

Jordan Casteel, Jordan Hand (2014)

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Jordan Casteel, *Jordan Hand*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 36 × 48 inches (91.4 × 121.9 cm)

Jordan Hand (2014) by Jordan Casteel is the oldest painting within the exhibition *Field of View*. As one of only two self-portraits in the exhibition, this work carries a sense of secrecy, conveyed through its composition, subject matter, and the deliberate staging within the exhibition. This articulates the intimacy of focusing on oneself and a fear of vulnerability within Casteel.

Located in the final room on the top floor, the painting—large and tucked away—acts almost as if it were a hidden gem, a token of thanks for walking through the exhibition and exploring Casteel's inner sanctum. The subject of *Jordan Hand* is a portrait of a nude Casteel, gently hiding her body with her arms and her face just out of frame. In the painting, the vibrant orange and yellow color scheme pale in comparison to the rich, red hue of Casteel's skin, which draws the viewer's attention. Still, all the major objects—the pillow, the flowers, the comforter—are all equally as important to the content of the painting as Casteel herself is. The orange pillow at the forefront of the painting is not only important because it shows that we are “in” a bedroom, but also because it gives a sense of comfort and trust due to its large size, conveying a sense of comfort to the viewer. The second pillow, adorned with colored flowers, catches the viewer's attention next. The intricacy of the design clearly shows a detail-oriented hand when it comes to flora, with Casteel even stating that it served as foreshadowing her later interest in painting flowers. The way Casteel positioned herself in the painting is captivating as well; Casteel's face was “violently cut out of frame,”¹ as if she herself was trying to take herself out of a *self*-portrait. Hesitance is what it conveys to the viewer, and truly a hidden gem.

Jordan Casteel is a black artist, currently residing in the Hudson Valley. Casteel's early career explored themes of nudity and the humanization of Black men—individuals often reduced to harmful stereotypes of violence, aggression, and abrasiveness. Her work challenged these

¹ In conversation with Jordan Casteel

stigmas by offering intimate, dignified portraits of Black men in everyday moments.² Her newest exhibition, *Field of View*, is named for the fact that the works were selected based on Casteel's relationship with the pieces, with the space inviting viewers into her community and offering a glimpse of the world as she saw on a daily basis. Through this deeply personal lens, Casteel encourages a more intimate understanding of the relationships and moments that shaped her artistic practice. As such, the inclusion of *Jordan Hand* is to give viewers a glimpse of how she saw *herself* on a daily basis at the time of painting it.

Created in 2014, Casteel painted *Jordan Hand* after working on the *Visible Man* series to combat being boxed in as a “black woman who painted black men.”³ Rather than conforming to this expectation, she took it as a challenge, using *Jordan Hand* to push back against the confines of this label. While Casteel's early work often explored the intimacy of nudity, particularly in relation to Black people and black men, *Jordan Hand* introduces a more personal lens. As she explained, “I've always had an inclination toward seeing people who easily might be unseen”⁴ and this idea extends to her self-portrait. By turning the spotlight from her usual subjects onto herself, Casteel's decision becomes an act of remarkable vulnerability and courage. In focusing on her own body, Casteel challenges traditional notions of representation while also advocating for the visibility of Black people—especially Black women, transforming her being into a powerful statement of agency and visibility.

But, placing herself at the forefront of the piece also required deep vulnerability—something Casteel herself acknowledged as something she could only go “so far with”⁵. Throughout painting, she was acutely aware of the stereotypes that Black women often

² Thelma Golden, “A Harlem Family, Thelma Golden in Conversation with Jordan Casteel” in *Jordan Casteel: Within Reach* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2020), pp. 36

³ Gioni Massimiliano, “Many Are Called, Gioni Massimiliano in Conversation with Jordan Casteel” in *Jordan Casteel: Within Reach* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2020), pp. 20

⁴ Rebecca R. Hart, *Jordan Casteel: Returning the Gaze* (2019), pg. 13

⁵ In conversation with Jordan Casteel

face—hypersexual, loud, high-maintenance—and noted, “I’m always in fear of my voice being negated as a young black woman. Denying the potential of invisibility is terrifying.”⁶ The “potential of invisibility” speaks to the fear of being silenced or rendered invisible, not through choice, but by external forces. For Casteel, self portraits actively negate the idea of invisibility, allowing oneself to be immortalized as they see fit. However, despite this concept, *Jordan Hand* reveals a level of apprehension when turning the gaze onto herself. In comparison, the nudes of *Visible Man* were not about sex, but about intimacy and vulnerability—an opportunity to truly know and connect with the subjects.⁷ In those works, subjects exuded fearlessness, unapologetically naked both physically and metaphorically. By contrast, *Jordan Hand* lacks this same boldness. There is a certain hesitation in the painting—the deliberate exclusion of Casteel’s face and posture speaks to a discomfort the artist felt in fully “exposing” herself. Ultimately, it could be said that although the existence of *Jordan Hand* is in an effort to rebel against the limitations people placed on Casteel, the painting is a stylistic departure from her previous work, reflecting a more complex, nuanced relationship with self-representation.

The significance of *Jordan Hand* deepens when we consider the time that had passed since Casteel last saw the painting—she had not viewed it for a decade. This separation, coupled with the vulnerability inherent in creating a self-portrait, converges on the canvas. As viewers stand before it, they are invited into an intimate space of trust, allowed to see a deeply personal part of the artist’s journey. At first glance, *Jordan Hand* might seem like a simple portrait, with the omission of the face perhaps signaling an artistic choice to highlight what she considers less important. But as one engages with the piece more deeply, the lens widens. *Jordan Hand* is not just about how Casteel viewed herself at the time of painting, but also about how she reflects on

⁶ Massimiliano, 20

⁷ Ibid.

herself in the present. This duality—looking both inward and backward—enhances the work with a layered complexity. In fact, when comparing *Jordan Hand* (2014) with more recent works like *Field Balm* (2022), this theme of self-reflection remains strikingly consistent. In both portraits, Casteel focuses on fragments of the body and personal objects rather than presenting a fully recognizable or overtly identifiable self. In *Jordan Hand*, the emphasis is on her legs and pillows; in *Field Balm*, it shifts to her feet and Crocs. These objects—whether the pillows in *Jordan Hand* or the gibbets in other works—are far more than mere props; they are intimate symbols of what matters to Casteel at each stage of her life.

All in all, the purpose of *Jordan Hand* is self reflection on Casteel's part, and the hesitance of vulnerability. Even though it holds everything but what one would say is a key identifier of someone, the face, it is still a portrait and holds as much weight as a portrait of *just* someone's face. A portrait does not need to immortalize the subject, only encapsulate them, and that's what Casteel's *Jordan Hand* does perfectly; from the skin, to the pillows, to the intricacies of the blanket on her bed, it captures an important moment in her life, one she thought required self-reflection and vulnerability.

Works Cited

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