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Art | In Conversation

Suzanne Jackson with Lilly Wei



Portrait of Suzanne Jackson, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

On the occasion of her solo exhibition, *Listen' N Home*, at the Chicago Arts Club Suzanne Jackson spoke to Lilly Wei about her process of layering, the importance of titles, and the role history plays in her work and life.

Lilly Wei (Rail): Perhaps first things first. Would you tell me something about your upcoming show at the Chicago Arts Club?

Suzanne Jackson: Yes. That exhibition will have works from around the time I arrived in Savannah in 1996. I was working with layering, with bogus paper and acrylic paint. I am really interested in structure, in architectural structure. I will always be a painter, but I also love sculpture. The show will begin with some works that haven't been seen much, built up of paper and acrylic, so it will be a progression from 1998 until 2022. There will be around sixteen pieces.

Rail: So, it won't be immense.

Jackson: This is a smaller survey of works that I never expected would be shown, but they are important as far as process goes.

Rail: And what is your process?

Jackson: I would say that from the very beginning, it was about layering, glazing, almost as if I was working in watercolor, but in the same way that one might work with oil paint when layering for luminosity. So always layering, layering, and layering for light, color, and texture.

Rail: What was your introduction to painting?

Jackson: I began painting as a child with watercolor. And then I taught myself to paint with oils. My father gave me the most beautiful box of Grumbacher oil paints when I was sixteen. And then my paints were stolen. So, from the sixties until now, I've been experimenting with acrylic. The newest works are pure acrylic paint that can hang from the ceiling or be placed against the wall. There is a piece behind me now on the wall that I'm working on, but it will probably be suspended from the ceiling.

Rail: For increased luminosity?

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Jackson: Yes, it's always a process toward greater luminosity and light. I think the work changes because of all the places I've lived, because the light changes.

Rail: You titled your Chicago exhibition *Listen' N Home*?

Jackson: That comes from a child lying down and listening to the radio, listening to music. As I work in the studio, there is constantly music of all kinds happening.

Rail: The title is rather colloquial.

Jackson: I was raised on very proper English but there are so many forms of English. I grew up in California, Alaska, and then there was New England, and now I live in the South. I've learned some Indigenous languages, like Gullah Geechee. That title is connected to a radio program we did before COVID, called *Listen Hear*, but so many people thought it was *Listen Here*. So my play on "Listen' N Home" was about being at home, what we learn at home as children, what comes from our parents, and the kind of music that comes into the home. I was born in St. Louis—I never lived there—but I remember my aunts and uncles getting dressed up to go to Chicago, to listen to blues and jazz. When we lived in San Francisco my aunts would bring music to us. So that memory has a very positive impact on my work that I don't think about so much when I'm working, but it comes out in the end.

Rail: As a writer, I give a lot of significance to titles, but not all artists do. How much weight do you assign to your titles? What do they mean to you?

Jackson: They matter to me but sometimes the titles don't happen until the piece is complete, such as *A Hole in the Marker, Mary Turner, 1918* (2020). I started that piece because I was trying to interject the figure back into my work, into a long, narrow abstract shape. And as I kept layering and layering the paint, the shape and the figure were disappearing until there was just a sort of moon at the top of the shape. But then I read an article about a woman writer who was documenting monuments and markers in Georgia. She stopped at one marker for Mary Turner, whose story I didn't know. Her husband had been lynched and she spoke out publicly against it. She was eight months pregnant, and the mob lynched her for demanding justice, and abused her while she was still alive. The writer also said that there were recent bullet holes that had been shot through the marker. So that title happened. I think that it's probably the most historic and most narrative title that came after the piece was done. I would never have thought that I would have made a piece like that. And I learned later that Harlem Renaissance sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, who was alive at the time, also made a work about Mary Turner, in gold, as I did.



Suzanne Jackson, *Bilali's Dream*, 2004. Acrylic, mixed-media, wood, netting and papers, 80 x 86 x 8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

Rail: How does your history affect you and your work?

Jackson: I feel as if, when I moved from city to city in the past, that I am following the paths of my ancestors. And it seems as if every place that I have lived, or have had an exhibition, there has been some relationship to my history and place in the United States that I did not know about. It just comes, like a spiritual movement, a subconscious movement, and I take on some of that history by accident, without realizing that it's happening. I feel that's a strong part of what's in my painting now, especially since I'm older and the work is more mature.

Rail: And part of that history includes Black and Native American ancestors?

Jackson: I've got some of everybody in the world. [*Laughter*] My DNA says I'm Western Asian, which is an interesting and strange combination that also has something to do with Finland and Western Russia. I always thought that living in San Francisco, in Chinatown, that I was part of that. And my first birthday was on Chinese New Year. I loved watching the big dragons from my father's shoulder during the yearly celebrations. It's my favorite holiday.

