

Jordan Casteel, *Glass Man Michael*

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Jordan Casteel, *Glass Man Michael*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 56 x 72". Courtesy of the Casey Kaplan Gallery.

Glass Man Michael by Jordan Casteel features vibrant oil paints on a large canvas, bringing the subject to life with striking color and texture. In this work, Casteel emphasizes the importance of celebrating community through her juxtaposition of vivid colors, intentional composition, and text.

Casteel's rendition of *Glass Man Michael* is characterized through its large scale, vibrant colors, and thoughtful composition. Upon first glance viewers are met with the sizable dimensions of the painting, making the intricate details easily visible and accessible. Casteel's painting depicts a man, Michael, sitting on a foldable chair on the sidewalk beside a table that has colorful glassware on and below it. Michael's stern expression and relaxed posture suggest to viewers that he carried himself with a sense of ease and pride when he was having his portrait taken by Casteel. Speckled with oranges, blues, pinks and greens, Casteel's color choices infuse the work with dynamic energy, making it feel both lively and realistic. The marriage of the large size of *Glass Man Michael*, its composition, and its colors further the overarching theme of community that Casteel is depicting in her painting.

Casteel (b. 1989) is an American figurative artist, who initially began her college journey as a sociology major before deciding to switch into studio arts. Her sociology-oriented mind has guided much of her artmaking practice.¹ In her work, Casteel draws from her own community and views her portraiture as an assertion of both her subject's identity and her own.² Casteel focuses on capturing the dignity, vulnerability, and humanity of her subjects. She cares deeply about honoring and bringing visibility to the people that she captures in her artwork, which can be clearly seen in *Glass Man Michael*.

Casteel is interested in focusing on how people perceive the people in her community,

¹ In conversation with Jordan Casteel.

² "Jordan Casteel," Studio Museum in Harlem Collection, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.studiomuseum.org/artists/jordan-casteel>.

using her work as a way for viewers to better understand the community as a whole. As such, her art celebrates this idea, offering a deeper, more personal insight into the lives and identities of those she portrays. When describing her fascination with portraiture Casteel notes that, “I can get out of my head and my assumptions about who I’m drawing or painting and really get into the nuance of what makes that person who they are. It could be the subtlety of the way they hold their hands, or it could be the environment that I capture them in.”³ This element of Casteel’s work is particularly articulated in *Glass Man Michael*, where Michael’s gaze is one of sincerity. Casteel’s portrait is a way for Michael to completely and accurately be portrayed to large audiences as her earnest depiction of him speaks to her depiction of her community as a whole. Similarly, Casteel furthers the idea that her work is larger than just painting to create a final product through indicating that, “to take somebody else’s image, you feel you become the holder of a piece of them,” and that the relationships that she is able to create through her art are ‘something bigger than just the painting itself.’⁴ Every aspect of *Glass Man Michael* has equal importance. Michael and the glassware next to him are on the same plane, they occupy similar amounts of space. The bright glassware displayed on the table beside Michael is eye-catching, yet does not take away from Michael’s presence in the painting. As much as individuals matter in a community, they are even more empowered when they are with the people that uplift them.

Casteel also includes “Harlem not for-sale fight back” in the background of her painting. Given Casteel’s reference-based method of creating portraits, this writing was likely on the wall behind Michael when she took her initial reference picture.⁵ This text is particularly intriguing as

³ Jordan Casteel, "Q&A with Jordan Casteel," Scholastic Art, Scholastic Art, last modified October 2019, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://art.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/100119/reimagining-color/interview-jordan-casteel.html?language=english>

⁴ Julia Felsenthal, "Jordan Casteel Is Making You Look," *Vogue*, February 27, 2018, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.vogue.com/article/jordan-casteel-art>.

⁵ In conversation with Jordan Casteel.

it is the only legible writing in the painting, and Casteel made the conscious effort to keep it in her portrait. Casteel's inclusion of the text likely serves as a criticism of the ongoing gentrification of Harlem, which Casteel speaks upon in an interview with *Bomb Magazine* through stating that, “the seeds and blossoming of gentrification in Harlem are literally written on the walls....Through the act of painting, I am able to slow viewers down enough to see the language and signals that are right in front of them.”⁶ The pairing of this text with Michael sitting beside his table of bright glassware notes how Harlem is not a community that needs to be changed, certainly not through uprooting existing stores, buildings, or groups of people.

Upon first glance, the importance of the glass in *Glass Man Michael* is not immediately apparent. Casteel's portrait initially seems to be a depiction of a man that was showcasing something that he is proud of, or something that he does regularly, which is selling glass. With further understanding and study, however, audiences come to realize that the glass represents so much more than just a quotidian hobby. There is so much going on in this piece that it is impossible to not find it visually interesting and stimulating; the longer that one looks at it, more and more details are uncovered. The artist's hope to candidly capture a community that she cares deeply about is incredibly clear through her intentional choices in the painting. Casteel wants viewers to understand the dynamic energy of Harlem's community and her portrayal of *Glass Man Michael* does this well.

Casteel's *Glass Man Michael* urges viewers to find the unity between all of the chaotic elements of the painting in order to fully understand the message that Casteel is trying to portray. Although all of the individual elements of Casteel's work carry significant weight it is when the work is viewed together that she is able to fully convey her message about the strength of

⁶ Cassie Packard, Jordan Casteel. "Reciprocating Gaze: Jordan Casteel Interviewed," *Bomb Magazine*, April 29, 2020, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2020/04/29/reciprocating-gaze-jordan-casteel-interviewed/>

community. Without all of the elements of the portrait, the painting loses essential information and, with it, much of its meaning. *Glass Man Michael* emphasizes how understanding one part of a community can serve as a gateway to understanding the community as a whole.

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