

Somerville-based painter and multimedia artist Tomashi Jackson awarded Rappaport Prize by deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum

Jackson says much of her work is defined by the push and pull of ‘grief and joy,’ and how they appear differently in public and private contexts

By [Emma Glassman-Hughes](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 24, 2023, 4:57 p.m.



Artist Tomashi Jackson is this year's recipient of the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum's Rappaport Prize. JULIA FEATHERINGILL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TILTON GALLERY, NEW YORK


On a recent afternoon, Tomashi Jackson painted wiggly green- and pink-hued stripes on canvas over a projected image taken by her mother, photographer Aver Marie Burroughs. It was a study of the bark of a tree in Burroughs's California yard — one of the last pictures she took before she died in 2021.

Jackson was working on the new piece for her show “Minute by Minute,” which will open at Night Gallery in Los Angeles this fall. She'd recently learned she had won the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum's Rappaport Prize, which honors local artists who have “demonstrated significant creativity and vision” and comes with a \$50,000 cash award. “I was totally shocked,” she said speaking to the Globe via Zoom from her east Somerville studio. “But I'm incredibly humbled and honored.”

Born in Houston, Jackson, 43, grew up in Los Angeles and has since amassed numerous honors, from her admission to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2019 to her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial that same year. But for all her success, she admits she “struggled with color” for “like, forever.” She can trace her “frothy confusion about color, the phenomenon of color, and how to move it and how to use it” back to second grade at her public arts elementary school in Los Angeles — a feeling that would follow her for years, she said, through her undergraduate and post-graduate studies at New York City's Cooper Union, then MIT, and finally Yale, where she focused on painting and printmaking.

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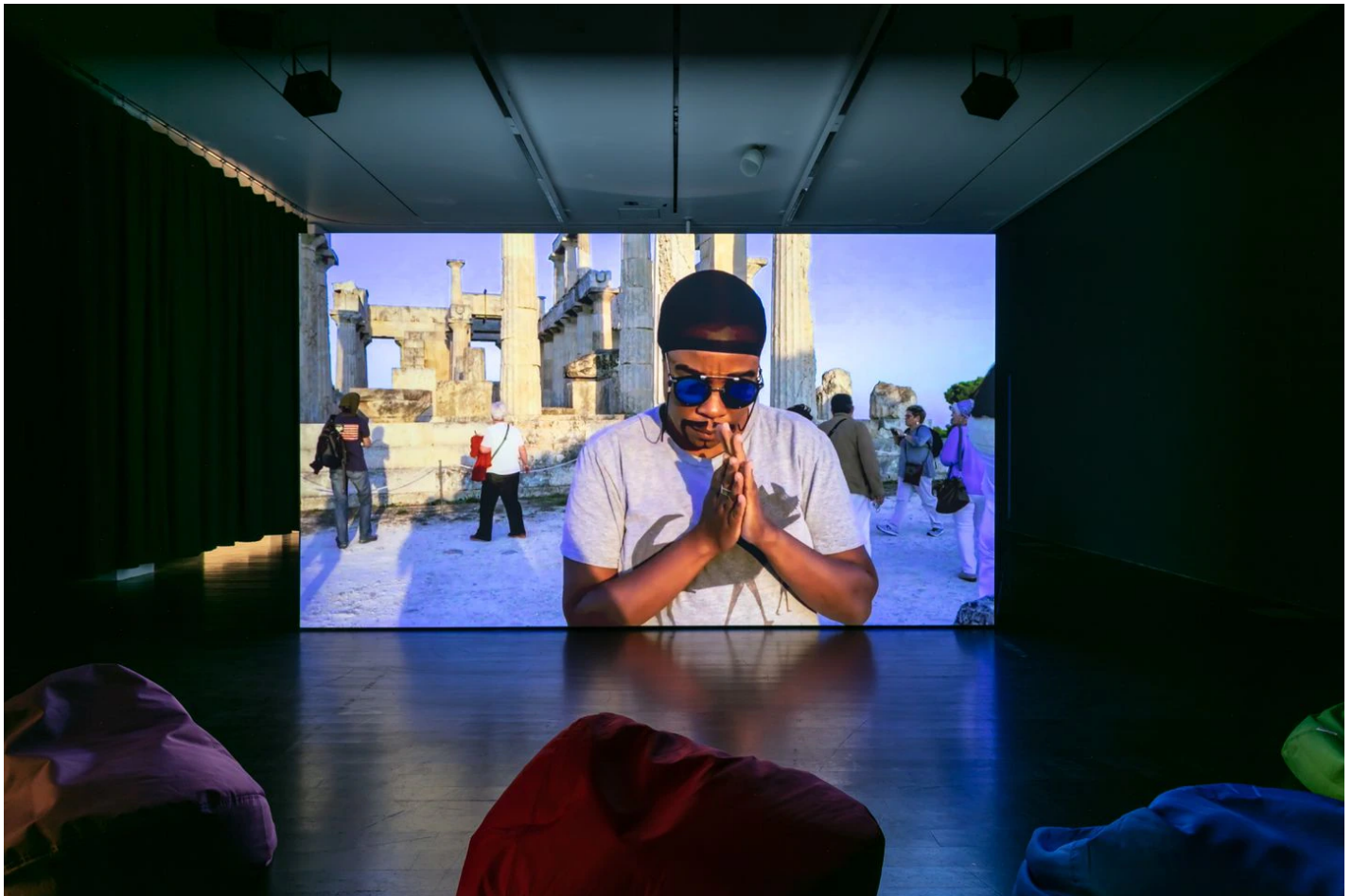
From "Across the Universe," Tomashi Jackson's mid-career survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in Denver, Colo., from June 14 until Sept. 10, 2023. WES MAYGAR

