

Amina, Jordan Casteel (2017)

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Jordan Casteel, *Amina*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 90 × 78 in (228.6 × 198.1 cm)

Amina by Jordan Casteel is an oil-on-canvas portrait created in 2017, part of her "Nights in Harlem" series. This collection, made during her time as a resident at the Studio Museum, was developed to help Casteel "connect with her surrounding community" by capturing intimate, personal depictions of the people she encounters in Harlem.¹ Casteel's *Amina* conveys the artist's exploration of Black womanhood through her evocative use of light and composition, capturing a sense of longing and identity as she seeks to understand her place within her community and the broader experience of being a Black woman.

Born in 1989 in Denver, Colorado, Jordan Casteel is a contemporary portraitist who uses painting to explore and interpret the world around her. Through her work, she creates intimate depictions of individuals from her community, focusing on themes of identity, connection, and representation. Inspired by her community and the environment around her, traces of Harlem, NYC and Hudson, NY are found in her work.² The influence of Harlem is especially pertinent and vivid within *Amina*—*Amina* is a painting inspired by a hair salon that she would frequently pass by when she was living in Harlem full-time.³ By painting this salon, Casteel is recognizing that it was a part of her environment and interpreting what this building represents in her life.

Painted to scale, the composition and light in *Amina* establishes a setting for the viewer and allows them to "step" into the painting. By standing in front of the painting, the viewer feels as if they are on the street standing in front of the salon. Casteel deliberately evokes this feeling because she wants the viewer to feel as if they are walking the streets of Harlem alongside her. When talking about the scale of her artwork, Casteel notes "For me, I am thinking about my body in relation to the bodies I am painting. These life-size, sometimes larger-than-life, portraits

¹ "Jordan Casteel: Nights in Harlem." Casey Kaplan Gallery, accessed November 12, 2024. <https://caseykaplangallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Casteel-CKG17-Press-Release.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ In interview with Jordan Casteel, November 11, 2024

are about engaging with my community, or my landscape, with mutual respect.”⁴ By creating her pieces so large, she is “forcing” the viewer to be with her in the moment. Beyond this, another technique that Casteel uses in *Amina* is light, which is used to help the viewer visualize the setting and the environment of the moment. The left side is dark while the right side is lit by the apartment next door. The dark side is painted with a dark blue and the light is a yellow paint. On the windows and awning of the shop, there are 37 women pictured to show the different hairstyles offered by the salon. Only a few colors are used—green, blue, red, black, and yellow. Notably, green, red, and yellow appear in the majority of African flags.

The choice to paint an African braiding salon was intentional, as Casteel wanted to connect to the “Black woman experience” through art. Casteel lived in close proximity, frequently passing the salon. However, as the artist notes, she never went in—despite a desire to indulge in the experience—due to her short hair and the chemotherapy medication she was taking that affected her hair growth.⁵ As such, the use of light in *Amina* effectively captures the feeling of being an outsider. Most of the light is coming from within the salon, creating a halo-like glow that highlights its magical and unreachable appeal. Casteel wants to go to the salon, but feels as though she cannot. In the context of Casteel’s journey towards self-acceptance and self-discovery, it seems a part of her goals is an ability to confidently participate in the activities of the salon. The light amplifies this sense of aspiration, because it gives the salon a heavenly appeal—the salon is the ultimate destination.

Moreover, *Amina* is also a way for Casteel to “slow down” the gentrification in Harlem and appreciate its culture and personality. When describing why and how she paints, Casteel notes, “There is a certain type of mindfulness that is required to slow down enough and really

⁴ Dawn Blackman, "Reciprocating Gaze: Jordan Casteel Interviewed" Bomb Magazine, April 29, 2020, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2020/04/29/reciprocating-gaze-jordan-casteel-interviewed/>.

⁵ Ibid.

feel what it means to be present with someone in that moment.”⁶ Casteel uses painting to understand herself relative to her surroundings and by painting this hair salon, she is embracing the culture of Harlem. Harlem is a neighborhood that represents the Black experience. Casteel wants to celebrate this culture through her work and “undo” the work of gentrification. By capturing this specific building, she is recognizing all the activity that happens in the building—the strenuous manual labor of the braiders, the women getting their hair done before a special event, the kids unable to sit still in the braider’s chair.

Through its use of light of perspective, *Amina* is able to give an insight into the ever present culture of Harlem and Casteel’s journey of self-identity. By painting this site, she is allowing the building to be remembered forever. The presence of the building will be remembered even if it is torn down. Furthermore, the physical distance from the viewer to the building represents the disattached feeling Jordan feels toward her identity. Being so far away from the entrance symbolizes the feeling of never being able to “fit in” enough that she may enter the building. Casteel wants the viewer to also feel the distance she feels to the hair salon. *Amina* is a powerful representation of how a place can hold culture, identity, and even the feeling of isolation.

⁶ Jordan Casteel, *Jordan Casteel Stays in the Moment* | *Art21, New York Close Up*, directed by Vicky Du (2017; New York City: Bomb Magazine, Youtube, 2017), video.

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