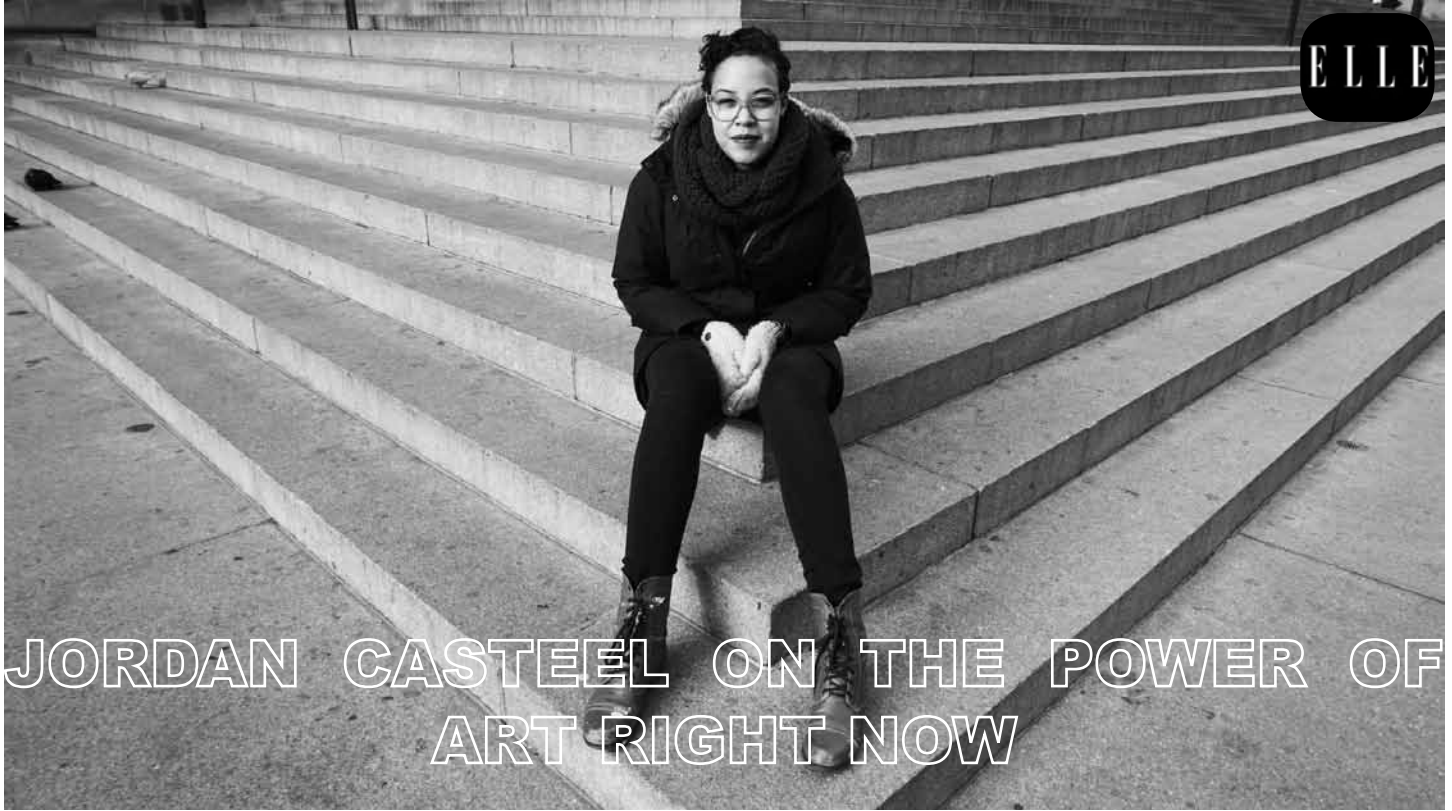


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BY LEAH MELBY CLINTON
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Amongst the never-ending, century-spanning talk about what art means—the ways it can impact society; how to define it—today's political climate has us looking to gallery walls with an even sharper eye. What is the artist's role in everything that's happening out there? Recording, parsing, distracting?

"If anything, for me, it has affirmed why empathy and the sharing of stories continue to be necessary," Jordan Casteel explained. The Colorado-born artist's work has been lauded by big-time institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the New York Times, and from our conversation, it's easy to reconcile thoughts of the little, craft-loving girl raised by a justice-chasing family with the cerebral, Yale-educated creative she is now. Here, Casteel answers our questions on building a career, weathering criticism, and more.

What are some of your first memories of art?

