

Jordan Casteel, Damani and Shola (2022)

Fatima Surovi

Jordan Casteel's 2022 painting, *Damani and Shola*, explores themes of identity, intimacy, and family dynamics, presenting a nuanced view of fatherhood through an earnest depiction of a father and daughter. Through her careful attention to color and composition, Casteel challenges stereotypes surrounding Black fatherhood, portraying resilience, tenderness, and complexity. This painting invites viewers to reconsider traditional notions of masculinity and family. Casteel's work goes beyond a simple portrait, becoming a deep look at identity, vulnerability, and resilience in the lives of fathers in families today.

Jordan Casteel, a celebrated contemporary artist, is renowned for her strikingly intimate and vivid portraits that highlight the richness of human connection. Her process begins with photographing her subjects in their everyday environments, a step that allows her to capture authentic moments and stay true to who they are.¹ These photos become the foundation for her paintings, which are filled with emotional depth and a genuine sense of intimacy. In an interview with Scholastic Art, Casteel shared how building a personal connection with her subjects helps her step outside her own perspective and truly see the small details that make each person unique.² Inspired by the people she meets in her daily life, she often chooses to focus on those who might otherwise be overlooked, giving their stories a voice through her art. Ultimately, her work aims to reveal the humanity in everyday people, often focusing on small and intimate moments, which can be seen in *Damani and Shola*.

Damani and Shola is a heartfelt and detailed portrayal of a father and his child. The focal point is Damani, sitting in a chair, gently holding his baby, Shola. The baby, dressed in colorful striped clothing, stands out immediately and draws attention with her lively expression.

¹ Scholastic Art. "Interview: Jordan Casteel." *Reimagining Color*, October 1, 2019. <https://art.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/100119/reimagining-color/interview-jordan-casteel.html?language=english>

² Scholastic Art. "Interview: Jordan Casteel." *Reimagining Color*, October 1, 2019.

Damani's expression feels thoughtful and protective. His relaxed posture, with one leg crossed and his hand holding Shola securely, creates a sense of calm and warmth. In addition, the background illustrates a home filled with light streaming through large windows, which look out onto a snowy landscape. The inside of the house is carefully detailed, with soft textures like the fluffy rug on the floor and the patterned blue fabric nearby. The toys scattered on the ground hint at everyday life and the presence of a child. Casteel's use of color is both bold and inviting. The warm tones of Damani's clothing and skin contrast with the cooler shades of the background, making him and Shola the central focus.

Casteel's use of bold colors is nuanced and deliberate, reflecting a desire to add depth, reflection, and emotional resonance to her work. Her experimentation with unconventional colors—like red, green, and blue—go beyond a mere aesthetic choice—they represent Casteel's choice to convey identity beyond racial construct and bring depth to the characters' skin tones. Additionally, Casteel's use of color is nuanced and intentional. According to The Studio Museum, her portraits often mix colors like red, green, yellow, and blue to convey identity beyond racial constructs. This layering of colors brings depth to the subjects' skin tones, adding warmth and complexity.³ The green undertones in the father's (Damani) skin in the painting challenge conventional depictions of Blackness, compelling the viewer to reconsider societal perceptions of race and identity. The painting is dominated by strokes of green, a color traditionally associated with growth, vitality, and natural imagery. However, while green *can* symbolize renewal and connection to the natural world, in this case its unconventional application evokes a sense of alienation or otherness. This subtly questions how race is framed in both societal and artistic contexts. The painting explores the duality of visibility and invisibility experienced by Black individuals. This choice redefines skin as more than a biological feature,

³ The Studio Museum in Harlem. "Jordan Casteel." <https://www.studiomuseum.org/artists/jordan-casteel>

turning it into a cultural marker that carries the weight of history, representation, and identity. More specifically, Casteel draws inspiration from the people she meets in her everyday life. She's especially moved by the richness of human connection, often focusing on people who might otherwise go unnoticed.⁴ The stereotype of a father portrays fathers as a distant provider focused on authority and strength rather than emotional connection or caregiving. Fathers are sometimes shown as less capable in parenting roles compared to mothers, or as detached people who struggle to connect emotionally with their children. Casteel challenges this notion through the painting's small details. The toys on the floor, the soft texture of the rug, and the glow of light through the window, creating a sense of everyday life that feels both intimate and common. Casteel's work captures the humanity of these moments, prompting us to reflect on what we often overlook in others. By focusing on a scene that might otherwise go unnoticed, she reveals the beauty and depth of the everyday, inviting us to see fatherhood in a new light.

Casteel's *Damani and Shola* isn't just a painting; it's a mirror held up to society, challenging us to confront how we see and stereotype others. Beyond its initial appearance as a tender family scene, the piece reveals deeper reflections on identity, cultural disconnection, and the search for authentic representation. For those who have felt distanced from their cultural roots, it serves as a powerful reminder of art's capacity to reclaim and celebrate marginalized experiences. Through its vivid depiction of love and intimacy, Casteel highlights the empathy found in everyday moments, the warmth of a glance, and the quiet strength of presence. Ultimately, this work teaches us that empathy lies in the details, the warmth in a glance, the comfort of a shared moment making us question what else we've been overlooking in our rush to judge.

⁴ YouTube. "Jordan Casteel: 'Within Reach' at the New Museum." Uploaded by New Museum, February 19, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO063SHqggE>.

Works Cited

Scholastic Art. "Interview: Jordan Casteel." *Reimagining Color*, October 1, 2019.
<https://art.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/100119/reimagining-color/interview-jordan-casteel.html?language=english>

Scholastic Art. "Interview: Jordan Casteel." *Reimagining Color*, October 1, 2019.

The Studio Museum in Harlem. "Jordan Casteel." <https://www.studiomuseum.org/artists/jordan-casteel>

YouTube. "Jordan Casteel: 'Within Reach' at the New Museum." Uploaded by New Museum, February 19, 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO063SHqggE>.