

Peak Summer (2024), Jordan Casteel

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Jordan Casteel, *Peak Summer*, 2024. Oil on Canvas, 50 x 40 (127 x 101.6)

Jordan Casteel's *Peak Summer* (2024) is an exploration of Casteel's personal journey toward self-discovery and inner peace amidst significant change. An oil on canvas work, this piece, with flowers and bright colors, has been used as a metaphorical canvas for a new beginning in Casteel's life. Through a rich visual language of bright florals, intimate depictions of everyday moments, and vibrant colors Casteel encapsulates her journey of adaptation to a fresh setting and environment, signaling her transition into this exciting new chapter.

Jordan Casteel, an American artist born in 1989, is known for her complex ways of portraying themes meaningful to her such as marginalized groups in vibrant, intimate settings. In 2024, she created *Peak Summer* during a time of personal exploration, having stepped away from her familiar Harlem neighborhood to reflect on her identity and well-being.¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jordan Casteel decided to move from her familiar Harlem neighborhood to the more tranquil setting of the Hudson Valley, seeking refuge from the overcrowded city and an opportunity for personal exploration.² This change in environment allowed her to reflect on her identity and well-being, leading her to create *Peak Summer*, a work that encapsulates the essence of her emotional journey and connection to nature. This transition from the city to upstate, an entirely new foreign environment, caused her to find herself and create distance from the over-congested city, and return to nature to where she felt most comfortable.

Upon gazing at the artwork, one is immediately struck by the overwhelming vibrancy of the colors, particularly the rich oranges and greens of the plants, which infuse the piece with a sense of renewal, growth, and possibility. But, as the viewer moves deeper into the composition, the realistic, rough textures and lines of the plants become apparent. These textured strokes are not smooth but showcase the artist's hand moving across the canvas, creating thick applications

¹ In conversation with Jordan Casteel, November 11, 2024

² Ibid.

of paint that provide a real feeling for the plants shown. For instance, the edges of the leaves are almost roughly done, with paint layered in varying thicknesses and directions, adding to their natural intricacy. The purple, red, and yellow flowers stand out in stark contrast to the green foliage, making them the main focus of the painting. All together, the colors create a framing that draws the viewer's attention, making the plants the main focus of the painting and creating a sense that the flowers themselves are symbols of energy and change. In consideration of the larger painting, the smooth texture of the flowers contrast with the roughness of the brushwork on the leaves, bringing out the flowers' delicate nature.

Casteel's deliberate use of contrasting colors communicates her message with clarity. The vibrant red symbolizes affection and vitality, while the bright yellow radiates joy and light. Together with the calming purple and lush green, these colors create an overall sense of warmth, intricately intertwining to produce a powerful emotional atmosphere that enhances the painting's overall narrative. Moreover, the combination of colors in the plants also underscores the importance of embracing individuality rather than conforming to one's surroundings. The boldness of these colors stands out against the garden's serene backdrop, signaling that authenticity flourishes when celebrated. Ultimately, through this vibrant contrast Casteel emphasizes that one need not fully assimilate to flourish. Instead, individuality can be celebrated, and growth can occur within one's authentic self. *Peak Summer* serves as both a personal reflection of her journey and a powerful reminder of the beauty found in diversity and self-acceptance. The orange tones of the flowers, set against a deep green background, balance energy with peace. The lushness of the plants, combined with dynamic brushstrokes, evokes the fullness and heat of summer, symbolizing life, growth, and renewal in all its forms.

Major themes of self-discovery, inner peace, and adaptation to a new environment resonate deeply with Jordan Casteel's quote, "The richness of life is in its quiet, uncelebrated moments."³ In *Peak Summer*, these ideas come to life through Casteel's portrayal of community warmth and her personal search for tranquility. Relocating to the Hudson Valley prompted her to reflect on her identity, approaching it as a fresh canvas where her surroundings could serve as tools for personal transformation. As such, her garden becomes a poignant symbol of this journey, offering a space where she could express herself amidst a new environment. The vibrant warm colors she employs reflect the comfort she finds in nature and emphasize the intimate moments of connection that define her experience. This intense color choice not only conveys optimism and newfound strength but also highlights her ability to weave her rich sense of self into her surroundings. Ultimately, Casteel conveys a profound sense of hope, suggesting that she has successfully melded her passion for painting with the serene beauty of nature, nourishing her spirit in a new setting. In doing so, she embodies the essence of recognizing and celebrating those "quiet, uncelebrated moments"⁴ that enriches life, highlighting the transformative power of her journey.

At first glance, *Peak Summer* might seem like a straightforward portrait of a garden, celebrating the beauty of nature. However, considering the context of Casteel's personal journey during its creation unveils a deeper, self-reflective dimension. The bright flowers symbolize her evolving identity, while her deliberate color choices evoke emotion and emphasize the narrative power of art as a medium for storytelling. In all, *Peak Summer* is more than a vivid portrayal of nature—it is a powerful reflection of the artist's journey of self-discovery and growth. Through her use of warm, contrasting colors and intricate textures, she invites viewers to witness her

³ Jordan Casteel, *Jordan Casteel Stays in the Moment* | *Art21, New York Close Up*, directed by Vicky Du (2017; New York City: Bomb Magazine, Youtube, 2017), video.

⁴ Ibid.

transition into a new chapter of life, one where she reconnects with herself in an unfamiliar, yet comforting environment. This piece ultimately leaves us with a deeper appreciation for how art serves as a medium for transformation and self-exploration, inviting us to reflect on our own identities and environments as sources of strength and peace.

Works Cited

Casteel, Jordan. Jordan Casteel Paints Her Community | Art21 'New York Close Up. Directed by Vicky Du. 2017; New York City: Art21, 2017. Video.

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