

*Bounty*, Jordan Casteel (2020)

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Jordan Casteel, *Bounty*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 72 × 56 inches (182.88 × 142.2 cm)

Jordan Casteel's *Bounty* is a large-scale oil-on-canvas painting that captures an intimate yet public moment of peace within the bustling setting of a New York City subway. Known for her thought-provoking, large-scale depictions of everyday life, Casteel transforms this ordinary scene of day-to-day life into a profound exploration of serenity amidst an environment of chaos. In *Bounty*, the artist conveys a deep sense of peace through deliberate use of color, composition, and technique. These elements work in harmony to highlight themes of resilience and introspection, even in the face of a messy and frenetic backdrop. Ultimately, *Bounty* communicates a timeless message regarding the locating of inner peace despite disarray, inviting viewers to reflect on the quiet strength that can emerge in even the most hectic of environments.

The first thing that strikes viewers about *Bounty* is its considerable size. The large scale of the work demands attention, immersing onlookers in a life-sized depiction of the subject and her belongings. The vibrant hues of the sitter's blue jeans and her pink floral shirt may next draw a viewer's eyes, as they are tactfully contrasted against the muted grays and browns of the interior of the subway car. Positioned slightly off-center, the figure sits on the leftmost side of the canvas, seated on a waxy-looking orange subway chair. The sitter herself is depicted in a relaxed yet purposeful pose, gently holding a bag of Bounty paper towels and a purse. Her eyes are closed, and her grip on her belongings, though calm, suggests an underlying sense of quiet determination and intentionality.

A closer inspection of *Bounty* reveals additional nuances that deepen the painting's narrative. Variations in color and texture across the sitter's clothing, subway seats, and subway background add a rich visual complexity, further developing an enticing story. The thick brushstrokes on the sitter's hands and face emphasize the subject's presence, making her seem more tangible and grounded within the scene. As Casteel has noted, "what I love

about paint strokes is that you get to see the artist,”<sup>1</sup> and in this piece, her distinctive brushwork allows not just the sitter but her own presence to be felt even though she is not physically depicted. Additionally, the vibrant orange of the subway seats draws the viewer's eye, creating an alluring visual rhythm, particularly contrasted with the more natural use of the subject's skin and clothing. Moreover, the polka-dot pattern behind the sitter mirrors the floral patterns on her shirt, creating a subtle harmony between the sitter and her environment. These small but deliberate details not only enrich the painting but also draw the viewer deeper into the scene, inviting reflection on the relationship between the individual and the urban world around her.

Jordan Casteel is a 35-year-old American artist, who is celebrated for her riveting depictions of everyday people in urban settings.<sup>2</sup> Born in Denver, Colorado, Casteel combines photography with observational painting to create her works. Casteel's proclivity to this process is majorly due to her sociological and anthropology background, which emphasizes understanding people and their environments. Casteel's photography-based approach often involves capturing images of people she knows or interacts with in her neighborhood, or through friendships she has formed.<sup>3</sup> This method highlights how identity is shaped by the environments one inhabits, allowing Casteel to capture fleeting, spontaneous moments that would be difficult to replicate without the immediacy and authenticity that photography offers.

However, *Bounty* marks a departure from this practice. In this case, Casteel photographed someone from a similar environment—the subway—but with whom she had no prior relationship. The photograph, taken in 2019, served as the starting point for the painting, with the piece being completed in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This truth

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<sup>1</sup> In conversation with Jordan Casteel, October 30, 2024

<sup>2</sup> “Jordan Casteel.” Studio Museum in Harlem. Accessed December 1, 2024. <https://www.studiomuseum.org/artists/jordan-casteel>.

<sup>3</sup> Jordan Casteel, *Jordan Casteel Paints Her Community* | *Art21, New York Close Up*, directed by Vicky Du (2017; New York City: Bomb Magazine, Youtube, 2017), video.

adds a layer of complexity and depth to the work, as it reflects not only a pre-pandemic world but also incorporates the artist's pandemic perspective. Through this lens, *Bounty* gains additional meaning, capturing both a moment in time and the broader sense of resilience and introspection that emerged during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

The central theme in *Bounty* is finding peace amidst chaos, a concept vividly communicated through the context of the painting as well as its composition. The painting presents a striking juxtaposition: the crowded, chaotic subway, which symbolizes disorder, contrasted sharply with the sitter's calm and composed demeanor. This contrast is intensified by the context of the pandemic, adding a layer of depth to the narrative. With this, the painting becomes a visual representation of escapism, portraying a moment of stillness during an otherwise turbulent period. Casteel has noted that the work is symbiotic—viewers look in at the sitter, while she, in turn, "looks out" at the viewer. In this dynamic, the sitter teaches a quiet lesson on finding peace in the midst of chaos.

Further evidence of *Bounty*'s theme lies in its careful balance of color and texture. The sitter's bright clothing serves as a visual anchor, drawing attention to her peaceful, calm presence and emphasizing her physicality in the space. In contrast, the busy, dotted background conveys the frenetic energy of the environment, reinforcing the sense of movement and noise surrounding her. But it is through this direct contrast that a sense of harmony between sitter and background is achieved, as her floral shirt subtly echoes the pattern of the polka dots behind her. This visual connection suggests a subtle alignment between her and the space, yet her inner tranquility remains distinct. Additionally, the sitter's grip on her purse and Bounty paper towels emphasizes the subject's awareness of space—these details show that the subject is aware of her busy and unpredictable

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<sup>4</sup> In Interview with Jordan Casteel, November 11, 2024

environment. However, her closed eyes and relaxed posture, as well as the bright colors of her clothing show that while she may be a part of her environment, it is not overtaking her.

The timing of Casteel's completion of *Bounty* in 2020 transforms the painting into something more than a snapshot of a singular moment—it becomes a meditation on resilience and the ability of humanity to persevere through adversity. At first glance, *Bounty* may seem like a straightforward portrayal of an everyday scene, but with deeper study and understanding of its context, it becomes clear that Casteel elevates a mundane moment into a profound lesson on peace and resilience. Through her technical expertise and compositional choices, Casteel captures a resounding emotional depth, driving onlookers to look beyond the surface and consider the deeper narratives and hidden lessons within ordinary moments. Ultimately, *Bounty* masterfully explores the theme of peace amidst chaos, using color, composition, and a sociology-informed perspective to transcend its subway setting and offer a timeless reflection on human resilience during uncertain times. By capturing this serene moment, Casteel reminds viewers of the power of introspection, even within the most chaotic environments, and creates an enduring reminder of the human capacity for calm and reflection.

## Works Cited

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