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Tomashi Jackson Harvests Histories From the Land of Plenty

For “The Land Claim” at the Parrish Art Museum, she digs deep into the suppressed stories of communities of color in the Hamptons.



Tomashi Jackson at the Watermill Center on Long Island, where she had an artist residency and created paintings for “The Land Claim” in partnership with the nearby Parrish Art Museum. Clifford Prince King for The New York Times

By Hilarie M. Sheets | July 8, 2021, 2:16 p.m. ET

WATER MILL, N.Y. — “What’s happening with communities of color there?” It was first question Tomashi Jackson asked when the Parrish Art Museum here invited her to partner in a project on Long Island’s East End.

While Jackson had been a house guest of her New York gallerist, the artist had no firsthand experience with the Hamptons, renowned for its beautiful landscape inspirational to generations of artists, and its exorbitantly priced second homes of the rich and famous.

But when Corinne Erni, the Parrish curator, began recounting stories of immigration arrests here, and of Latino people being stopped in their cars for traffic violations that turned into ICE detention and family separations, Jackson said the wheels started turning. On Sunday, “Tomashi Jackson: The Land Claim” will open at the Parrish with seven new canvases, an outdoor sound piece and an installation across the facade’s window, informed by the artist’s interviews over the last 18 months with nine members of the Indigenous, Black and Latino communities living on the East End.

At the Watermill Center last month, where Jackson was completing her suite of paintings for the Parrish, she explained how the idea came together.



“Among Protectors (Hawthorne Road and the Pell Case),” in Jackson’s studio at the Watermill Center. It’s now on view at the Parrish. Clifford Prince King for The New York Times

Jackson, born in Houston in 1980 and raised in South Los Angeles, is known for excavating histories related to the abuses of power, disenfranchisement and displacement of people of color. For the Whitney Biennial in 2019, her curiosity led her to explore the history of Seneca Village, the once-thriving Black middle-class community whose land was seized by the city through eminent domain during the creation of Central Park. Her interest in the dangers faced by migrant workers driving on the East End became the entry point for the Parrish project.

“But you know what happens with research,” said the artist, a visiting lecturer at Harvard, where she will have another exhibition, opening Sept. 20, at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, about the history of school desegregation. “You walk into someone else’s garden with a couple of seedlings of questions, and there’s all sorts of other things happening.”

Jackson's paintings synthesize connections shared by local residents of color around experiences of transportation, housing, agriculture and labor. The works integrate fragments of their personal family photographs amid historical images and shifting fields of color.

"Across all these communities I had been listening to, the fact of the land was a common echo — investment in, reaping harvest from, burying people in, being displaced from," Jackson said about the oral histories she distilled into new paintings.



From left, "The Three Sisters" (2021) and the window installation "Vessels of Light (From Jeremy, Juni, and Steven)" (2021). Enlarged photographs include images of Shinnecock children and descendants of Black farm workers from Southampton. Jenny Gorman

The title of the exhibition comes from conversations with Kelly Dennis, a member of the Shinnecock Nation and a lawyer involved in ongoing land disputes between the Town of Southampton and the Shinnecock people, now shrunk to a small reservation. The neighboring Shinnecock Hills Golf Club was built on land that once belonged to Native Americans, and members of the nation allege the golf course was carved out of the tribe's ancestral burial grounds. (In an email, Brett Pickett, the club's president, declined to comment.)

During Jackson's interview with Donnamarie Barnes, an archivist at Sylvester Manor Educational Farm on Shelter Island, a ferry ride away, the artist learned about the local descendants of enslaved people who were brought to the island by the Sylvester family, sugar-plantation owners in Barbados, in the 17th century. Sylvester Manor had been one of the largest slaveholding sites on Long Island.

Richard Wingfield, a community liaison for the Southampton school district, remembered the extraordinary gardens on Black-owned properties, bought up by developers over time. The Parrish now sits on a field where his grandmother and aunts once worked as laborers picking potatoes.

“The whole history of this place started to emerge, like mountains coming out of the ground — something taking shape that was unseen and unheard,” Erni, the show’s curator, said.



