

November 19, 2019

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

# An Artist Who Makes Paintings Without a Canvas

Ahead of a new solo show, Suzanne Jackson talks about her creative routine, her love of jazz music and the worst studio she ever had.



The painter Suzanne Jackson at her home in Savannah, Ga. Peter Frank Edwards

By Julia Felsenthal

[Suzanne Jackson](#) isn't fond of the term "overachiever," though you wouldn't be wrong to call her one. At 75, she has had a long, storied, multi-hyphenate career as a painter, poet, dancer, teacher, curator and theater designer. She's not a fan of the word "career" either: "It's my life's work," she says. "There's just a lot of things to be interested in." Jackson traces that attitude back to her childhood in 1940s and '50s pre-statehood Alaska, where a certain pioneering spirit prevailed. "We just *did* things," she remembers. She went to college at San Francisco State University at 17, studying art, drama and dance; toured South America as a ballerina; and in 1967, moved to Los Angeles, where she toiled around town in a Buick Hearse, took drawing classes from [Charles White](#), began showing her paintings at the influential Ankrum gallery and, in 1968, opened Gallery 32, the community-minded space she ran out of her studio near MacArthur Park for two years. There, she hosted exhibitions by emerging black artists like [David Hammons](#) and [Bettye Saar](#), as well as a fund-raiser for the Black Panthers. As a single mother in her 40s with her son in tow, she earned a graduate degree in theater design at Yale, worked on productions with the Kennedy Center and the Berkeley Repertory Theater and eventually settled in Georgia in the mid-90s to teach at the Savannah College of Art and Design. She has now lived and worked in the city for two decades, in a rambling, three-story, double-wide 1890s house that she owns in the historic Starland district.

Though she has made paintings since she was a child, and exhibited since the late 1960s, Jackson has had something of a banner year. In June, she mounted a career survey at Savannah's [Telfair Museums](#); in September, she [won a grant](#) from the Joan Mitchell Foundation; and this month, she opens a [solo show](#) at Ortuzar Projects in Lower Manhattan, an exhibition that focuses on her boundary-pushing recent work: otherworldly, dimensional paintings composed entirely of acrylic paint — with no canvas beneath — embedded with bits of household detritus and personal ephemera.

Jackson first began using acrylics during her years in Los Angeles, after her car was broken into and her oil paints stolen. She initially deployed it almost like watercolor, setting down layer upon layer of washy pigment to build up dreamy images of black figures commingling with birds, flowers and hearts. In more recent decades, her art has become abstract and more driven by materials. During the years she worked as a theater designer, Jackson began incorporating discarded bogus paper — the sheeting used to protect a stage while painting sets — into her



Jackson's recent works, like "Turtle, Phoenix, Pleasures" (2019), are made from pure, layered acrylic, with no canvas underneath. Here, she's embedded bag netting and wood into the paint. Peter Frank Edwards



Jackson often begins a piece on a plastic covered table, then peels the acrylic off and hangs it to dry. Peter Frank Edwards

sheeting used to protect a stage while painting sets — into her increasingly textural surfaces. Then it was leftover deer netting from her garden, ballet netting from her costume designs and produce bags and wood salvaged from renovating her house. Eventually she figured out that she could put paint down directly onto a table covered in plastic, then peel it up and hang the drying film as her canvas, allowing her to paint acrylic straight onto acrylic. The result, which looks delicate but is not — “you can kick it, stomp on it, it’s not going to be harmed,” says Jackson — blurs the line between painting and sculpture. Upcycling remains central to her process. She even peels the paint from her hands and stores the dried flakes for future use. In this way, her synthetic medium “becomes organic,” she explains, “because I’m reintegrating paint that would go into nature and destroy it.”

When we speak over the phone in late October, Jackson has just come inside after trying to help a butterfly with a broken wing that got caught in her screen door. She bemoans the gentrification that's changing her leafy neighborhood, the interlopers who seem intent on cutting down trees and installing newfangled businesses, like a shipping-container food court that, she says, "looks like a prison." (Not all the neighbors are so terrible: At the brewery across the street, the proprietors named a beer in her honor — "Ms. Suzanne," a Guinness-like concoction that's best served in a wine glass.) Her own home sits on three lots, her backyard lush with pomegranate trees, grape vines, woodpeckers, turtles, feral cats, possums, raccoons and snakes. "Everyone wants it, but they're not going to have it," Jackson says of the property. She chuckles. "That's just the way it is." Sitting in one of her studio rooms on the west side of the building, her 8-year-old Siamese, Lexi, on her lap, she answers T's artist's questionnaire.



Jackson's work is inspired by her love of the natural world. Here, "Baby Bogus" (2005) hangs above a table full of dried leaves and feathers.  
Peter Frank Edwards



The recent piece "Temporarily Untitled, Veils" (2019) is made of acrylic paint with a wire armature. Peter Frank Edwards

**What is your day like? How much do you sleep? What is your work schedule?**

Last night, I didn't go to bed until 2. Sometimes I can wake up at 4. I listen to NPR until 8 in the morning. My bedroom is on the second floor, so I come downstairs and through the studio to see what I'm doing. And I may end up climbing a ladder to work on something before I get around to the kitchen to have a cup of coffee or some breakfast. Then I have to feed all the cats. I come back into the studio and fiddle around some more before I get dressed. I work less now at night. My neighborhood is very noisy at night, almost like a circus with all these clubs and parties.

