

NIGHT GALLERY

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

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Tomashi Jackson in Conversation with Maddie Klett, "Tomashi Jackson with Maddie Klett," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2021.

BROOKLYN RAIL

Art In Conversation

Tomashi Jackson with Maddie Klett

"The paintings ended up
creating a system for
themselves."

OCT 2021

Watermill, NY

Parrish Museum

The Land Claim

July 7 – November 11, 2021



Portrait of Tomashi Jackson, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

My visit to the Parrish Art Museum to view Tomashi Jackson's exhibition *The Land Claim* was a day-long trip. I left my Brooklyn apartment in a friend's car and ventured the entire length of Long Island to reach the Parrish's sun-lit, barn-inspired galleries nestled on a verdant meadow. The architecture certainly considers the region's agricultural identity and the meadow's former life as a potato field. The result of a month-long studio residency at the nearby Watermill Center and over a year of research, Jackson's expansive project at the museum considers the lived experiences of the Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people who have a history with this land on the East End of Long Island. Her exhibition was organized by Corrine Erni with assistance from Curatorial Fellow Lauren Ruiz. In the conversation that follows, we talk about Jackson's love of printmaking, her collaborative methodology as a social historian, and trusting the needs of her paintings to lead the way.

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Tomashi Jackson: Thank you for inviting me to speak with you and thank you to the *Rail* and Phong and everyone over there for expressing interest in this project. I'm going to ask for your guidance Maddie. I'm interested in history and I think that we may share some affinities and maybe beliefs about art history as social and cultural histories that define and are defined by social relationships, living conditions, and working conditions. So I'm going to ask for your guidance. I'm interested in how you experienced the show.

Maddie Klett (Rail): The first thing I want to say about the exhibition is that I had to ask a few favors to get to it. Because I don't have a car. And public transit to that part of Long Island was possible but difficult.

Jackson: And that's only to get there. That's not really to get around there. There are buses, but that's the whole issue. Transportation precarity is the whole issue.



Installation view: *Tomashi Jackson: The Land Claim*, Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York, 2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

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Rail: Right. In the sound work *The Interviews* (2021), composed by Michael J. Schumacher, on the façade of the museum a speaker talks about the precarity of public transportation to and within East Hampton. The work is a compilation of interviews you had with members of the local Black, Latinx, and Shinnecock communities. I arrived at the show with some very audience-oriented questions like: who can actually see the exhibition? Who has access to it? But I came away realizing that the project is much bigger than what is within the museum walls. It addresses the question of what it means for that institution to sit on that land. You use some great visual tools to attend to this question, like for *Vessels of Light (From Jeremy, Juni, and Steven)* (2021). Using the wall of windows in the entrance foyer, you superimpose images of Shinnecock children gathered at their Pow Wow grounds, descendents of Black laborers who have a history with that land, and a blended Long Island-based Latinx family, onto the view of the surrounding meadow. The conversations and collaborations you had while developing the exhibition were happening at the same time as the rematriation of local land to the Shinnecock people in June 2021. There's this active social history unfolding amongst the collaborators involved in the project. So that question of "who is the show for?" It really is a matter of looking at your collaborative research methodology, and what is generated beyond the space.

Speaking of the space, the exhibition occupies two of the galleries in the back of the museum; one displays six new paintings and the other has been transformed into a reading room with the museum's curatorial fellow, Lauren Ruiz. I want to talk about the conceptual connection between painting and historical research for you. Aesthetics and imagery seem so important in how we understand national narrative, and all the narratives that shape contemporary life—the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and everyone around us. This idea seems like a through line in your work. With all that said, can you talk about your integration of archival research, and particularly photography and imagery, into your paintings?

Jackson: I began learning printmaking practices at the Cooper Union's School of Art in 2006 with Lorenzo Clayton, Cara di Edwardo, and Scott Nobles. Photography darkrooms, lithography, silkscreen, and intaglio processes were on the fifth floor. It was a really exciting place.