Rail: And you went to Alaska with your family when it was still a territory.

Jackson: I was seven and was there through the end of high school. People have these strange notions about what Alaska is. When I grew up there in Fairbanks, in the northern part, it was more democratic, not Republican, with many Indigenous tribes, quite different from the southern part.

Rail: Your family moved west from St. Louis?

Jackson: Yes, so many people did during the Great Migration. San Francisco was my first home and the beauty of its architecture and art stays with me. Space in my work is very important. We had so much space and light along the Pacific Rim. I miss the mountains and the hills. It's really flat here in Georgia, but it's also beautiful. I love the silence and listening to nature, to the birds outside. I've done that since I was a child. I'm constantly trying to find nature. My backyard is a big natural space where I let everything overgrow. It's my sanctuary. I'm looking at some cardinals right now in the branches.

Rail: We could all use a similar sanctuary. So your early memories were about San Francisco?

Jackson: I remember my daddy taking me all over San Francisco with him. I saw the buildings and the public art from the WPA, like the murals in Coit Tower. I was seeing it, but I wasn't realizing it. It wasn't until I went back to San Francisco for college that I really saw the things that influenced me as a child. For one instance, my mother used to go to a paint store where the European man there had big buckets of paint and he would mix up the colors. She loved aqua for the inside of her cabinets, while everything else was white. But I remember walking into that big warehouse and seeing that man mixing up paint in those big buckets. And what I realized later was that it was my first time seeing so much intense color being made. After you get to be this age, a lot of little memories come back that seem inconsequential, but they are, I think, very important to the way we've developed.

Rail: I think that memories like that are what stitch together a life, and those from childhood are, of course, especially formative. When you returned to San Francisco, you went to San Francisco State. Is that where you got your BFA?

Jackson: It was a BA. People make it a BFA. It was a college then! [*Laughter*] This is really prehistory. It was San Francisco before the revolution. And before S.I. Hayakawa became president of the school.

Rail: I remember him, he was—

Jackson: Wasn't he terrible? And then it turns out he had a wonderful African art collection. It was an incredible college at that time.

Rail: It was an incredible period in San Francisco.

Jackson: Oh, it was. But I was pre-revolution at San Francisco College, now San Francisco State University. I was there right after the Beats. And then I left San Francisco to tour South America, and when I came back the hippie movement had started. I was in-between, not old enough to be a Beat and too old to be a hippie.

Rail: Tell me about taking drawing classes with Charles White.

Jackson: When I came back from South America from a tour as a dancer, I moved to Los Angeles, and a photographer I knew suggested I should take a class with Charles White at Otis. At San Francisco State, we were pretty much self-taught, working with peers most of the time, which was good. But Charles White was the first teacher I had who actually talked to me in class. There were only two or three women besides me—Judithe Hernández and Linda Jacobson. He was very positive, very supportive and that was wonderful. I found a studio space around the corner and that became the gallery that I thought everybody had forgotten about and now I can't get away from. [*Laughter*]

Rail: You read my mind. I was just going to ask you about it.

Jackson: I was in that studio space from 1968 till 1970.

Rail: And that was Gallery 32?

Jackson: Yes, that was the number of the suite.



Suzanne Jackson, *Garnet Zagbite*, 2016. Acrylic on layered acrylic, Garnet medium and mixed papers, 36 x 57 inches. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: David Kaminsky.

Rail: You showed some impressive artists.

Jackson: We were just artists being artists and putting up work; it just happens that they were David Hammons, Betye Saar, and Dan Concholar. We were all very young. And Charles White would come to all the exhibitions. I look at young people now and I wonder if they're enjoying each other in the way that we did.

Rail: I'm sure they are. We're always optimistic when we're young. But tell me about some of your other projects. You have a wide range of talents. In addition to being a visual artist, you were a dancer, and you went to Yale for drama, you taught, and more.

Jackson: I had been invited to teach painting at the USC Idyllwild School of Music and Arts (now Idyllwild Arts Academy) because of Noah Purifoy, whom I met during the time I was in Charles White's class, and later we were on the California Arts Council together. Noah told me about a place in the mountains that was up a curvy hill and very spooky, and I thought that sounded wonderful. So I went there and was invited to teach painting. And, it turns out, Françoise Gilot also taught there. She was married to Jonas Salk by then and the Salk Institute was nearby. I was there for three years or so then moved back to San Francisco to help my mother after my father passed away in 1981. It was a rough time for me in the eighties. It was almost as if I had disappeared from the art scene although I was still painting. Lloyd Richards, then dean of the School of Drama at Yale, was looking for people of color so he could have a more diverse drama school, so eventually I applied. I was interviewed by Ming Cho Lee and Michael Yeargan—in person. I didn't realize who Ming Cho Lee was, even though I'd seen his operas. I think I've bumbled through my life that way. I am very naive and just do things. And then it turns out that I should have done much more. But it gives you more confidence to present yourself to someone when you don't know who that person is. You're not as nervous. Later, you realize what a privilege it was.

