

Naima's Gift, Jordan Casteel (2023)

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Jordan Casteel, *Naima's Gift*, 2023. Oil on Canvas. 94 x 80 inches (238.76 cm x 203.2 cm)

Jordan Casteel's *Naima's Gift* (2023), is an oil painting that transforms an intimate family moment into an immersive experience through its monumental size and vibrant, textured composition. Depicting a close-knit family—Deon, Kym, and Noah—Casteel uses dynamic colors and intentional details to emphasize the beauty and strength of familial bonds. Drawing from her personal experiences of adapting to new communities, she likens nurturing relationships to tending a garden, emphasizing the need for time, devotion, and care. This theme aligns with the ideas explored in Bell Hooks' *All About Love*, where love is described as an intentional and active practice rooted in care and connection. Both Casteel's painting and Hooks' philosophy present love as a transformative force, highlighting its power to sustain and enrich both personal and communal relationships¹.

At the heart of the painting is the family: the father, dressed in a patterned shirt of warm reds and blue and gray hat, supports the child with steady hands, while the mother, dressed in a flowing white dress and a wide-brimmed straw hat, lovingly leans in to kiss him. The child, full of joy, clings to his parents with trust and energy, his green shark-patterned rain boots and playful overalls emphasizing his youth and grounding the scene in everyday life. What is truly captivating, however, is the intricate rendering of the family's skin tones. The father's complexion includes subtle notes of purples and blues, giving his skin a luminous, sculptural quality. The mother and child's skin glows with soft tones of browns and reds, radiating warmth and vitality. These details imbue the figures with a heightened realism, creating a sense of vitality and renewed energy.

This interplay of color and texture contrasts with the dreamlike garden in the background. Blossoms and trees in vibrant pink, red, and green shades create a lush, surreal atmosphere. A pink barn peeks out from the background, its whimsical presence enhancing the surreal, almost

¹ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

idyllic atmosphere. However, unlike the carefully rendered faces and clothes of the family, the garden is painted with large paint strokes. The flowers are hinted at rather than fully defined, their abstract shapes and vibrant hues contributing to a sense of vitality. This contrast draws the viewer's focus to the family, allowing the garden to simply serve as a symbolic frame of joy.

Jordan Casteel, born in 1989 in Denver, Colorado, is a New York-based artist known for her vibrant, deeply personal portraits of her community. During the pandemic, when she moved from Harlem to the Catskills, she worried about losing her sense of belonging. To stay connected, she started a WhatsApp group to find other people of color and rebuild the community in a new context—a testament to her longing for familiarity and connection. Her portraits, including *Naima's Gift*, go beyond commemoration; they form a living narrative shaped by the people and relationships she cherishes.

Casteel's process of creating *Naima's Gift* reflects her thematic focus on care and connection. She photographs her subjects in their personal spaces, capturing the nuances of their environments and relationships. These photographs serve as direct references for her paintings, where she thoughtfully combines elements to best convey her subjects' essence. In a conversation with Massimiliano Gioni, she explained, "Maybe it's my background in sociology and anthropology...but I had to learn to dissect layers of privilege and read the relationship between bodies and space...I wanted to contribute very humanized, vulnerable representations of the...Black bodies..."² It can be tempting to see the painting as simply a representation of Black lives, but it tells a deeper story of care and community within the Black experience. This sensitivity shines in *Naima's Gift*, where the garden visually supports the family, symbolizing how their care for the garden is reciprocated through its uplifting presence.

² 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. 23

The subject's direct gaze in *Naima's Gift* is another striking element. Her reasoning behind this is to foster a reciprocal relationship between the painting, the people represented, and the viewer.³ She also noted that activating the gaze ensures that the subject remains "protected" and "actively present" wherever the painting goes. This concept of presence is crucial because it positions the subject as an active, central figure rather than an object to be observed. It challenges traditional portraiture, which often objectifies subjects by rendering them passive or ornamental. By confronting the historical marginalization of Black bodies in art, Casteel redefines her subjects as agents of their narratives, asserting their dignity and humanity. The artwork is a reminder that the connections we nurture, much like gardens, thrive when cultivated with love and devotion. This theme resonates deeply with Jordan Casteel's values, who finds solace and purpose in art and gardening. To her, creating art feels like a call to prayer, much like tending to a garden, a process that requires her to act intuitively and decisively, battling the elements without overthinking.

Ultimately, *Naima's Gift* is both gentle and strong. Casteel's choice to show the subjects surrounded by nature changes how we see them. While the painting initially appears as a celebration of Black identity, understanding Casteel's life and emphasis on community reveals a deeper focus on the relationships that sustain and empower us. *Naima's Gift* makes us think about the importance of family bonds and community, offering powerful ideas about love, care, and shared moments.

³ Brian Tate and Jordan Casteel, "Reciprocating Gaze: Jordan Casteel in Conversation with Brian Tate," *Bomb Magazine*, April 29, 2020, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2020/04/29/reciprocating-gaze-jordan-casteel-interviewed/>.

Works Cited

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