For her MFA thesis at Yale, Jackson spent time in the university's law library, reading up on the legislative history of the 1954 Supreme Court case [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka](#), which set forth the integration of public schools across the US. She used black-and-white images from that era to connect the case with news from present-day 2016 — a time when “there was killing after killing after killing” of Black youth, she said.

But her classmates felt the desaturation of the images conveyed a forgotten past — not a “contemporary crisis,” she said. So Jackson switched to “very, very bright colors.”

“In the process, the work started to be read as absolutely joyous,” she said. “One of my professors was like, ‘You’re talking about things that are so sad. But the colors are so bright, it makes me hopeful.’”

Jackson, who has taught at Harvard University and Massachusetts College of Art and Design, said much of her work is defined by the push and pull of “grief and joy,” and how they appear differently in public and private contexts.



From "Across the Universe," Tomashi Jackson's mid-career survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in Denver. Jackson's exhibition "Minute by Minute," her second at Night Gallery in Los Angeles, will be on view starting Sept. 30. WES MAYGAR

In “Minute by Minute,” she merges images from her mother’s camera with her own photographs of her emergence from the COVID-19 lockdown. She describes Burroughs’s photos — dated just two months before she died from lung and liver cancer in the midst of the pandemic — as “very lonely and solitary,” with “no people, just trees.”

Meanwhile, Jackson’s own photographs capture the opposite: the ecstasy of returning to community after a year alone, with scenes from a Beyoncé show in London, a rooftop Juneteenth celebration in Denver, a “Friendsgiving” dinner with “chosen family.”

The fused images are projected onto canvases slathered in “earthen materials” collected from her travels, including sand from Colorado and marble dust from a [quarry in Dionyssos, Greece](#), where marble for the nation’s famed monuments is harvested. The result is what Jackson calls a “crosshatching” of divergent feelings: isolation and togetherness, vulnerability and immortality. “I’m kind of getting a kick out of turning my

mother's last photographs into this material that's at least symbolically related to the sacred monuments that have come to define much of our own collective relationship to democratic monumentality," she said.

Similar themes arise in her mid-career survey, "Across the Universe," at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, which she noted will be coming to the Tufts University Art Galleries sometime next year. As part of her prize, Jackson will also be giving a talk at deCordova in the spring, though the museum itself [closed for renovations](#) in February for up to three years.



From "Across the Universe," Tomashi Jackson's mid-career survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in Denver. WES MAYGAR

Sarah Montross, chief curator at deCordova, described Jackson as “a vital artist and vibrant educator who deeply researches and responds to critical topics, past and present,” noting that “her resulting artworks also make you want to investigate their many layers, textures, and materials.”

Jessica May, vice president of Art and Exhibitions at The Trustees and artistic director of deCordova, told the Globe that jurors were “deeply impressed by the depth of her thinking about history and culture and the extraordinary visual power of her art.”

The prize, funded by the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Foundation, was first awarded in 2000, and was raised last year from \$35,000 to \$50,000.

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A wonderful, intelligent, comprehensive article about a fascinating artist. I should have already known about her.
Thanks.

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