

Jordan Casteel, *Daffodil* (2022)
Sophie Tulovsky



Jordan Casteel, *Daffodil*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 72 x 56 inches. Courtesy of Love, Luck & Faith Foundation

Jordan Casteel's *Daffodil* (2022) depicts a peaceful, domestic still life situated in upstate New York. Part of Casteel's newer artistic efforts, *Daffodil* attempts to redefine Casteel as an artist, making way for more calmness and joy in her practice. Casteel's choice of subject matter and perspective reveal the artist's desire to be perceived in a different light, inviting viewers into a new, more introspective chapter of her career.

Jordan Casteel, a figurative artist, began her professional career in Harlem, painting largescale portraits of the people and atmosphere that surrounded her. After a long history representing Harlem—which included a residency at Harlem's Studio Museum—Casteel decided to move to upstate New York amidst the chaos of COVID-19. However, a shift occurred in Casteel's work after she moved to the Catskills in 2021; she started painting flowers. Feeling overwhelmed and in need of an escape, Casteel spent a considerable amount of time working in her garden, a place where she found “peace and safety”¹ in times of uncertainty, both for her personally and for the world. This shift was also an attempt by Casteel—who has often said she does not want her art and herself to be limited to a specific practice—to redefine herself as an artist.² At the beginning of her career, she wanted to stray away from being known as the artist who solely paints portraits of black men. Now, Casteel is trying to make her work more personal and more in tune with her own feelings and experiences. In an interview talking about her newer work, Casteel explains, “I think what portraiture could mean for black people and black artists is the ability to make work that is connected to the vastness of our experiences that don't always have to hold the weight of an activist social justice standpoint. That saying something doesn't always have to look like representing our pain.”³ The conscious choice to start painting flowers, after a long history of portraying the black experience in America, hints at Casteel's desire to

¹ Los Angeles County Museum of Art. “5 Questions, 5 Artists: Reframing Portraiture.” YouTube, August 3, 2022.

² In conversation with Casteel, November 11, 2024.

³ Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

spend more time exploring her identity on her own terms while simultaneously breaking away from solely creating art that represents black people's pain.

In the center of *Daffodil* stands a maroon vase, filled to the brim with blooming flowers, essentially making this painting a portrait of the floral arrangement itself. The flowers sit on a dark blue, wooden table that extends past the bottom of the canvas, forming a V-shape at the bottom of the piece which allows the viewer to enter the work. The visible edges of the table in the middle of the canvas curve inwards, directing the viewer's eye to the center of the work and trapping the viewer's attention on the flowers. The placemat, which also extends past the bottom of the canvas, reinforces the painting's openness to the viewer, acting as an invitation. In fact, Casteel chose to position *Daffodil* at the end of a table, almost serving as a "bouquet" for the table, inviting everyone who sits there to feel they are a part of the work. If observed closely, the background—a forest—turns out to be indistinct scribbles, blending the trees and nature together. While the green tones of the flowers and the forest share a similar color palette, the flowers stand out sharply due to their intricate details, in stark contrast to the background, which is rendered in broad, abstract strokes. This creates a barrier between the foreground and the background, suggesting that the bouquet, and by extension the viewer, are closed off and safe from the uncertainty and wildness of the outside world. The beam to the left of the vase further reinforces this idea, hinting that the table is under a roof, most likely attached to Casteel's own home. The bright blue underpainting—seen in the beam, the plates, and shining through the flowers—gives the painting a surreal and almost unrealistic feeling, connecting *Daffodil* to Casteel's other works in which she also employs bold and exaggerated color choices. "[The underpainting] becomes a source of light for the painting,"⁴ said Casteel while describing the importance of color in her works. The neon blue lines also create a contour for the piece, bringing the viewer's eye back to

⁴ Authors, Scholastic Magazines+. "Interview: Jordan Casteel." Scholastic Art, October 1, 2019.

the center, once more emphasizing the importance of the bouquet. Moreover, the prepared dining plates and silverware hint at a family meal preparing to be shared. By placing one of the plates near the edge of the canvas, Casteel is inviting the viewer into her home and extending an invitation to partake in this intimate scene.

In essence, *Daffodil* is a still life painted in the traditional style of a portrait. However, it is not only a portrait of the bouquet, but a portrait of Casteel's private life. It gives the viewer an intimate glimpse of the calmness and joy that Casteel experiences being in a place where she feels the safest. In turn, this extends to the viewer, also giving them a sense of tranquility and security when they look at and interact with the piece.

Works Cited

- Authors, Scholastic Magazines+. "Interview: Jordan Casteel." Scholastic Art, October 1, 2019. <https://art.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/100119/reimagining-color/interview-jordan-casteel.html?language=english>.
- Felsenthal, Julia. "Jordan Casteel Is Making You Look." Vogue, February 27, 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/article/jordan-casteel-art>.
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "5 Questions, 5 Artists: Reframing Portraiture." YouTube, August 3, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO063SHqggE>.