

Jordan Casteel, *Traveling Mercies* (2019)

Mei Agardwal



Jordan Casteel, *Traveling Mercies*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 78 x 60 inches

In Jordan Casteel's 2019 work *Traveling Mercies*, the artist deliberately isolates the viewer through the way the work is displayed, its color, and its composition. This makes the viewer into a figure unable to interact with the subjects; the viewer is only able to watch, spectate, and protect them in a moment of vulnerability.

The first thing that stands out about *Traveling Mercies* is the staggering, almost larger than life scale of the work, a quality echoed in much of her work. Its scale makes the subjects appear as if they are really there, and the experience of observing the painting is akin to watching a group of strangers from across the room. The painting is placed into an open and exposed place, making the subjects and the painting itself feel vulnerable. Each subject is left vulnerable and unaware, either with their eyes closed or turned away from the viewer, rendering them unaware of their audience and unable to protect themselves. The intense stare of a figure that is so iconic in many Casteel paintings is notably absent here, allowing the viewer to approach the scene more intimately. Without the barrier of the unflinching gaze, the viewer is allowed to come closer and engage more deeply with the vulnerable subjects and their environment.

Jordan Casteel is a 35 year old artist previously based in Harlem, who currently lives and works in the Catskills in upstate New York. She is a referential artist who most often works from photographs of her community. The photos she works from often have the subjects staring directly at the camera, at the viewer. However, *Travelling Mercies* and her 2020 work *Bounty* are the only two pieces that stray from this general trend. The subjects of her two paintings were unknowingly photographed because they were particularly striking to her. Specifically, Casteel was drawn to the subjects of *Traveling Mercies* as she felt a personal connection to the twins, being one herself.

Within the painting Casteel uses similar colors to convey a fraternal relationship in the composition. When painting, Casteel “may include surroundings that amplify personality or relationships; other times she limits the palette or reduces the complexity of an environment to allow the most salient characteristics to emerge.”<sup>1</sup> This approach is reflected in Casteel’s use of underpainting in *Traveling Mercies*. She keeps less important areas, such as the lining of the subway seats, unrendered, letting the pale green underpainting peek through behind layers of vibrant colors. The painting, although largely limited to a neutral color palette, has a few bright pops of red and blue in the woman’s hair wrap and the twins’ red jackets. These two colors are in tension with each other—the blueish-green contrasts the fiery orangish red. This makes both colors individually appear to be more striking, which draws the viewer’s eyes towards them. Additionally, the red of the jackets shows a similarity and kinship between the two brothers, which serves to emphasize their humanity. When looking at the painting, the brothers can become one mass, the red of their jackets blending together, the start of one brother and the end of the other, from afar, indistinguishable. The colors that unite the twins also isolate us from them, excluded from the mass that they become. The modular nature of the colors, with each bright one in a distinct section of the canvas, taken with the gaze of each subject, turned away from the viewer, gives the impression that the viewer is not invited in: the audience exists solely to watch, to be a pair of eyes kept on the painting, as the subjects themselves are unaware of the world around them. The emphasis on the humanity and vulnerability of the subjects that calls the viewer’s attention serves to protect the painting.

On a less visual level, the title of *Traveling Mercies* conveys Casteel’s desire for protection over the subjects. The phrase, typically used as a blessing for safety on one’s journey

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, pp. 65

suggests that the subjects need to be safeguarded in some way. Casteel wishes to maintain the tranquility of the moment, and not have the vulnerable state of the subjects not leveraged against them. Within the gallery space, the viewers serve as the guards of the painting, watching over and ensuring nothing threatens it.

Within the exhibition, *Traveling Mercies* stands out as it is one of the few pieces depicting children. Children are particularly vulnerable as they are dependent on others, and so their inclusion serves the project of the piece as their presence asks the viewer for protection. Casteel is quoted as saying, “I think a lot of this has to do with historical painting and the notion of who has the right to depict what bodies at what scale... I was really interested in humanizing a history that is often criminalized and sexualized.”<sup>2</sup> Viewers look at subjects who cannot stare back at them, who cannot protect themselves—both because they are children and because they are unaware of their surroundings. As such, the painting simultaneously calls for empathy and care from its viewers, and distance from the subjects who are looking away from us. We are held at an arm's length, as far as the painting will allow us to get, and asked to merely watch. We cannot get any closer to the subjects for that would disrupt the quietness of the moment; at the same time, the scale painting demands us to keep looking, so as to not leave the subjects and the painting itself unguarded, unprotected.

*Traveling Mercies* is so captivating because, in contrast to adjacent works, the subjects were looking away, captured unknowingly and immortalized on the canvas as forever unaware of the viewer. This is a departure from many of Casteel's other works, which feature the subjects staring right at the viewer with intense, piercing eye contact. Instead, it is the quietness and the vulnerability of the painting that has an effect on the viewer. It serves almost as a pause in the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

gallery, a moment that calls for attention, not to engage, but to observe from the distance: to watch over.

Within *Traveling Mercies*, Casteel utilizes color, composition, texture, and framing within the gallery to both hold the viewer at an arm's length, keep them from prying in a vulnerable moment, while simultaneously calling on them to observe. The painting is a quiet reflection, a wish of protection for the subjects from the viewers, and an unobtrusive departure from the format of many other Casteel works.

*Works Cited*

Hart, Rebecca R. "The Glance and the Gaze" *Jordan Casteel: Returning the Gaze*, Denver Art Museum, 2019,