

Suzanne
Jackson

Five
Decades

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Rachel Reese

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Telfair Museums

Throughout her career, Suzanne Jackson has organized her life by prioritizing her desire to paint and to pursue her artistic concerns in their purest forms, a self-imposed mandate made in 1968 and an ethos that—while at times compromised or under threat—she has maintained as a guiding principle. Through the steady process of listening, observing, revealing, editing, and synthesizing as the curator of *Five Decades*, I have gotten to know her in her myriad roles, from painter and dancer to maker and thinker and, most importantly, friend. As I have learned, and hope *Five Decades* shares and celebrates, among many other things, is that her life involves frequent moves and travels—migrations and “memory experiences” as she terms them, driven by heritage and culture—where she might (unconsciously) be following in the paths of ancestors. Each geographical change involved a (rightly so) social and contextual shift, and they have cumulatively pushed her in new and exciting directions as evidenced in the lifelong evolution of her art practice. These shifts have also witnessed an identity projected onto her as a racialized outsider: as a teenager, a “Negro girl from Alaska” attending the National 4-H Congress in Chicago; in her twenties, a “person of color” from the United States, as projected by people she met in South America; in her professional career, a black artist whose work was often seen as being “not black enough”; in her forties, a black woman attending graduate school with (primarily white) Ivy League students two decades her junior; and in her fifties onward, the oversimplified identification as an African American woman living in the South. This exhibition and scholarship aim to foreground her artistic voice and identity as her own nuanced and complex self—and no one else’s. In her words, “I was more romantic when I was younger, and as you go through life things happen. This world is kind of messy.”

In editing this volume and organizing the exhibition, I was thinking deeply about such a “messiness” in the context of responsibility, particularly of (younger generations of) curators and scholars in bringing visibility to under-recognized and deserving artists late in life: what are the expectations of interpreting their work within both historicized and contemporary contexts? With this framework in mind, I am deeply honored and grateful for the new contributions to scholarship on Jackson’s work provided so carefully by these three scholars, as this project is only made complete with their contemporary voices and perspectives—both reinterpretative lenses on her earlier work and critical perspectives on her current work. Their essays were informed and guided by close collaboration with the artist, including several visits to Savannah to look, listen, record, and research.

Dr. Melanee C. Harvey examines the ways that a feminist perspective presents in Jackson’s life and manifests in her art. Harvey’s essay makes an argument that the connections between environment, relationships, and spiritual exploration in Jackson’s work is evidence of an ecowomanist art practice, and considers Jackson’s career between the 1970s and 1990s, highlighting her multifaceted approaches to enriching black art broadly through the methodology of ecowomanism.

julia elizabeth neal peels the layers—conceptual, metaphorical, and physical—comprising Jackson’s work primarily through her considerations of materiality. neal’s essay highlights an ethics of care, healing, and ultimately preservation present in Jackson’s later works, and simultaneously extracts through-lines from her earlier practice, which, when explored through this lens of materiality and care, assert there is indeed a linear trajectory.



Fig. 1.1.

Jackson's kitchen window overlooking her backyard, Savannah, Georgia, July 2019.

Figs. 1.16–17. Below (top row), left to right: Jackson's back porch in St. Mary's City, Maryland; Jackson's backyard with vegetable garden in foreground, July 1995.



Fig. 1.18. Below (middle row): Jackson drawing on Ossabaw Island, a barrier island on Georgia's coast, August 13, 2010.

Fig. 1.19. Below (bottom): Jackson poses with a live oak tree—"my kind of tree"—at Wormsloe Historic Site, Savannah, Georgia, June 2018.



WHAT

I



LOVE

Fig. 2.1.

Cover image for Jackson's first artist's book,
What I Love: Paintings, Poetry, and a Drawing
(Los Angeles: Contemporary Crafts, 1972).

Suzanne Jackson: Layers



Fig. 3.1.

Studio portrait of Suzanne Jackson, reproduced in Rachael Mason, "A Centerpiece of Neighborhood Revitalization," *Connect Savannah*, January 21–27, 2000.