**How many hours of creative work do you do in a day?**

All day long. If I'm not physically putting paint on something, I'm writing or reading, thinking about it. And even when I'm supposed to be sleeping, I'm thinking about what I'm going to do, how I'm going to accomplish a structural idea, what should the title be, what's next. And then, because I don't have assistants, I'm also having to think about the calendar, the schedule of things going on. Sometimes I think I really *should* have an assistant, but I make my work so that I can get up on the ladder and take it down. I believe my hand should be in the work, and not somebody else's, unless I want to share the credit with them.

**What is the worst studio you ever had?**

Physically the worst studio might be my very first one, for \$40 a month on Temple Street in Los Angeles. It was like a storefront on the front of a beautiful Victorian house. I had to put a parachute over my bed because there were holes in the floor from the house upstairs, and the kids would throw little pebbles down. I just remember my mother and father sitting there, my dad in his suit, my mother in her nice little dress, like, "What has happened to our daughter?" To me, that wasn't a bad studio. It was my first studio, and it was really wonderful.

### **What is the first work you ever sold, and for how much?**

That was a piece that I sold at the Laguna Beach art museum in 1968 for \$300. I think it was called "Gypsy Girl." It was a watercolor. I have a feeling that when they had the fires in Laguna Beach, that painting could have been destroyed. I don't even know who bought it.

### **When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What is the first step?**

Sometimes I'm working on three or four things at a time. One or two pieces may be drawing, and then I'm working on something else. Sometimes it's just, put down the brush stroke or a big palette knife on something, then see what happens. Walk away and come back. Try to be focused, and then try to be unfocused.



Jackson pictured beneath "Nine, Billie, Mingus, Monk's" (2003). Peter Frank Edwards



A detail shot of Jackson's studio includes her drawing materials. Going to school for theater design made her a better draftswoman. "That's another element I've been really fascinated by," she says, "how to achieve this beautiful line." Peter Frank Edwards

### **How do you know when you're done with a piece?**

With these new pieces that are pure acrylic, I watch to see where the stress is. Maybe there are places where the paint is thinner, or the weight of the paint may pull. Sometimes I'll go back, but usually the piece just tells me that it doesn't want to be touched anymore.

**What music do you play when you're making art?**

Lots of jazz. I used to start with [Yo-Yo Ma](#) in the morning, and then it would evolve into jazz, and then maybe by 3 in the morning it would be [Jimi Hendrix](#). I met [the Savannah radio veteran] Ike Carter, and in 2013, we started this group, bringing in music that we like for a radio program ["Listen Hear," hosted by Savannah State University Radio]. He's kind of a maestro of blues and African-American classical music.

**Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?**

My lazy food is a veggie burger. I like really grainy Ezekiel or spelt bread, and then I put on tomatoes and lettuce. I grew up with Miracle Whip instead of mayo, and the strongest grainy mustard. That's my fast food. With a glass of wine, maybe.

**Are you bingeing on any shows right now?**

I love "[Poldark](#)." That's my Sunday night splurge.

**What is the weirdest object in your studio?**

Probably me? This is an odd building. On the third floor on the east side there's a sign that says "This Room is Haunt" [sic]. One day, this man came by in a truck and said, "I used to live in that house when I was a little boy, and we wrote a sign because we thought that room was haunted." So that's left over.

**What's the last thing that made you cry?**

I was at the dentist the morning that the Joan Mitchell Foundation called. When I got home, there was an email from them. I'm so used to getting rejection notes. When I opened it up, I couldn't believe it. I think I just said, "Oh my God," and broke out in tears. Before that, the last time I really cried was when my son passed away unexpectedly [in 2016, of congestive heart failure]. Then I couldn't cry very long because all his friends were there, and I had to console them. But I broke out in tears when I realized I had actually, for the first time in my life, won a real grant with money attached. I just sat there crying all by myself.

### **What do you bulk buy with most frequency?**

As soon as I got my grant money, I ordered five gallon buckets of acrylic medium from Nova Color in California. I also buy 60 pounds of cat food on a regular schedule. And bird feed. I have subscriptions for that, and I have a subscription for wine. That's my other thing.

### **Do you exercise, other than climbing up and down ladders?**

Well, I have a lot of steps to run up and down. I *was* a dancer, and I was really toned. I think the last time I danced was when I taught modern dance in 1994. People don't seem to dance anymore, even social dancing. They just stand and hoot and holler. They don't move. I can't forgive myself for not being as toned as I was when I was younger, when I weighed 105 pounds and hadn't had a baby. It's part of being a woman: You grow up and you have a body. I've become less unforgiving about it, but I'm still always trying to breathe in. Sometimes in the morning when I wake up I try to stretch in bed, which is cheating.

### **What are you reading right now?**

Aberjhani, who wrote a poem for my Telfair catalog, has a book called "[Dreams of the Immortal City Savannah](#)." That's the one I've read recently. I just bought this big volume of George Herriman's "Krazy Kat." I said I was not going to buy any more books at my age, but I had to have that one, because that's how I learned to read. And I think the social commentary may have subconsciously influenced my life.

### **What's your favorite artwork by someone else?**

Oh, that's so hard! I love Mary Lovelace O'Neal's paintings. [Ruth Asawa](#) is another of my favorites. We were on the California Arts Council together. [Mary Corse](#). Her work is so subtle. [Senga Nengudi](#). It's really hard. You know the drawing that really affected me when I first saw it? The one by Charles White of a woman with books spread out on the table. Of course he was my teacher. I love [Lee Bontecou](#)'s work. And [Augusta Savage](#). There are just so many lovely things in the world, and people who help you to think and see. You can't just choose one.

*This interview has been condensed and edited.*

"Suzanne Jackson: News!" is on view from Nov. 21, 2019, through Jan. 25, 2020, at Ortuzar Projects, 9 White Street, New York, [ortuzarprojects.com](http://ortuzarprojects.com).

