

April 21, 2024

The very first steps, whether you're an actor getting into character or an artist presenting the survey of your life's work.

## How It Begins

### Building an Installation

The artist Suzanne Jackson, photographed at her Savannah, Ga., studio on Feb. 1, 2024, works on a piece that will eventually be installed on a terrace at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

THE SAVANNAH, GA.-BASED artist Suzanne Jackson, 80, has worked as a dancer, a set and costume designer, a professor and a poet — but most notably as a painter. Jackson describes her ethereal compositions as “anti-canvas,” which she creates by building up layers of acrylic paint and at times found materials, including netting and produce bags. In 2025, she’ll display a selection of work from her six-decade career, along with a new site-specific installation, as part of a retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

I’m working on a commission for the fourth-floor terrace of [SFMOMA]. It’s an installation that’ll climb the walls of the terrace and partially fill the open space. My approach is quite different than if I were working on a painting in my studio: I have to think of it in an architectural or sculptural sense. There’re technical aspects, so I’ve been doing a lot of research in airports and from airplane windows, looking at large-scale structures that don’t fall down — things on the rooftops of buildings like windsocks or poles. This piece will be built from the ground up, unlike my other work that hangs from the walls or ceiling.

I don’t go looking for ideas. I just go into the studio and start painting. Now that I’m older and not teaching, I don’t have to do anything except paint. In the morning, I roam around the house. I do the laundry. I feed the cats. I look out the window and stare at nature. I have a big window at the end of my kitchen and can see tall trees and birds and animals and insects. I go through the studio to get to the kitchen from my bedroom, so sometimes I end up stopping and looking at work I’ve already done. There’s a lot of sitting and thinking and looking. Sometimes, I’ll turn on music — Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy or Yo-Yo Ma. On Mondays and Fridays, it’s [the Savannah radio D.J. and jazz historian] Ike Carter’s show “Impressions.”

As the music flows, so does the paint — that’s a spiritual environment to be in. Other times, I’ll work in absolute silence. At the beginning, I explore. I’m never quite sure what’s going to happen. Usually, it comes spontaneously. One brushstroke leads to the next, and then it becomes another idea. I might think I have one idea when I start, but it often changes along the way to be something completely opposite. I’m just having a good time being a painter. That’s how I started, and it’s how I’m going to end. ■



Photographs by Kendrick Brinson

THESE INTERVIEWS HAVE BEEN EDITED AND CONDENSED.  
PHOTO ASSISTANT: DAYNA ANDERSON