In 2000, Suzanne Jackson sat for a portrait expressive of the creative identity she has embodied since the 1960s: that of the Painter. A welcome addition to the glamorous headshots and images from magazine spreads and fashion modeling portfolios in Jackson's extensive personal archive, this monochromatic photograph distinctively conveys confidence in her profession by her embrace of the deluge of paint encircling the room, snaking across floorboards, and saturating her clothing. This poignant image of Jackson as a painter diverges from her most recognized position in art historical narrative: founder and curator of Gallery 32, an important, self-funded Los Angeles venue to and for emerging and established African American artists between 1968 and 1970. Jackson's parallel work in dance, theater, and poetry often occupies attention in historical narratives at the expense of in-depth treatment of her painting career. Most writings about her paintings typically stall at the level of visual description, partly because they exist as short-form exhibition announcements or newspaper overviews. A 1974 review describing Jackson's paintings as "dreamy" and rife with "rhythm, exuberance, and mystery" is representative of this void in criticality, and cursory remarks about her cultural references remained imprecise even in 2000.¹ Deep exploration of Jackson's painting style and iconography is long overdue, effectively rendering her photographic portrait even more urgent as testament to a career that she has sustained for decades and continues to cultivate. Today, she is engaging a new method of working in which paint and its materiality establish sensorial channels to reflect on chronicles of Black life and personal preservation. Her process of layered mark-making results in opaque, translucent, and encrusted effects that are as much an index of her as they are mediums in which narrative and metaphor roil.

Notwithstanding the interpretive void around Jackson's paintings, her oeuvre is nonetheless the result of a practice unfolding over years of layering ideas and paint together, with the objective of stimulating sensory experience. She reiterates this goal throughout artist statements recorded continually since 1969, which accrue greater historical and interpretive significance in the absence of serious discussions of her work. Their fundamental first-person nature undoubtedly offers indispensable insight into stylistic and conceptual transitions. In particular, Jackson's statements reveal that her evolution as a painter extends from accumulated ideas instead of clear stylistic breaks often attributed to aesthetic changes over time. The two-year time span of 1969 to 1971 encapsulates the period in which she explored reality versus fantasy as a dialectic. She wrote, "What I paint attempts to express the conflicts within the mind, conflicts of choices—of

A Return to Painting



Fig. 4.1.

Jackson's home in Savannah, July 2019.

On the edge of Savannah, Georgia's historic Metropolitan district, the large, red-colored double house that serves as Suzanne Jackson's studio and residence looks amiss. The dwelling and the history it contains stand as relics in Starland, formerly one of Savannah's majority black neighborhoods that became a burgeoning arts district in the late 1990s. Originally built in the 1890s to accommodate several generations of the same family, the home—purchased by Jackson in 1998—is now surrounded by various vintage boutiques, a nationally recognized bakery and cafe, and a small-batch craft brewery. Inside her home, the walls, doors, and table surfaces are covered in photographs and personal mementos from Jackson's time in Savannah and beyond: tchotchkes, textiles, archival materials, books, and paintings that hang, overlap, fold, droop, and ooze. Outside, each chip of the house's exterior reveals layers of material history that echo the layers of acrylic paint and mediums comprising the artist's large-scale works.

Just as her live-work space exists on the margins of Savannah's historic district, Jackson similarly occupies the margins of abstract painting. Yet her art is at the cutting edge of both the city's and the medium's boundaries. Jackson's early Savannah years represent a new phase in her development in terms of imagery, technique, and materials. In 1996, shortly before Starland's gentrifying turn, she relocated to Savannah to teach painting at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Her first residence was a two-story apartment in the Victorian district where light—sourced by the sun during the day and street lamps during the night—peered through the windows, casting shadows and patterns on the walls, effects that made their way into her work. Rising rental prices and spatial constraints soon forced Jackson to look elsewhere for housing, and she moved southward to her current home two years later. This move allowed her ample space, time, and resources to reestablish a full-time studio practice for the first time in her adult life. It also gave the artist new inspiration, marking her transition from figuration to abstraction.

Ma-Yaa and *Juditha's Door* (both 1998) exemplify this transition. Apparitional figures and ancestral memory recur as imagery and narrative, while the artist's constant exploration of materials drives new studio innovations. During this time, Jackson was still settling into Savannah and completing costume design for N. Scott Momaday's *Children of the Sun*, a touring play commissioned by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC that opened in 1997. The set design for this story about a Kiowa legend was spare, and the costumes were a mix of capes and masks that recall ceremonial forms and artifacts typically ascribed to First Nations