Rail: Did you want to teach?

Jackson: No, I've never really thought of myself as an educator, although I realized that I've taught almost all the way through. It's how artists survive quite often. People want us to teach. I was fortunate to be able to teach dance and painting and fine arts. I never expected when I moved to Savannah that I would be teaching for such a long time, but I loved the students. They were wonderful.

Rail: And an actor—

Jackson: Well, that's forced upon you. There were a lot of musicals, and if you couldn't sing, you were a dancer. If you couldn't dance, you were a singer, and quite often you were both. And then when I ended up at Yale after that interview, I thought I was going in for technical things. I wanted to handle all the equipment—the saws and the drills—all that. But Ming Cho Lee was looking for people who could draw. I've always been able to draw. It's the base of my paintings. Well, one of them. I'm interested in line, in texture. There are times that I work on a drawing for years—which is silly. I can draw a feather in a minute. But it's calming to do something that is quite the opposite of my abstractions, although everything that I do seems to become an abstraction, even the figurative work, because I work with the flow of paint, and layering it. Someone asked me the other day about a work—is it abstraction or is it figurative? And I thought, well, probably it's both, just because of the way that I work with paint.

Rail: Isn't that what many artists do?

Jackson: Yes, but no one was paying attention to artists like us, especially those of color who'd been around for a long time. I think that was to my advantage. I could just experiment and explore. I understand now that my work should be put in perspective—how did I get from here to there? That's what the show in Chicago is about. How I went from the heavy papers that I salvaged from theater productions and layered and how that evolved into layered pure paint. Now I'm really interested in other structural elements using paint. The Joan Mitchell grant that I received was wonderful because my work was being recognized as painting and sculpture at the same time. But I really believe in painting, from traditional methods to new technologies, and all the things that can still be done with paint and materials. I'm also diligent about not putting the raw materials back into the environment. I realized that when I was cleaning my brushes, paint was going down the drain and into the estuary, into the environment. I try to put any scraps of paint, any construction materials from my hands, from palette knives, from paint jars back into the new work.

Rail: We should all think more about that. And the new piece behind you?

Jackson: I'm not satisfied with it, because it needs to have a more painterly quality, which is what we used to say when working with oil paint. But I'm using acrylic, a material that's malleable and can become something else, not just a flat surface. And I'm really proud that I'm making these paintings that hang double-sided in space, that are all paint, with light moving through them. It's the strength of the acrylic that really interests me, and the sculptural forms it may take.

Rail: Are you using brushes?

Jackson: I use a palette knife but yes, more often brushes—I use lots of brushes—and I pour and keep pouring as if I'm using watercolor.

Rail: Do you peel it off a surface?

Jackson: I do. I have plastic covers on the tables. I may work on the table, or I may work upright, with the works just hanging in space. But the initial layers I start on the table, and then pull them up. Many of the parts and pieces of each painting are fragments that have been chipped away and then applied as paint. It's painting in another way. I don't call it collage because it's not another material. It's all paint—acrylic on acrylic. And it's suspended: paint suspended in space. Then I started experimenting with putting heavier paints within the paint to see how strong they are. It becomes a structural issue because of the weight of the paint. The paint becomes an armature for itself.

Rail: And you use materials you have on hand?

Jackson: I have some strips from redoing the metal roofing on my building. So there's a piece of metal at the top of one piece. And then, for another piece, I had leftover copper gutters, and leftover molding. I am looking at them to see what I could do with them. It's fun to incorporate the stuff that's lying about. It makes a kind of history.

Rail: It's the kind of conservation and repurposing that women historically have practiced.

