

FRIEZE

Suzanne Jackson's Retrospective Celebrates a Chameleonic Talent

Her sumptuous works at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art are unified by a propulsive, blooming quality



BY BLAKE OETTING IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 21 OCT 25



The path through Suzanne Jackson's retrospective, 'What Is Love', is structured by the various places in which she has lived: San Francisco; Fairbanks, Alaska; Savannah, Georgia; New Haven, Connecticut and other locations around the US. I first encountered Jackson through Kellie Jones's pioneering scholarship on Black artists working in Los Angeles in the 1960s and '70s; upon winding my way through the exhibition, however, this association between the artist and any one scene or school was supplanted by a general impression of *passage* as the pivotal heuristic for approaching Jackson's practice. This is all the more appropriate given the formal character of the paintings themselves. Across the span of the exhibition, which takes us from the late 1960s to work from the past few years, Jackson demonstrates manifold ways of translating that geographic sense of drift into a subtly motile visual grammar.



Suzanne Jackson, 'What Is Love', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: SFMOMA; photograph: Devlin Shand for Drew Altizer

In *Triplical Communications* (1969), among the earliest paintings on view, Jackson diluted acrylic paint to depict three intertwined bodies set against a pearlescent, white gesso background. While artists like Helen Frankenthaler have embraced a similar sort of aqueous poetics in their painting in order to dissolve the division of figure and ground, in Jackson's works of the 1960s and '70s the metastasizing effects of her watery medium – resulting in a litany of coextensive forms – illustrate more natural types of interrelation. Jackson's approach in this period, demonstrated through paintings such as *We are silenced, our vision is blind* and *One of Us is Right* (both 1970), produced coagulated compositions that strung together human, animal and plant life into systems of colourful co-dependency – illuminating one answer to the exhibition's titular question.



Suzanne Jackson, 'What Is Love', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: SFMOMA; photograph: Devlin Shand for Drew Altizer

The embryonic quality of Jackson's subjects extends throughout the show, including her turn towards landscapes and cityscapes in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, and her more recent quasi-sculptural hanging assemblages. To produce these latter works, like *deepest ocean, what we do not know, we might see?* (2021), Jackson layers acrylic paint with found materials into baffling constructions that, while appearing to have the brittle texture of crystallized sugar from afar, gently sway as viewers move around them. In doing so, these luminescent, multimedia works pick up on the same sense of imminent motion demonstrated through the washes of acrylic that suffused Jackson's canvases in the late 1960s. In addition to their movement in space, the paint itself seems to slowly ooze downward, amber-like, in several cases tapering off towards the bottom of the suspended composition. Here, the propulsive, blooming quality of Jackson's earlier painting, with its capacity to interlace and confuse form, finds its translation from illusionistic to physical space.



Suzanne Jackson, 'What Is Love', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: SFMOMA; photograph: Devlin Shand for Drew Altizer

Alongside Jackson's sumptuous work, the exhibition's methodological approach to the question of artistic practice is also impactful. Beginning in the second room, which focuses on the artist's influential Gallery 32 in Los Angeles (1968–70) and continues through her activity with the California Arts Council, Brockman Gallery Productions and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act programme in the mid- to late 1970s, the curators frame their retrospective view of Jackson as one keenly aware of her advocacy for other practitioners. As detailed by one piece of ephemera from her days at Gallery 32 – a list titled 'Shit I have to do' – Jackson's art-work involved, in addition to painting, making slides, borrowing equipment, creating invitations, printing posters, bookkeeping and installing shows. Indeed, as Jones so rigorously demonstrates in her research, an artistic community involves not only people producing art but an exhibitionary and financial complex ready to support it. This show offers an uncommonly expansive account of that aesthetic, organizational and community-oriented apparatus – and one rare, chameleonic talent who made herself a part of its every nook and cranny, time and time again.

*Suzanne Jackson's **'What Is Love'** is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until 1 March 2026*