happens from day to day: you’re adding something new, building it, working through composition and how elements come into the spaces in different ways. Each time you come back to work on it, something new has happened in your life.

For me, drawing is easy. I love it. It’s a calming therapy, a spiritual connection. I was really having a good time drawing this. You sometimes hear people say, “Oh, people who make abstract paintings do it because they can’t draw.” I think the opposite is true: for people who can draw, drawing is an easy thing—it’s something traditional and expected. People expect realism, and they enjoy it, because it’s the pleasure of seeing something recognizable. But every element in this drawing is an abstraction, even the things that are supposedly recognizable. I always play with things a little bit, stretch them and have fun with them. That’s just what the hand does. This piece is a little bumpy; it is not supposed to sit flat

on the wall. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve let go of perfection. Ever since I left art school, it’s been about adjusting the rules of art, taking the fundamentals and stretching them into something more exciting. Finding another kind of beauty.

My body was going through a lot of changes, becoming fuller, and I was thinking about how a woman’s body becomes “out of shape,” but is also very powerful, and aggressive. It really had to do with women pushing through all this stuff that we have to do. But then also how women get taken for granted: we are not supposed to have knowledge, or power, or intelligence. Or take risks, do things that are new or innovative. I was also thinking about women having been medics, herbalists, the ones who brought babies into the world, and how that was taken away from us by modern medicine, which doesn’t have a clue about our bodies.

I was having such a good time [drawing the] animals and insects. I used to collect all these bugs and things that would fall on the ground or come into the studio. I think about the big palmetto bugs that I first saw in 1966 when I was in Venezuela on tour with a dance troupe, staying in the Guadalajara Hilton—we called it the Guadala-Hilton. When I moved to Savannah, I saw palmetto bugs again. They still fascinate me. The cats won’t eat them because they are so nasty.

There are parts of environments sneaking in: a little oasis of palm trees and some roots of something else. The cat is based on one of my kitties. And there is a polar bear just above the larger head—you have to look for it. There are birds. There is so much in this earth environment that we still don’t know. So much of nature is disappearing. I think I was putting as many disappearing things as I could into this drawing. I’m still fascinated by nature, like when I was a child and would walk through a garden and everything was bigger than me. I still love that idea. ●



Suzanne Jackson:  
*a history drawing-  
cracked wall*,  
2016–19.