

Jordan Casteel, *Magnolia* (2022)

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Jordan Casteel, *Magnolia*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 78 x 60 inches

Magnolia (2022) is an oil painting by artist Jordan Casteel, an American portrait artist known for her vibrant and intimate portraits of family, friends, and environments that shape her personal life and artistic practice. In a departure from her human-centric work, *Magnolia*—created in the Catskills of upstate New York, where Casteel relocated during the pandemic—focuses on a magnolia tree in bloom. The painting marks a significant evolution in Casteel’s practice, serving as a testament to the artist’s evolving efforts to capture beauty, resilience, and personal growth during a moment of global uncertainty. Through this shift in subject matter, Casteel captures the profound connection between her new surroundings and her art, illustrating how the environment can embody hope and renewal during challenging times.

Magnolia is a large, vertical painting, and this choice of scale enhances the way the subject is presented, emphasizing the presence and beauty of the magnolia tree in full bloom. Casteel does not just paint magnolia flowers; she carefully captures individual petals that dominate the canvas, serving as a focal point for viewers. The placement of the flowers and petals appears organic, as if they were plucked straight from reality, reflecting Casteel’s use of the environment as her reference. She employs a variety of visible brushstrokes in shades of pink, white, and gray, playing with saturation and intensity to bring depth and texture. In engaging with the painting, one might notice the tree that stands at the base reaches into every corner of the painting. After an extended observation, it soon becomes easier to notice the individual petals that decorate the ground, the texture of the tree, and the presence of the magnolia in the foreground, background, and middle ground. Beyond the canvas, magnolias are often symbols of resilience and endurance and during such a difficult time, both for the world and for Casteel herself. Her use of the flowers, therefore, can be interpreted as finding beauty in a difficult space, or perhaps even symbolizing the strength found in vulnerability.

Jordan Casteel, a 35-year-old American artist, is renowned for her vibrant portraits that explore a diverse range of subjects—from men (“Visible Men” series, 2014) to the subway (Subway series, 2017). Influenced by artists like Kerry James Marshall and Alice Neel¹, Casteel's work conveys intimacy and social depth, with the artist seeking to capture the essence of figures often overlooked or underrepresented in the media, portraying them in intimate, domestic, urban, and even botanical settings. Through her use of bold colors, expressive detail, and composition, she brings attention to the humanity and complexity of her subjects, offering a fresh perspective on everyday lives and environments.

Through blooming flowers, this piece serves as a personal reflection of Casteel, conveying a desire for growth even in challenging times. The work explores major ideas of resilience, renewal, and transience—themes that resonated with both her personal experience during the pandemic and the broader cultural context of change and uncertainty. Casteel remarks that, “when I first moved to the Catskills, I was very anxious that I would not be able to find a community similar to the one I was deeply a part of in Harlem.”² However, by reaching out and engaging with her new surroundings, she was able to create a large network of people of color in her neighborhood, allowing her to feel a sense of intimacy with the area as she had come to love in Harlem. As she reflected, “whether I'm painting a figure or not, I am always representing the spaces in which people live.”³ As such, by focusing on a tree in bloom, Casteel symbolically captures the idea of growth and survival amid challenging times by using the magnolia, known for its fleeting beauty, to underscore the transitory nature of life and emphasize the importance of cherishing moments that are beautiful yet impermanent.

¹ Rebecca Hart, et al. *Jordan Casteel: Returning the Gaze*, Denver, Denver Museum of Art, 2019, pp.

² In interview with Jordan Casteel, November 11, 2024

³ Ibid.

Initially, viewing *Magnolia* as a portrait seemed far-fetched, given the conventional understanding that art typically adheres to established definitions and purposes. Portraits are often associated with representations of human figures, capturing likenesses and conveying personal identity. However, good art doesn't have to strictly conform to these conventions, and bad art does not simply disregard them—but these definitions do play a significant role. Casteel's body of work, particularly showcased at the Hill Art Foundation, reshapes that notion. Her traditional portraits of Black men and families evoke a sense of reality. These are not fictional characters painted on a whim; they are people who interact with their environment, looking directly at the viewer, almost demanding recognition and acknowledgment. Ultimately, Casteel's decision to portray these figures and scenes teaches that art can be a medium of empathy, capturing the nuances of the human experience. As she says, "It's possible I'm being too romantic about it all, but I think my job as an artist is simply to make works that reflect the time in which I live."⁴ Observing her subjects in such authentic, vulnerable forms speaks volumes about their humanity and Casteel's commitment to honoring that.

In *Magnolia*, Casteel continues this ethos by expanding the definition of portraiture to include nature and space as reflections of personal and communal identity. Capturing beauty, resilience, and quiet growth amid a period of global uncertainty, this shift to landscape portraiture marks a departure from her typical human-focused subjects, illustrating her response to new surroundings and a period of introspection during the pandemic. Choosing to paint a magnolia tree is an acknowledgment of the difficulties faced during this time, a decision to confront the pervasive fear and instability without romanticizing it.

⁴ Amanda Fortini, "Is There Something Radical About Painting Flowers?" The New York Times, February 28, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/28/t-magazine/flower-portraits-paintings.html>.

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