

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca

Tessa Solomon, "Tomashi Jackson's Powerful Art Reckons with America's Present and Overlooked Histories," *ARTnews*, September 28, 2020.

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Tomashi Jackson's Powerful Art Reckons with America's Present and Overlooked Histories

BY **TESSA SOLOMON** September 28, 2020 4:05pm



Tomashi Jackson, portrait by Awol Erizku, 2020. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND NIGHT GALLERY

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Tomashi Jackson is interested in American myths—illusions of democracy and equity within a system designed to oppress. Earlier this year, the artist debuted a solo exhibition of collage paintings, titled “Forever My Lady,” at Night Gallery in Los Angeles, marking Jackson’s first show in her hometown. The work in it has lost none of its relevancy as Americans prepare for perhaps what may be the most contested presidential election in U.S. history. Bold investigations of color in the school of Josef Albers were layered with social and political ephemera: materials related to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the landmark legislation which prohibited discriminatory practices which prevented Black Americans from voting; portraits of investigative journalist Gary Webb, who exposed the CIA’s perpetuation of the cocaine trade; hand-painted photographs from Jackson’s own family archive.

Themes of voter disenfranchisement continue in “Love Rollercoaster,” an exhibition of five new paintings that opened at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, this past weekend. The state made headlines this summer for a new limit on ballot drop boxes—one location will be available to deposit ballots in each county—which had voting rights activists crying foul. “Love Rollercoaster” argues that this is no isolated incident, but the latest entry in a long history of voter suppression. Throughout, excerpts of conversations with members of Ohio’s Black communities are collaged with campaign materials.

Jackson will also be the focus of “Platforms,” at the Parrish Art Museum in New York, an annual exhibition series which invites an artist to activate the entire space for site-specific projects. The 2020 edition was scheduled to take place this summer and fall, but has been postponed to the summer of 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Jackson’s project, titled “The Land Project,” centers the experiences of Indigenous, Black, and Latinx families on the East End of Long Island in New York, many of whom are affected by intersecting issues of housing, transportation, and migration. The artist interviewed historians and community leaders from Organización Latino-Americana of Eastern Long Island, the Eastville Community Historical Society of Sag Harbor, the Bridgehampton Child Care and Recreational Center, and the Shinnecock Nation; transcripts of the interviews will be made available to the public.

ARTnews spoke with the artist by email this past spring, as the public was first confronting the “new normal” of the coronavirus. This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

You’re coming off the Whitney Biennial into new representation, in addition to an invitation from the Watermill Center for a residency. How are you processing this stage of your career, which seems to be moving at an ever-accelerating speed?

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I feel fortunate to be a part of a gallery that has supported me over the last four years. Jack and Connie Tilton welcomed me to Tilton Gallery in New York City with my first solo show, “The Subliminal is Now,” in 2016. Things have been busy between making work for group and solo exhibitions and college-level facilitation at multiple East Coast schools. There’s been a lot of juggling going on that would not have been possible without the support from the Tilton Gallery team helping me to keep it all together.

Timing has been a project of its own. I’ve been in conversation with Davida Nemeroff and Night Gallery for a few years now after I had the opportunity to show with Rose Marcus at Mass MOCA in Susan Cross’s group exhibition “In the Abstract.” I got to finally work with them in Los Angeles for my first solo show at the gallery, “Forever My Lady,” that opened in mid January. I felt so looked after. I was able to assemble and construct the work that I began in June at a residency that traveled with me from Skowhegan in Madison, Maine to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the ICA at VCU in Richmond, Virginia, for “Great Force” curated by Amber Esseiva, to the ARCAthens Residency Program in Athens, Greece, before finally arriving in Los Angeles with my studio in a suit case and the work in rolls. Completing that body in Los Angeles required coordination and intuition within myself and with a number of other extraordinary people in different locations (carpenter Ruben Palencia, video editor Ariel Jackson, painter Anna Rosen, and Jose Alvarez at Duggal Visual Solutions in New York). I could call anyone from either gallery when I needed help. It worked like a good song. The timing and Energy was right. It had to be for everything to come together. Under the most absurd circumstances, limits on time, and demands of labor and emotions, we remained in tune with each other.

How has the health crisis affected your plans?

The global public health crisis has changed a lot of things for everyone everywhere. I’ve been sheltering in place in Massachusetts since March and I’ve remained in meaningful communication with the amazing people at both Tilton Gallery and Night Gallery. The good vibrations and seriousness about stewarding my work in this world are so powerful for me right now [and] keeping me encouraged right now. They understand me. So entering the new representation relationship just feels like the continuation of something that makes sense. So much is difficult to make sense of right now, but my work isn’t one of those things because of the communities that I get to be a part of across the country.

You make works that confront living histories of racial injustice. Where do you begin when you’re setting out to document these moments with art?

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When I am starting a process for a specific history of a place or event, I go to that place if I can. I search my feelings and observe the current state of that world. I tend to wonder where the present converges with the past; where there are patterns in experiences of public space. I understand public space to be both physical and historic; implicating many people. Issues of governance, policy, and law are such realms that touch us even when some of us can't feel their presence. I look for the people that I can ask questions about whatever it is I am sensing as links from the present to the past. Every interactive step tells me what to do next in seeking out archival materials to help me visualize the stories in collision.



Tomashi Jackson, 'Ecology of Fear (Abrams for Governor of Georgia)
(Negro Women wait to congratulate LBJ),' 2020.
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Can you tell me some about the works shown in a group exhibition at Night Gallery this past summer?

Temple for Bakari (Shady Grove Church Bombing) is an ode to Bakari Henderson who was beaten to death on a busy street on the Greek island of Zakynthos in 2017 by a group of Serbian men. They had been angered that he took a selfie with a Serbian woman bartender. He was chased from the bar into the street and cornered between parked cars. No one intervened to help him. All of it was captured on closed circuit security cameras. They were cleared of his murder. In the piece, he and his parents are painted into a surface coated with Pentelic marble, the only marble used to restore the ancient monuments of the Acropolis. One of his celebratory graduation photos intersects with a picture of his parents after the court's verdict of assault instead of murder was announced. Before his death he'd told his mother that given the state of race and racism in the United States, he felt safer in Greece. Bakari was from Texas.

This piece is special for a number of reasons, one being that I made it after "Forever My Lady" opened at Night Gallery. I stayed in the studio and kept working until I had to pack up and fly back to the East Coast. It was mounted on its stretcher and installed in the gallery after I left town. Making it taught me a lot. After spending six weeks in Athens, I felt like I had to make a work dedicated to Bakari, I just had to. It turned out to be incredibly beautiful, it sparkles. It holds something that I learned from every work I made from the Biennial until that moment, which were hard and sometimes painful processes.

Do you have a sense of what a finished work will look like when you start developing a new idea?

I don't always know what the outcome is supposed to be and I try to leave room for those resolutions of discipline to reveal themselves. Will drawing or printmaking or moving images or sculpture enter and make sense of things? What collaborations with other disciplines of the Conservatory might answer open questions of accessibility and vehicles for emotion? I grew up in California, and I understood painting through murals first. I had a lot of charged questions about the nature of public space and narratives of the People. Digging with intention into research driven work and having a best friend whose work is in education and economic policy, I understand public space in more expansive ways now. I believe in the Plastic Arts, the Performing Arts, and the Humanities. All of this helps me to see, listen, interpret, and produce work and facilitation that feels right. I can't do it if it doesn't feel right.