

Jordan Casteel, *Harlem Public*, 2021

Amelie Dejean



Jordan Casteel, *Harlem Public*, 2021. Oil on canvas, Collection of Ralph Segreti & Richard Follows

Harlem Public by Jordan Casteel is a large-scale oil painting of the restaurant Harlem Public located on 149th Street in Harlem, New York. The piece was painted in 2021, a time in which the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic were deeply impacting the Harlem community. Through her meticulous attention to detail and vibrant use of color, Casteel captures the essence of the iconic Harlem Public, evoking a sense of familiarity, comfort, and reassurance. In a period marked by uncertainty and hardship, the painting offers a poignant reflection of community, resilience, and continuity.

Jordan Casteel was born and raised in Denver, Colorado. She earned a degree in painting from Agnes Scott College in Georgia before pursuing her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) at Yale University's Graduate School of Art. In 2014, Casteel was offered a solo exhibition in New York, a pivotal moment in her early career. Shortly thereafter, she was awarded a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, an experience that deepened her connection to the neighborhood and its community. It was during this time that she began to feel a sense of belonging in New York.¹

Harlem is a space that is extremely important to Casteel; in an interview with MoMA she mentioned that, "You cannot ignore the street and the people here."² Additionally, Harlem was a neighborhood that was disproportionately impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and given that being a part of Harlem's community is extremely important to Casteel's identity, an artist painting a space that was well-loved by the community and could represent the hardships that were faced can be seen as a way to remind others what Harlem was going through and how they overcame it.

¹ Gay, Roxane, "Where Jordan Casteel Sees Herself Going," *The Cut*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.thecut.com/article/jordan-casteel-profile.html>.

² Chloe Wayne, "Jordan Casteel," *Medium*, April 14, 2016, <https://nyc.moma.org/jordan-casteel-ab8c0fd26d9d>.

Harlem Public immediately catches the eye with its enormous and lifelike scale, inviting the viewer into the painting as if they were walking past the actual restaurant during a stroll through Harlem. The warm colors of *Harlem Public*, both in the painting and the real location—oranges, reds, and yellows—evoke a sense of comfort. Orange, a color associated with energy and optimism, in particular, dominates the canvas. Given that *Harlem Public* was painted during the height of the pandemic in 2021, when optimism was at a low point and uncertainty loomed large, the vibrancy of Casteel's portrayal of the restaurant offers a striking contrast to the bleakness of the moment. Additionally, Casteel describes this painting as a time capsule, capturing both the essence of the pandemic and her personal experiences during that time period. During the New York City lockdown, Harlem Public, a restaurant near her apartment, became a place she would pass on walks and occasionally stop in to eat, which ultimately inspired her to create this painting.³ It seems that she wanted to capture a moment that was important and impactful to not only her but her community as well.

Harlem Public appears as a well-decorated space, its surfaces adorned in signage that was common in the COVID-19 era. Multiple signs are placed sporadically on the restaurant stating that masks are required, as well as large, colorful signs thanking New Yorkers and first responders. On the window above the door, a poster of Breonna Taylor stands out with a vibrant background, juxtaposed with a faded image of George Floyd, partially obscured by the window's reflection. These posters speak to the surge of support for the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. In the upper right side of the window, the logo for At The Wallace, a bar located in the same building as Harlem Public, can be seen. The man within the logo is wearing a mask that

³ In conversation with Casteel.

says "Fuck 2020," reflecting the overall frustration felt by many during the pandemic. The pandemic was an extremely unique point in time, and Casteel was able to simultaneously represent many of the issues her community faced while displaying the iconic Harlem Public as a space of hope and optimism for many.

Upon first glance of *Harlem Public*, it can be difficult to believe that Casteel considers it a portrait and not a landscape. But, through understanding Casteel as an artist and looking closely at the art, it becomes clear that it is a portrait of place and time. Ultimately, because of Casteel's ability to paint *Harlem Public* accurately and with such beauty, she is able to retell a community's story in a way that is similar to the stories told in portraits of people. By painting a well-loved and known place in Harlem, Casteel portrays the experiences of many during the COVID-19 pandemic while also providing a sense of hope and warmth to her community.

Works Cited

Gay, Roxane. "Where Jordan Casteel Sees Herself Going." *The Cut*, February 16, 2022.

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