

Jordan Casteel, *Harold* (2017)
Lucas Valentin



Jordan Casteel, *Harold*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 78 x 60 inches (198.1 × 152.4 cm).

In *Harold* (2017), artist Jordan Casteel combines strong colors, a calm composition, and strong eye contact to create a powerful contrast between the sitter's humanity and harmful stereotypes often associated with Black men. Through this depiction, Casteel challenges reductive stereotypes, allowing the subject, Harold, to be depicted in a space of care and thoughtfulness, unlike the historical labels placed upon Black men.

From Denver, Colorado, Jordan Casteel is a New York-based artist whose work spans from depictions of people and places in Harlem to the nature around her home in the Hudson Valley. Throughout her career, Casteel has explored ideas of gender and race, specifically addressing and combating harmful prejudices. Her paintings both spotlight and celebrate marginalized individuals, defying imposed stereotypes. By bringing these figures into the foreground, Casteel provides her subjects with the opportunity to see themselves in a manner of pride and honor.

Harold is a large piece, with vibrant shades of red, yellow, and orange radiating from an out-of-view streetlight and the laundromat in the background. It is set at night, which is made clear by the sharp contrast between light and shadows. Harold is the central figure of this piece and is depicted with an array of textures and colors. His figure stands out against the more simple laundromat background, as his clothing uses the darkest colors in the piece. The bricks on the left also subtly guide the viewer's eye toward Harold, their angled lines leading directly to him. Harold sits on a cool blue chair, with a relaxed posture. His face has cool, purple undertones, contrasting his jacket's warm colors. Casteel combines her use of varying brush lengths, color, and light to create complex textures throughout the piece. His chair, with its smooth surface, is captured through longer, fluid brushstrokes as well as a reflection, which shows the smoothness

of the material. The bricks are painted with shorter brush strokes, which demonstrate a rough texture, and are dark in between, which shows the grooves and spaces between the bricks.

Casteel establishes the meaning behind this painting in two major aspects: eye contact and color. The cool tones on Harold's face, combined with his relaxed facial expression, create a serene and tranquil depiction of the subject. This tranquility, however, is not limited to Harold alone; it extends to the background and setting as well. Through the artist's choice to depict the painting at night—a time that is typically associated with feelings of peacefulness, Casteel arouses feelings of calmness and serenity. On discussion of eye contact, the choice to maintain such bold eye contact with the viewer in *Harold* is stylistically distinct within Casteel's broader body of work. When discussing the use of eye contact in her pieces, Casteel expresses that her job in these paintings is to ensure that her subjects are represented and to foster a connection of empathy between the viewer and the subject. The gaze, in this context, is a key element of this representation, as it helps establish the relationship between the two.¹ In consideration of *Harold*, Harold's strong gaze creates an immediate and intimate connection with the viewer. Casteel positions the painting in such a way that the subject's eyes are on the same level as the viewers, inviting them into a shared space. As the audience engages with the painting, they are drawn into Harold's intense, direct eye contact, fostering a sense of intimacy and strengthening the bond between the subject and viewer, ultimately deepening the focus on Harold. The closeness Casteel portrays allows for a face-to-face, personal moment with Harold, inviting the viewer to see him not as a stereotype but as a fully realized individual. This representation challenges the harmful

¹Cassie Packard, Jordan Casteel. "Reciprocating Gaze: Jordan Casteel Interviewed," *Bomb Magazine*, April 29, 2020, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2020/04/29/reciprocating-gaze-jordan-casteel-interviewed/>

and false labels often placed on Black men by society, offering a view of him that is true and honest.

At first glance, one might see *Harold* simply as a portrait, but upon closer engagement and reflection, the depth of meaning and intentionality in every aspect of the painting becomes evident. *Harold* is part of Jordan Casteel's larger collection titled *Nights in Harlem*, in which she captured photographs of Harlem's residents at night, posed in their natural surroundings. This project reflected Casteel's desire to move beyond stereotypes and offer true, nuanced representations of Black men. By focusing on the people of Harlem in intimate, everyday moments—both in the series and *Harold* specifically—Casteel challenges the often reductive portrayals of Black men in the media and provides a more authentic, humanizing view of their lives. Each choice in *Harold*—from the gaze to the color palette—reflects this commitment to presenting subjects as fully realized individuals, free from the harmful labels imposed by society.

Works Cited

"Jordan Casteel." Studio Museum in Harlem Collection. Accessed November 18, 2024.
<https://www.studiomuseum.org/artists/jordan-casteel>.

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