

*Jordan Casteel, Elizabeth and Roman (2024)*

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Jordan Casteel, *Elizabeth and Roman*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 45 × 30 in (114.3 × 76.2 cm)

*Elizabeth and Roman* by Jordan Casteel is an oil painting portraying a tender moment between a mother and her child. Through the artist's emphasis on the mother's hands, gently cradling the child, use of vibrant, rich colors, and deliberate exposure of the underpainting, this piece evokes a sense of family, childhood, and security.

*Elizabeth and Roman* is a large artwork that draws the viewers in through its eye-catching portrayal of a child in someone's arms. At first glance, one notices that the young child is held in hands that are ambiguous to the viewer. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that these are likely the hands of a mother. The child's clothes are detailed and very vibrant: navy blue pants with a light blue floral pattern, a green sweater, and a white jacket on top. The child's grey and white striped socks and soft beige, fuzzy shoes further emphasize the warmth and innocence of the small figure. As the viewer continues to examine the painting, the mother's hands become a focal point. The hands—a mix of purple, red and pink tones—bring the painting to life. The right hand of the mother, Elizabeth, is particularly striking; there is an eye-catching two-piece gold ring with a diamond set in the center. The artist has meticulously detailed the fingers, capturing the shadows and wrinkles that suggest wisdom and experience, adding depth to the emotional resonance of the image. However, in direct comparison to the detailed hands and body of the child is the painting's simple light green background. This choice—untouched underpainting—leads the viewer to interpret that Casteel intentionally left the underpainting visible to keep the focus on the intimate bond between mother and child. The soft, unobtrusive green background doesn't demand attention, instead subtly enhancing the figures and ensuring they remain the central focus of the painting. As a result, when viewers engage with the work, they may almost forget there is anything in the background, drawn instead to the tender connection between the two figures.

Born in Denver and currently based in New York, Jordan Casteel's work is deeply inspired by the people and communities around her, attracting "widespread acclaim for colossal portraits of friends and neighbors."<sup>1</sup> Central themes in Casteel's art often include race and gender, with a particular focus on Black individuals as a means to challenge harmful stereotypes and celebrate the beauty of Black life.<sup>2</sup> By working with individuals she knows, Casteel forges lasting connections, developing and turning friendships into familial ties. For her, the subjects of her portraits are not just models—they are people with whom she shares a genuine relationship. This connection is reflected in her understanding of the importance of family and the lasting impact of the relationships she forms. This idea of fostering relationships through art is very present in *Elizabeth and Roman*, a painting of a close friend and her child. Casteel has shared that she watched Roman, the child, grow in his mother's hands, and through this experience, she came to understand the feeling of motherhood.<sup>3</sup> Knowing both the mother and child personally, she felt compelled to capture their bond in her painting. For Casteel, artmaking is a way of forming meaningful connections with others, a "particular alchemy...that begins with a nervous hello and transforms strangers into family."<sup>4</sup>

Casteel's choice of composition and color in *Elizabeth and Roman* conveys the intimacy and connection between mother and child. Compositionally, Elizabeth holds Roman in her steady hands, protecting him from the unknown world around them. This painting evokes a sense of family and childhood, capturing a moment that only occurs when children are small—when parents hold a child close, offering protection and care. Color choices further enhance the feeling of intimacy: the simplicity of the background further emphasizes the emotional bond between the two figures. The exposed underpainting suggests that the world that exists outside of the two's spaces is secondary, and that this child—rendered in

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<sup>1</sup> Zoë Lescaze, "Jordan Casteel Won't Let You Look Away," *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/14/arts/design/jordan-casteel-new-museum.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> In conversation with Jordan Casteel, October 30, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Lescaze, *New York Times*

bright, full colors—is the source of joy, meaning, and purpose in the mother’s life. In addition, Roman also symbolizes hope for the future, an innocent force capable of transforming the world. While the background remains plain, the child’s presence promises creativity, vitality, and promise, ready to bring life and color to the world around them. As Jordan Casteel has said, "Color is everything! Today I take time to determine what color will capture the essence and the energy that I want each painting to hold."<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, color is not merely an aesthetic choice but a means of conveying the energy and message of her work; and in *Elizabeth and Roman*, the colors are carefully chosen to highlight the depth of the connection between mother and child, underscoring the moment's emotional significance.

One might initially find *Elizabeth and Roman* striking for the sense of peace that emanates from the work. The mother’s gentle, yet comforting hold on her child conveys a strong feeling of security and comfort. But, through further engagement, the viewer gains a deeper appreciation for the work. The painting is not simply a peaceful, backgroundless painting of a mother holding a child—it showcases Casteel’s efforts to spotlight the beauty of motherhood. Children make the world—that may otherwise be blank—colorful and bright; they become the center of the universe for a parent. Ultimately, the viewer can appreciate Casteel’s deliberate choices—hand placement, size, proportion—in both color and composition.

Overall, *Elizabeth and Roman* evokes the feeling of family, comfort, and security. The plain background serves to highlight the child’s presence in the mother's protective hands, emphasizing the warmth and safety of their bond. This painting can look plain upon first glance, but does serve a larger message upon further examination, leaving the viewer with a sense of peace and understanding.

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<sup>5</sup> Jordan Casteel, "Q&A with Jordan Casteel," Scholastic Art, Scholastic Art, last modified October 2019, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://art.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/100119/reimagining-color/interview-jordan-casteel.html?language=english>.

### *Works Cited*

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