

ARTFORUM

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Suzanne Jackson

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)

By Suzanne Hudson 



Suzanne Jackson, *Crossing Ebenezer*, 2017, acrylic wash, acrylic gel medium, acrylic detritus, firewood bag netting, peanut shells, wood, D-rings, 92 × 67 × 3".

The three words “What Is Love” appear without punctuation and suspended on a gray entry wall to Suzanne Jackson’s epic retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, posing a question that alternately might be parsed as an exhortation, a mantra, or a hymn. This presentation of some eighty paintings and drawings made since the 1960s emerges from and extends the emphasis of *What I Love*, a small book Jackson published in 1972. Shown in a vitrine in a setting among other larger-scale and exuberantly colored works often rendered on page-like expanses of gessoed canvas, the publication quietly emphasizes its author’s affinity for visual art and poetry, with Jackson figured as a polymath from the start. While paintings are a throughline in the survey, such formative and increasingly insistent interdisciplinarity is felt in all of the works that follow. Less abstractly, the image of a heart-shaped face that graces *What I Love*’s cover recurs in the acrylic painting *Not Every Clown Lives at the Circus*, 1967, and the graphite drawing *Interlocation*, 1969, among many other instances. Elsewhere, hearts (absent the faces within) morph outside of bodies, congealing from liquid paint puddles as vital emblems of passion or tenderness, or sprouting hands where there should be arteries.

This is to suggest that Jackson—artist, writer, organizer, dancer, curator, theater designer, mother—effectively models reciprocal belonging: love as a dream, something emanating from the self, if always in relation. Jackson’s multivalent work with others is structural to curator Jenny Gheith’s framing of the artist’s career. Legible in photographs and ephemera throughout, this stress on community (of pedagogy, politics, family) is especially well-placed in a show-within-the-show section about

Gallery 32, a self-funded Los Angeles exhibition space that Jackson ran out of her studio from 1968 to 1970. (She showed Senga Nengudi, Betye Saar, and others in “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show,” the first survey of African American women artists in the city.) Here, pieces once installed at Gallery 32 are brought back together. Works by Nengudi and Saar, along with those by Dan Concholar, Emory Douglas, and John Outterbridge, share space with the centrally sited, body-printed glass of David Hammons’s *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969, a seemingly evergreen commentary on the limits of institutional access. While this room transitions into another centering Jackson’s arts advocacy, the clusters of paintings in the following galleries reflect her embrace not just of animals (flamingos and lizards), nature (gardens and daffodil-yellow skies), and extra-human sentience, but also of a robust and directed environmentalism.

The show unfurls chronologically and, owing to Jackson’s migratory movements, the content in the galleries progresses in lockstep across time and, correspondingly, place. This means that proximate and recollected landscapes—from the San Francisco of her childhood and the Alaska of her adolescence to her mid-career time in Idyllwild, California, and, since 1996, Savannah, Georgia—often determine the image. Made in Savannah, *Woodpecker’s Last Blues*, 2013, marks a material transition from wall-based works on paper and canvas to pigmented and transparent compositions without a traditional support, suspended from the ceiling. Jackson used deer netting to hold the paint and medium, affixing feathers, leaves, and tar paper across its surface. Its oval structure implies a portal that subsequent pieces literalize through Jackson’s further development of painted, dried,

and free-hanging acrylics. These draped banners effect a densely layered forest of matter and symbols. One example is *Crossing Ebenezer*, 2017, which flashes red, the color of blood, memorializing a Civil War-era massacre of emancipated African Americans who were drowned in the titular creek. Just beyond, the new commission *What Feeds Us?*, 2024–25, is anchored by a central sculpture of a felled tree, its bark composed of wire and moss, resting on a bed of trash swept up from Jackson’s workspace. A meditation on the global movement of garbage, it finally and emphatically delivers a question. Before long, it will be a requiem.