

# NIGHT GALLERY

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

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Shanti Escalante-De Mattei, "Artist Tomashi Jackson Uncovers the Hidden Histories of Indigenous, Black, and Latinx People in the Hamptons," *Artnews*, July 26, 2021.

## ARTnews

Est. 1902

### Artist Tomashi Jackson Uncovers the Hidden Histories of Indigenous, Black, and Latinx People in the Hamptons

BY **SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI**

July 26, 2021



Collaborative work, *Vessels of Light* (From Jeremy, Juni, and Steven), 2021. Installation view. DARIO LASAGNI

Long seen as a bucolic, oceanside respite for New York's wealthiest, the **Hamptons** has historically been maintained by an often-unseen group of working-class people, many of them people of color. The under-known stories of the area's Black, Indigenous, and Latinx residents, whose labor makes these networks of towns and hamlets so inviting, is currently the focus of artist **Tomashi Jackson**'s latest solo show.

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That multi-part exhibition, “The Land Claim” at the **Parrish Art Museum** in Water Mill (on view through November 7), features seven paintings, a vinyl window installation, an outdoor audio work, and archival materials. All of the work draws on extensive research by Jackson and her team, which included connecting with community members to conduct oral histories. As with her past work, Jackson’s latest paintings are layered compositions that feel at once abstract and figurative. Archival photographs painted in a bright halftones peek out behind vinyl panels printed with other images. The geometric effect is softened by Jackson’s incorporation of materials—paper bags, burlap sacks, soil, wampum dust, and more—into the canvases.

These works grew out of a 2017 visit to the Hamptons with Parrish curator Corinne Erni, who told Jackson about something that is a regular occurrence for the area’s Latinx population: traffic stops. The community continues to be disproportionately targeted; a class action **lawsuit** in 2015 revealed that Latinos were also being robbed during these traffic stops. Because a significant portion of the population is undocumented, these stops often led to their being detained by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

“People are getting disappeared, yet there’s no visual representation, no photos, no videos—just data,” Jackson told *ARTnews* in a recent phone interview.

When Jackson accepted a residency at the Watermill Center, the legendary Hamptons arts space founded by Robert Wilson, she decided that she wanted to continue learning more about the lived realities of the Hamptons’s Black, Indigenous and Latinx community as a way to share their stories through her art. As an outsider, Jackson prioritized connecting with nine community members who introduced her to others. All the while, she conducted her own research.

“I come from working-class people, so I have the utmost respect for the people who make spaces work, both private and public spaces,” Jackson said. “I’m not from this place, so I knew that I had so much to learn. The research affords me an opportunity to ask questions because I know I don’t have the answers.”

In January 2020, Jackson set out to collect oral histories from the POC communities that would form the basis of an audio installation, titled *Interviews*. (Jackson was assisted in the oral histories by Martha Schnee, K. Anthony Jones, and Lauren Ruiz, and after the pandemic’s lockdowns began, the interviews shifted online.) Edited together by composer Michael J. Schumacher, *Interviews* echoes along the promenade alongside the Parrish, in which overlapping voices tell their stories of struggle and survival.

Throughout the process, Jackson began to notice recurring themes in what her interviewees said. “You would think that these folks were sitting in a room together, talking,” Jackson said. “They each invited me to really *see*—that if people took the opportunity to look at the information, the history, the documents, it’s all there.”

Another major component of Jackson’s exhibition is its focus on Long Island’s Indigenous Shinnecock people, who have been fighting to regain stolen land for generations. Jackson teamed up with artist and researcher Jeremy Dennis (Shinnecock Indian Nation), who created an Instagram account (@onthissite) to highlight his ongoing research into the Hamptons’s Indigenous history. Scrolling through his account you might see a patch of marsh that used to be a cremation ground, a house that sits on land promised to an Indigenous family.

Dennis sees his collaboration with Jackson as an opportunity to create a space for educating people about the land that was taken from the Shinnecock. It’s an ongoing history: in July, Sugar Loaf Hill, a sacred burial site about a 15-minute drive from the Parrish, was bought back by the the Shinnecock Indian Nation.

“We live in such a segregated place,” Dennis said by email, “which makes these uncomfortable conversations—about who has the right to the land—difficult to have.”

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Tomashi Jackson, *Among Protectors (Hawthorne Road and the Pell Case)*, 2021 DARIO LASAGNI

One of Jackson's new paintings, *Among Protectors (Hawthorne Road and the Pell Case)*, connects to this history. Created by layering halftone painted images on top of each other and interspersing them with colored vinyl panels, the painting recreates a photograph of Doreen Dennis-Arrindell (Jeremy Dennis's aunt) standing in front of a bulldozer. She is protesting the beginning of a Hamptons development on sacred Shinnecock land in 1996. Another image visible in *Among Protectors* shows another activist Chenae Bullock leading a Shinnecock prayer service in 2020 at another construction site where the remains of what was most likely a member of the Shinnecock nation were discovered. To these layers, Jackson has added soil, dust from the studio of a Shinnecock wampum carver, and burlap potato sacks.

The other five paintings explore agriculture, immigrant families, matriarchs, and two historically Black neighborhoods in the Hamptons, Azurest and Ninevah. In *Among Fruits (Big Shane and the Farmer)*, Jackson layers an archival photo of several Black men harvesting potatoes over a photo of a Shinnecock member holding a chicken of the woods mushroom that he has just foraged. Together Jackson juxtaposes two different approaches to getting food: the often exploitative labors of monocropping (the practice of unsustainably planting a single crop year after year) and the self-sufficiency of traditional food gathering.

There's also another brutal history that Jackson learned about during her residency in the Hamptons. The owners of these potato farms had previously had a partnership with the local jail in Riverhead. Detainees there—many of them young Black men—who had been arrested for infractions like public intoxication were made to work in the potato fields as a form of prison labor. The practice lasted well into the 1970s. "The slightest infraction and you end up in some extreme situation," Jackson said.

A portion of "The Land Claim" is devoted to revealing Jackson's research process for the exhibition. Notes and drawings cover one wall, while another holds the original archival photographs used in some of the works. Additionally, there are shelves of library books the team had checked out over the past year and a half, as well as binders full of news articles related to the Hamptons and the people of color who live there.

"There was a whole lot of planning and a whole lot of coordinating that had to happen to make living here possible, that's not lost on me," Jackson said. "It takes so much for a person to be able to work where they live [out] here."