“Among Sisters and Brothers (Three Families),” 2021. Jackson builds her canvases as though they are quilts. This one includes soil from a potato field, cotton textiles, paper bags and archival prints on vinyl. Clifford Prince King for The New York Times

Before stepping foot inside the Parrish, visitors will encounter the voices and stories of the nine interviewees projected from speakers under the roof, in a soundscape made in collaboration with the composer Michael J. Schumacher.

Jackson’s paintings, which have been collected by the Whitney, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, layer archival imagery onto canvases painted with vivid hues and bold, abstract geometry. Since her M.F.A. days at Yale, she has been strongly influenced by Josef Albers’s aesthetic theories about the way we perceive colors.

“Her art is as much about abstraction as it is about racial politics,” Holland Cotter observed in his New York Times review of Jackson’s projects at the Whitney Biennial.

For “The Land Claim,” she began by building her canvases as though they were quilts, collaging brown paper bags, fabrics from Sag Harbor, vintage potato sacks and shapes painted in saturated colors. She then superimposed the residents’ photographs in layers. She converts the images into halftone lines and paints these lines into her busy surfaces. Other images, she prints onto translucent vinyl strips that hang over the painting, creating a cacophony of impressions.

In one painting, “Three Sisters,” the faces of matriarchs from three distinct communities and time periods intersect, emerging and recessing in the frame, with optical illusions created by the overlapping lines and colors. “They collide, they collapse, like sediments of history,” Jackson said.



Installation view of "The Land Claim" at the Parrish. Jenny Gorman

Ashley James, an associate curator at the Guggenheim, is intrigued by how Jackson adapts a concept Albers called "vibrating boundaries," about how adjacent saturated colors seem to interact, to how people of color are perceived in public spaces. "She refuses the idea that aesthetics can be separated from our political histories," James said.

Jackson started out in mural painting, working as an apprentice to the Chicano muralist Juana Alicia for several years in California. Her interest in abstraction was sparked when she moved to New York in 2005 to attend Cooper Union. She was a student of the critic Dore Ashton, who witnessed the rise of Abstract Expressionism firsthand and brought its narrative to life for Jackson.

Walking around New York, Jackson was struck by the ubiquity of awnings and had the idea of wrapping her paintings around awning-style structures projecting from walls (it's a technique she still uses in museum shows to recall public spaces). She hung clear vinyl strips on her paintings after seeing the commonplace plastic flaps insulating refrigerated areas in New York bodegas.

After graduating in 2010, Jackson studied at the M.I.T. School of Architecture and Planning. For her master's thesis, she interviewed her mother, an engineer, about their family's suppressed history as domestic laborers. It established her approach of gathering oral histories.

"The research she does for each single show could be a Ph.D. thesis," said Connie Tilton, a founder of the Tilton Gallery in New York. She met Jackson at Yale's Open Studios in 2016 and offered her a solo gallery show that year. (Jackson is now also represented by the Night Gallery in Los Angeles.)



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Jane Panetta, a curator of the 2019 Whitney Biennial, pointed to similarities between “The Land Claim” and the Biennial project, where Jackson merged imagery of Seneca Village in the 1850s with contemporary press accounts reporting Black-owned properties seized by the city in gentrifying sections of Brooklyn.

“Like Central Park, the Hamptons is a very familiar, very beloved, very polished space, yet there are these buried, complex, often ugly histories there,” Panetta said. She is also impressed by the artist’s use of aesthetic techniques to get at these stories in a way that isn’t overly didactic. “Albers gave her the idea that color is subjective, it can change depending on context — it’s not a static thing,” she said.

Jackson’s impulse is always to expand the historical archive through conversations. “I think of myself as a portraitist by nature,” she said, “looking closely at other people and trying to capture some sort of essential humanity.”

Tomashi Jackson: The Land Claim

July 11 through Nov. 7, Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, N.Y. 631-283-2118; parrishart.org.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/arts/design/tomashi-jackson-parrish-hamptons.html>