For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to the act of making. I was the child who would ask for a box of "stuff" from Michael's for Christmas. That box could include things like pom-poms, popsicle sticks, paint, construction paper, and, always, a glue gun. It would bring me hours of pleasure in exercising my imagination. I was making "art." I had a part of our family room dedicated solely to my crafts. That space was sacred. It was one place where my brothers weren't.

In general though, art was always around growing up. My grandmother, Margaret Buckner Young, was on the board of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and moved to Denver to be near her grandchildren. Although I only ever knew her as "Grams," she had left behind a full life supporting the arts in New York City. She was collecting the works of Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Hale Woodruff, and many others before they had established names within the art canon. I was surrounded by this artwork every day, though I am not yet sure where or how I fit into that.



James, 2015; Oil on canvas

Why was going to a women's college important to you?

If you had asked me as a junior in high school if I would ever consider going to a women's college, I would have laughed. Having grown up with two brothers and all male cousins, I felt most comfortable in my relationships with men. Grams had taught educational psychology at Spelman College and my love and respect for her was profound, so the potential of following in her footsteps was something I wanted. However, I surprisingly found my home on the campus of Agnes Scott College [in Decatur, GA]. Agnes is an institution that had not previously been on my radar, but it took my breath away. I immediately changed my application to early decision. (I have made most of my major decisions in my life by trusting my gut.) My time there was life-changing.

Before Agnes, I would have described myself as being brutally shy. There I came out of my shell and explored the power of my own voice, which I believe could have only happened in a space where I felt the confidence and encouragement of women. As a result, I cannot regret not having gone to an HBCU [historically black college or university]. I was still in Atlanta, close to Morehouse, Spelman, Clark Atlanta, and the like. I was still connecting with local HBCUs and running the Agnes Scott Black Student Union, Witkaze. The values of my grandmother continued on even if I was not in the physical location where she had once dedicated her time. I was defining my own journey.

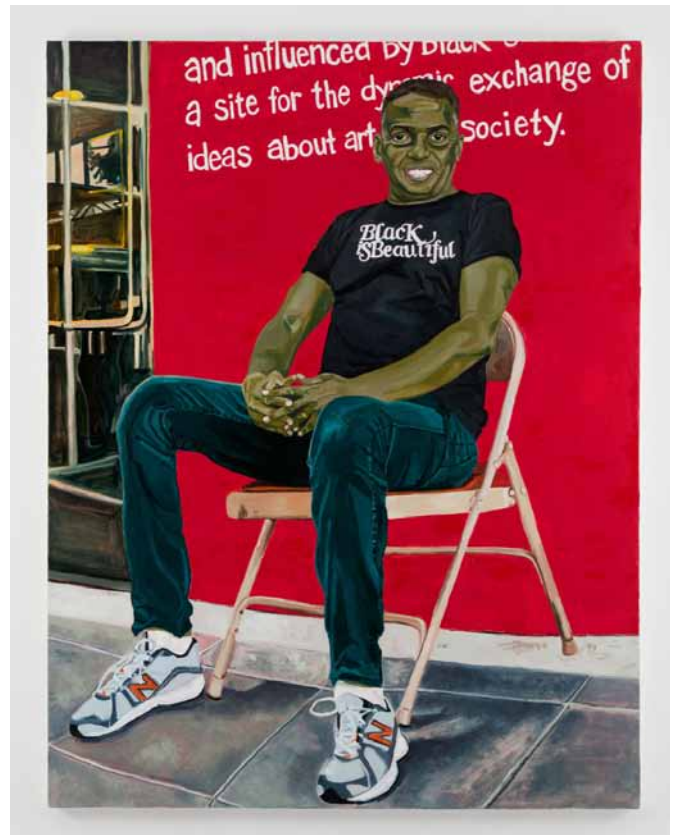
Your body of work and professional CV, including work with Teach for America, make it obvious social justice is important to you. Where is that rooted?

My passion for social justice runs very deep. I come from a family where having compassion for others and fighting for equity is a non-negotiable. My grandfather was born to educated parents in Kentucky—a rarity for black families. His father, my great-grandfather, was the president of the Lincoln Institute, an all-black boarding high school that had a secret curriculum where they were educating students outside of the meager societal expectations. My grandfather, Whitney Moore Young, Jr., went on to serve as director of the National Urban League from 1961 to 1971, working as one of the “Big Six” during the Civil Rights Movement. He married my grandmother, Margaret, an educator and writer who went on to serve on many boards (Lincoln Center, Metropolitan Museum, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Girl Scouts, and New York Life Insurance) and write her own children's books. My mother, Lauren Young Casteel, is the current President and CEO of the Women's Foundation of Colorado and was the first black woman to head a foundation in Colorado and the only person in Colorado to run three foundations.