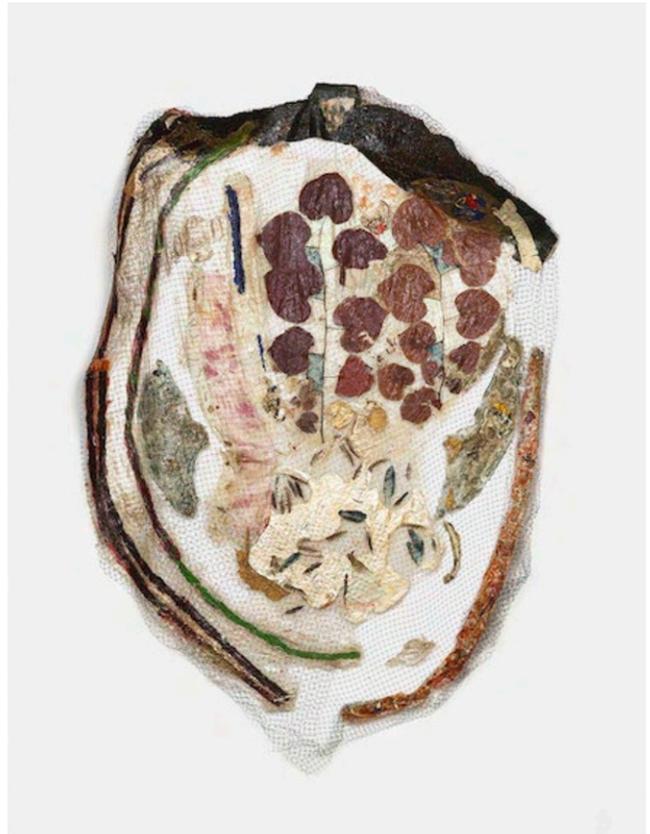
Jackson: Exactly. For one of the pieces that I had in the exhibition at Glasgow, I found a piece of silk. The little piece of fabric was from about the 1930s from my mother's sewing box. I put the strip in. Then I added the top of a satin lining from a bodice. I thought, this is really crazy, but I'm just going to have fun with it. By the seventies, women artists were often incorporating aspects of the feminine into their work.

Rail: Yes, it was important that women determine for themselves what goes into their work, what had value.

Jackson: I was more hesitant when I was younger. I remember making big paintings, people would come into the gallery and say, “Oh, these are awfully big paintings for you to do as a little woman.” I don’t think about that anymore. I just go ahead and do works that are important to me. And I like doing little bitty paintings as well. A good small painting is really difficult to make.

Rail: A few years ago I wrote a catalogue essay for an exhibition called *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction* that featured artists who were Black women. They were all extraordinary abstract painters. And I thought, this would have once been three strikes against you as an artist: abstraction, painting, woman of color. But, of course, a shift was taking place. Now it’s a home run, or at least a triple. Before, if you were an artist of color, you were supposed to be only concerned about social and political issues, identity issues, and so on, but not about abstraction. And that, of course, is as biased, racist, exclusionist, as anything else.

Jackson: When I first started painting, I always seemed out of sync with whatever was in fashion. When I was a more figurative painter, it was really because I was a young painter coming out of college, then taking a class with Charles White. I’m seeing some strange descriptions of the works that I made right after that class. I was simply dealing with some of the structural things he was teaching us about the body and the face and all of that. But when I was working figuratively, everyone else was working in abstraction or in conceptual art, especially in California and at CalArts. Within Black culture, African Americans wanted to see images that looked like them when I was working abstractly. I was fortunate because almost immediately Ankrum Gallery, a really prominent LA gallery, started showing my work in a neutral place on La Cienega, and people loved the work. When I moved to Savannah, I thought I would be working more figuratively. But then somehow the work went into abstraction. I think it was because of the materials that I was using.



Suzanne Jackson, *Woodpecker's Last Blues*, 2013. Acrylic on acrylic, deer netting, woodpecker feathers, redbud leaves and tar paper, 76 x 60 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: David Kaminsky.

Rail: You told me a story about a work that's going to be in the Chicago show called *Hers and His* (2018).

Jackson: That was because of Faith Ringgold. I saw a Faith Ringgold exhibition at Mills College in the late seventies, I think. She was working with her mother's quilts, and she said, "When you inherit your mother's quilts, you have to finish them." My mother was working on quilts from 1937 until she died in 2009 when she was ninety-five years old. I'm not going to do that. I'm a painter, I told myself. But I kept remembering what Faith Ringgold had said. So in *Hers and His*, I took scraps that my mother had rejected and made a work from it. It was not exactly a tribute to my mother, but it relieved me of what I felt was a curse that had been put on me by Faith Ringgold.

Rail: When we talked about your Chicago show, you said music was important to you, to your work.

