

BROOKLYN RAIL

Gerald Jackson



Gerald Jackson, *Untitled*, ca. early 2000s. Found objects, glue, 18 x 6 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches. Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, New York.

Gerald Jackson's elusive persona—he is known by many yet notoriously difficult to track down—is reflected in his multidisciplinary art practice, which evades easy categorization.

In 2002, Jackson was evicted from the cherished Bowery loft he had inhabited since the early 1970s, and he moved to New Jersey. Since then, his career has gone under the radar, undoubtedly informed by his forced displacement, but he has recently re-emerged onto the New York art scene. This year alone, his work has been presented at Wilmer Jennings Gallery at Kenkeleba House, White Columns, and the Independent Art Fair (as part of Gordon Robichaux's booth). Now Jackson steps back to center stage with the exhibition currently on view at Gordon Robichaux, the first full-scale presentation of his work mounted since the gallery began to represent him not long ago.

Originally from Chicago, Jackson's youth as a mixed-race man was marked by hostile encounters and the looming threat of violence. Several times in his oral history interview with Stanley Whitney, published by BOMB Magazine, the artist mentions constantly feeling that people were after him, from neighbors to the police. "I had to carry a gun to school," Jackson recalls. After briefly serving in the army—

mainly to get out of Chicago—Jackson moved to New York City in 1963. He spent the majority of his New York tenure in the aforementioned loft on Bowery, making work across various media, including painting, drawing, collage, and textile.

Deeply immersed in the New York art scene of the time, Jackson socialized with artists such as David Hammons, Keith Haring, and McArthur Binion, as well as musician Ornette Coleman, who had been his roommate at one point. In 1983, Lorraine O'Grady included Jackson in her legendary *The Black and White Show* at Kenkeleba Gallery in the East Village. Thinking of the exhibition as a conceptual piece in its own right, O'Grady invited 14 Black artists and 14 white artists to contribute artworks executed in black and white only. Jackson offered a large painting on canvas titled *The Card Players* from the mid-1970s, which reveals a visual dialogue with Haring. While it received little press at the time, *The Black and White Show* is now

Ksenia Soboleva, "Gerald Jackson." *The Brooklyn Rail* (January 21, 2022), accessed online.

remembered as a watershed moment in addressing the segregation of the art world, and Jackson's participation is notable.

Spanning the last two decades of the artist's career, the works currently on view at Gordon Robichaux exemplify the breadth of Jackson's practice. The walls are adorned with a series of abstract paintings and drawings, often executed on found panels and materials discarded by others. The gallerist Jacob Robichaux recalls Jackson once telling him that the material conditions of his work reflect the material conditions of his existence, a subtle yet poignant commentary on how people of color are treated in this country. An untitled piece from 2014 consists of photocopied enlargements of a black-and-white optical pattern, pasted together into a large square and used as a surface onto which Jackson then painted an abstract composition. Two rectangular shapes hover horizontally across each other, the top one blue and the bottom one green, filling almost the entire surface except for a horizontal line in the middle that divides them. The paint is applied so thinly that the black-and-white pattern underneath the blue and green remains distinctly visible, and four thin vertical lines in chalk pastel run over the paint, two on each rectangle. This vibrant juxtaposition of blue and green has become a recurring motif, particularly in Jackson's most recent paintings. As a child of the 1990s, I cannot help but associate it with the Microsoft Windows XP background depicting a sunny landscape. To Jackson, however, blue and green are the two colors that most successfully move beyond race, and tap into a universal realm of human spirituality. Like that of the painting described above, the compositions tend to be broken up in two sections, reminiscent of Mark Rothko, and occasionally feature those thin vertical lines akin to Barnett Newman's zips. This is not to suggest that Jackson is in any way derivative, but rather to highlight his conscious engagement with the history of abstraction.

The exhibition also features various figurative drawings, most of which superimpose pastels, markers, and watercolors over photocopied imagery drawn from Egyptian art. A page from what appears to be an exhibition catalogue depicts a photocopied portrait of an ancient Egyptian queen (likely Nefertiti, though I am no Egyptologist), which Jackson has enlivened using chalk pastel, coloring the face yellow, the lips red, and accentuating the eyebrows and eyeliner with black. The artist has long been fascinated by the Egyptians for their skill in simplifying figures to symbols, something he strives to do in his work as well. The importance of Egyptian art is also palpable in a series of sculptures from the early 2000s, through which Jackson aims to evoke the obelisk by stacking found objects ranging from compact discs, figurines, plates, and vases. In one such work, a miniature of Michelangelo's *David*, painted blue by Jackson, rests on top of a stack of rocks. He is holding a glow-in-the-dark star under his arm (the ones you often find on the ceiling of children's rooms), while an object meant to resemble an aureole decorates his head. These curious sculptures are Pop-like in their use of vernacular objects, and, in my opinion, are the highlights of this show.

While the press release emphasizes the idea of transcendence inherent to Jackson's work, stressing the artist's interest in the cosmos and spirituality, my experience of it was quite different. Though Jackson's fascination with faraway worlds and mystic symbolisms is certainly palpable, what I saw is an artist whose work is deeply and beautifully grounded in the everyday fabrics of the city. As the artist continues to belatedly receive the recognition he is due, I would be eager to see a comprehensive exhibition that brings together works spanning the entirety of this six-decade-long career, to see if this argument holds up. But in this exhibition, the promise of transcendence beyond the material realm is complicated, and arguably enriched, by Jackson's elaborate use of found materials. His panels, objects, and even photocopies serve as constant reminders of the concrete reality we inhabit—what New Yorker can truly give themselves up to transcendence, anyway?

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