All of which is to say: My legacy in education and philanthropy is undeniable. I think for much of my life, I did not know how this personal family history would fit into the life I wanted for myself. It wasn't until college that the potential of merging my interests in education, social justice, and art presented itself, but the root of those passions has always felt clear.

Can you identify a turning point in your career?

When I was accepted into the MFA program at the Yale School of Art, I knew that the opportunity had the potential to take me from painting in my bedroom in Denver to developing a career. But my time in that program was really grueling. I did not graduate with a sense of confidence in myself or the work, however, I was affirmed that hard work could pay off. I have always been really ambitious by nature, but being an artist, I have the opportunity to put my that hard work could pay off. I have always been really



Timothy, 2017; Oil on canvas



Twins, 2017; Oil on canvas

ambitious by nature, but being an artist, I have the opportunity to put my skills as a learner to good use. I continue to believe strongly that nothing can happen without the work. It is because of the work that I have had the opportunities I have had. [Art] is a practice, and with practice comes growth through failures and successes. I am in this profession for the long haul. I have to exercise patience and put all of my skills to use in order to ensure a thoughtful career.

Have you experienced disappointments that turned out to be positive in the end?

One of my dearest friends, artist EJ Hill, often uses roller coasters as a metaphor for life and being an artist, and I cannot think of a better example of the highs and lows that come along with this work. Being an artist is about learning to navigate the lows in order to feel the highs again. Of course there have been moments where I wasn't accepted into a residency I really wanted or had a tough studio visit. But with each "fall," I have come up a little stronger, a little more prepared for the next. Developed grit. It feels similar to the notion of mistakes. Hindsight is always 20-20.

Looking back on moments where I thought it was impossible to stand again and seeing that not only have I stood, but I have stood much taller and with more humility and patience than before. At some point, we all have to relinquish our fears to a process. A process that may just be out of my control, which is undoubtedly terrifying. Much like a roller coaster.

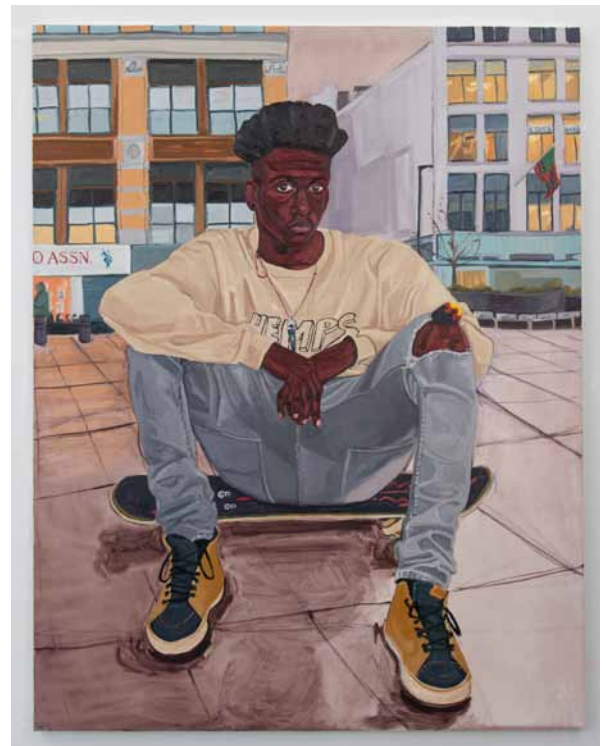
How do you think about creating work meant to be digested by both an audience and critics?

Learning to sift through information is a skill we all can and do benefit from. I'm constantly exercising my will to determine what does or doesn't affect me and my practice. I believe there is great power in criticism and reviews, but greater power in our ability to determine its importance on a personal level. Dialogue is power. Listening is imperative. But when it is me, alone in the studio, everything else disappears. I have to listen to my hand. Noise is just noise.

Painting for me is about seeing. It's about slowing down enough to either see something you haven't seen before or see yourself authentically considered and represented. I have been lucky enough to see the moment when some of my sitters see themselves on canvas for the first time, [like] when James's (2015) wife thanked me for seeing him as she has always seen him and for sharing that. What does it mean to offer someone visibility in a world that is constantly rendering their humanity invisible? I relinquish a ton of control over how a painting is perceived once it leaves my studio, however, I can and do work really hard to make sure it is full of empathy and respect.

So many of your paintings are of men—did you decide to focus on males over females?

For me, my work is about humanity. It was never an explicit thought to paint men over women. I do not think women are absent in my work. As a woman myself, I feel utterly present, every stroke has been filtered through my own personal narrative and experience. My desire to represent my community feels clear: as a sister, daughter, and friend.



Jared, 2016; Oil on canvas