Jackson: If you have music and art together, and you are listening to this wonderful music and putting down a brushstroke in an abstract painting, they almost flow together. I have a drawing called *Joan's Wind* that I made while listening to a symphony. I couldn't remember which symphony but Tiffany Barber at UCLA found the actual symphony that I was listening to, a symphony about Joan of Arc. The brushstrokes and the lines in that drawing come from listening to the music. I think that's what happens to many of us, why my figurative work has some abstraction in it. It's just the way I use the materials. Sometimes I can't help myself; I put down the brushstroke just because the color is so beautiful or the shape of something is so wonderful. I think people who work in abstraction, after a point, simply want to keep pushing the work to see how far it can be pushed, what more could be done with this? I know how to draw. I know how to make something absolutely realistic, but how far can I push this to make it beautiful, to make something else that has to do with listening and hearing a kind of spiritual inner self?

Rail: Who or what were some of your major influences?

Jackson: My parents first. I keep going back to my parents as supporters of my work. And I love work by Barbara Chase-Riboud because she is a sculptor, mother, diva. I missed the opportunity to go to Mexico with Elizabeth Catlett because I had just gotten that big LA loft space at Jefferson and Main. There are so many artists that I love. Ursula von Rydingsvard and the way she gets into the wood. And Mary Lovelace O’Neal, of course, who is an abstract artist from way back, and all the people that I grew up with, Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, all of us together as friends. That’s how we influenced each other, by just supporting one another. It’s women artists just supporting one another; there were many and I hate to leave anyone out. And I love the work by El Anatsui. When I saw his work, I thought, oh, my goodness, this is what I’m trying to do with paint. But I do it all alone. I don’t have a whole village to help me out. I prefer to be in the studio alone. I think everyone we encounter influences us and helps us along. Every minute of our lives we’re being helped by someone.



Suzanne Jackson, *Hers and His*, 2018. Acrylic, cotton, scenic Bogus paper, and wood 86 x 67 inches, Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

Rail: And if I were to say the word “change” to you, how would you characterize that, from when you started to today? How have things changed for you as an artist, how has the context changed?

Jackson: In the beginning, especially when I first moved to Los Angeles and left home for the first time, I was still learning to paint, to use materials. I was very naive, very romantic—Los Angeles, Hollywood, you know. Then I went through some rough times in my life, but I was persistent as a painter, I didn’t give up. And now, finally, I feel better about the work because I’m always trying to make the work better. I feel as if I have something that really is mine, even if I had my signature in it from the beginning. I feel that it is mature. After all the things that have happened in my life with my family, my son passing away unexpectedly at forty-five, and then the cat he gave me passed away this past month; it made me do a lot of thinking about what I am leaving behind. For one thing, this building of mine will be an artists’ residency when I’m gone. I want to leave something for the community, for other artists so they have a place to work and be with each other, a place that’s a positive influence. I believe in sharing. I think if you are doing well, then you should be able to share that with other people. I think I’ve always tried to do that in any way that I could.

Rail: So what's next?

Jackson: The change now is about me pushing to the next level. I have the example of Elizabeth Catlett saying at eighty-eight that she had a ton of sculpture to make and she couldn't wait to get home to start her new piece. I keep thinking about older women artists like Betye Saar, in their nineties, who are still making work. That's important to me. I'm just going to keep painting and writing until I can't anymore. I feel I'm a global person with some of every nationality in me. So I feel that I represent all women of color, all of us. I try to, at least.

Rail: I read somewhere that you were an "environmental abstractionist."

Jackson: That's interesting. I learn something about me that I didn't know before each time I read something. I think it's because younger people have experiences and a vocabulary that are quite different from what we had. So I'm really paying attention, saying, Oh, I didn't know I was that or I didn't know my work was considered that way. That's the reason I think of myself as naive even now. There are personal things in my life that might make me a little wary, but that's not in the work.

Rail: The social environment around us has changed over time. There's a more embracing attitude toward women, and toward women of color now, a change in what society is willing to champion spurred by feminism, civil rights, environmentalism—and that, too, will change again, however it does. Are you not in the least bit resentful that it took this long?

Jackson: No, I think because, as a young artist, we were told, you don't get out of school and have an exhibition—

Rail: Unlike now—

Jackson: Well, we were supposed to wait and develop our work. And when the work is really developed, then you get recognition. Then you get museum exhibitions. Although I had that all along, even though nobody knew much about me. But I was still showing all over the world in my little way. I can't feel resentful because there were wonderful artists who were being ignored as well. Like Ruth Asawa then. For me, there were people whom I looked up to, and who kept me going. I was fortunate to have older parents and to be an only child. They did everything they possibly could for me. And so did the community I grew up in in Fairbanks. There are so many people in the world who have so much less. For a long time, I didn't expect anything to happen. Not big things. I was showing, but not like the kinds of extraordinary shows that are happening now. I've been very fortunate.

Contributor

Lilly Wei

Lilly Wei is a New York-based art critic and independent curator.