

CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001
TEL +1 212 645 7335
FAX +1 212 645 7835
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Jordan Casteel

The Practice of Freedom

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Jordan Casteel's second exhibition at the gallery, entitled "The Practice of Freedom," presents eight new portrait paintings of her Rutgers University - Newark students.

Casteel draws the exhibition's title from professor, author, and activist bell hooks' 1994 book "Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom", which explores the benefits of a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student within an age of multiculturalism. Applying hooks' ethos to her classroom, where Casteel teaches undergraduate painting, the artist imparts a holistic approach to her students' artistic practices — one that strives not for perfection through knowledge, but for a mutual interest that promotes criticality and self-empowerment.

In the spirit of hooks' teachings, Casteel's latest body of work brings the identities of a group of young students of color into focus. Casteel began this project by asking her students to choose the setting in which they are portrayed. These environments have shifted from instinctively depicting subjects on the streets of Harlem to a return to familiarity, as seen in paintings from 2014 to 2016, in which Casteel's sitters were often known to her. Largely interior domestic scenes, home-life and familial expressions of affection and closeness are pictured. Arranging their lives into a tableau of artifacts, Casteel positions her students in a manner similar to 1800s Victorian portraits. Intimate portrayals of *Noelle* and *Cansuela*, seen at home in their bedrooms, neighbor the multiple family generations that merge into one in *Medinilla*, *Wanda* and *Annelise*. *Jorge* proudly displays his Honduran ancestry while *Amoakohene* and his mother, *Serwaa*, are pictured in their Newark, NJ living room against the backdrop of a hanging portrait Amoakohene painted of his mother. Defined by gestural brushwork, bold swathes of color and detailed patterning, their bodies blend into the couch's floral motif. It is through these elements that Casteel distinguishes personal narrative and lays the foundation for viewers to establish connection through our shared histories and backgrounds.

Existing outside of the exhibition's larger framework are two smaller-sized "subway" or "crop" paintings that hang in an adjacent gallery. Sourced from candid photographs taken on the NYC subway, Casteel captures a moment in time beyond context or backstory. Lacking eye contact, the substance of these paintings is the details; the focus a plastic bag from Target wrapped around the wrist of a fur coated woman passing the time on her smartphone.

"The Practice of Freedom" marks a shift towards a mutually inclusive power dynamic. hooks writes, "When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process." Holding this language close, Casteel seeks to unite her teachings imparted in the classroom with a tangible practice. Deconstructing assumptions of engagement, the artist demonstrates the power of collaboration by instilling her students with the agency to think critically and authentically. Casteel's work comes into scrutiny unlike ever before, for both the painter's and sitters' vulnerabilities are at stake — the playing field further leveled.

Jordan Casteel (b. 1989, Denver, CO) received her BA from Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA for Studio Art (2011) and her MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT (2014). In 2019, Casteel presented a solo exhibition at the Denver Art Museum, CO. The exhibition then travelled to the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, where it is currently on view. In recent years, she has participated in exhibitions at institutional venues such as Baltimore Museum of Art (2019); Aishti Foundation, Beirut (2019); Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA (2019); Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR (2018); MoCA, Los Angeles, CA (2018); Harvey B. Gantt Center, Charlotte, NC (2017); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY (2017 and 2016); and MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA (2017). She is an Assistant Professor of Painting in the Department of Arts, Culture, and Media at Rutgers University - Newark. She lives and works in New York, NY.