

Nasturtium: A Reflection of Self

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Jordan Casteel, *Nasturtium*. Oil on canvas, 72 x 56 inches, 2021

Jordan Casteel's *Nasturtium* (2021) is a painting of her garden from her home in upstate New York that contains many unique artistic choices. One of the most notable elements of her painting is the way some of the plants are left in the purple underpainting, a deliberate decision that is central to the piece's meaning. This choice is not incidental, as Casteel is known for making unique choices in her painting that make it more personal to her and her views. In *Nasturtium*, the use of underpainting invites viewers into Casteel's inner world, acting as a means to reflect and show Casteel's feelings during a time where she experimented with new subject matter, challenging preconceived notions of her art. Through this piece, Casteel opens up new possibilities for expanding her work and possibly changing the set opinions on her pieces.

In the time of the creation of *Nasturtium*, Casteel relocated upstate due to COVID-19, physically distancing the artist from Harlem, a community that inspired many of her early pieces. This shift led Casteel to wonder what she would paint now in this new community. As she settled into life in the Hudson Valley, she began gardening, an activity she grew to deeply enjoy. Eventually her husband suggested she should paint her garden, but Casteel dismissed the idea, saying, "Nope. Couldn't do that. Nobody cares about my garden."¹ Her initial rejection of the idea was likely influenced by Casteel's early fame for creating portraits of Black men and the communities around her—which also reflected her anthropological background—a body of work that garnered her significant attention. Given the success and recognition of her previous work, she may have felt that painting a garden, an intimate and personal subject, would not align with the public expectations formed around her work. However, over time, Casteel began to reconsider her husband's advice, reflecting on her own artistic philosophy that, "portrait painting is an opportunity for me to slow down and really investigate and engage with the person and

¹Amanda 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>.

their environment.”² Ultimately, she immortalized her garden to canvas, and it was through this portrait of her garden, rather than a person, that she was granted an opportunity for her to try out something new and more personal. By painting flowers, she was able to step outside the box of the public expectations that had formed around her, refusing to be pigeonholed as an artist solely defined by her portraits of Black men. In the end, this shift in focus allowed Casteel to refine her belief that paintings are not only representations of others but also reflections of the self, with *Nasturtium* becoming a chance for Casteel to truly be seen as a reflection of herself.

At first glance, *Nasturtium* may appear to be a simple garden, with vibrant bursts of purple throughout the composition. However, it is important to note that this purple is not a final layer of paint, but rather the visible underpainting of the piece. This exposure of the underpainting is a deliberate and thoughtful choice by Casteel, revealing a layer typically concealed in an artist’s final work. As the purple appears throughout the painting, from the plants to the fence, the color not only draws attention to Casteel’s process but also suggests a deeper intention behind their prominence. The color purple can be interpreted as a representation of Casteel herself, as it stands out in stark contrast to the surrounding natural colors of the foliage, evoking a sense of foreignness or displacement—something reflected in Casteel’s personal life with her relocation to the Hudson Valley. By allowing the purple to stand so boldly, she communicates a sense of "newness" in her life, reflecting her experiences and emotions in the moment. Moreover, this choice—purple amongst natural shades of green, red, and yellow foliage—signals a new direction in her artistic practice, where the visible underpainting becomes a metaphor for her evolving self-expression. Ultimately, it is these subtle details that viewers

² “Interview: Jordan Casteel.” Scholastic, accessed November 16, 2024. <https://art.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/100119/reimagining-color/interview-jordan-casteel.html>.

come to notice and admire the rest of the painting. From this, it can easily be said that color, to Casteel, plays a major role in painting and as a representation of self.

Casteel herself has noted *Nasturtium* is her most honest piece; a reflection of her self-identity filtered through the lens of her garden. Thus, the garden serves as a metaphor for the artist's experience in a new environment, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, *Nasturtium* becomes a visual exploration of Casteel's journey into a new environment, a testament to her efforts to “determine how her practice would work, ‘being so far from people [she knew], and so far from a familiar landscape,’”³ and the purple represents her efforts to find her place in this new “world.”

In all, *Nasturtium* offers a profound insight into how Casteel perceives her world, acting as a window into her experience as a newcomer to the Hudson Valley. Yet, the piece is more than just a representation of the self; it marks a departure from her earlier artistic expressions, embracing a more intimate, personal narrative. The narrative signifies Casteel's desire to create a different kind of viewing experience—one that subverts expectations and prioritizes her own artistic joy. By inviting viewers into this new space, she opens the door to a deeper introspection, ushering in a new era in which her paintings speak to the viewer as if to say this is her. Ultimately, *Nasturtium* becomes a painting where viewers can pause and reflect on Casteel's world—evolving and multifaceted in nature—and see her new world through her beloved garden, seeing what she sees.

³ Fortini

Work Cited

Amanda Fortini, "Is There Something Radical About Painting Flowers?" N.d.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/28/t-magazine/flower-portraits-paintings.html>.

"Interview: Jordan Casteel." Scholastic Art. Accessed November 16, 2024.

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