My mother was the family photographer and I grew up being encouraged to take pictures. I spent a lot of time sitting in her closet with our family photo albums in my lap trying to understand why things were the way they were in the '80s and '90s among my own people and in our community. I am fortunate to have experienced significant housing security. I lived in the same place the entire first 18 years of my life and my grandparents owned and lived in their house in San Francisco for 40 years. So to look through these family photographs was to see not only the same people growing and changing, but the same places. Photography was a format that I grew up having a really natural and dependent relationship with. My mother took photography classes at Los Angeles City College and I would follow her around there. Photography and film, in my experience, were very tactile mediums that happened in my family's house, during my studies at the San Francisco Art Institute, and eventually at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

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Tomashi Jackson, *Among Heirs (Niamuck and Azurest)* (side view), 2021. Acrylic and wampum dust on canvas, cotton textiles, and paper bags with archival prints on PVC marine vinyl mounted on a handcrafted walnut awning structure with brass hooks and grommets, 75 x 77 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches. Courtesy Tilton Gallery.

The big “aha” took place when I realized that photography and printmaking were related and Scott taught us how to turn a photograph into a halftone image to make it printable through a silkscreen. At Cooper and I learned very practical ways of making an image that reminded me of things I learned following my mother around fixing things and in her work as an operating engineer. A lot of the practical concerns that govern printmaking are engineering concerns. They’re wet/dry concerns, they’re viscosity concerns, they’re concerns around cleanliness. They’re processes that are not up for any sort of conceptual or artistic debate. They are facts about how machinery and materials work and how images are made.

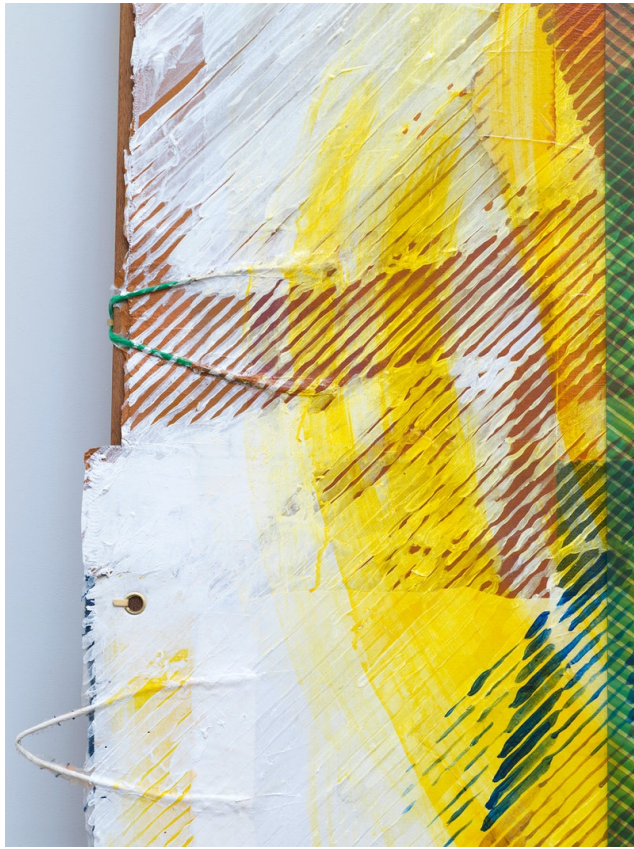
2006 was the year after the copy camera was retired in the Cooper Union print shop so I never got to learn to use that machine. So the way that I learned about making a halftone dot or halftone line was entirely through Photoshop. It was a big revelation. Historically we go from etching to lithography to photography to tintypes to daguerreotypes, to the moving image and to digital imagery. It was really fascinating to me that, in turning a solid image into a halftone line, a digital image can be returned to the origin point of printmaking, the line. In some of the oldest printmaking practices, like etching, we see that simple cross-hatching lines can create the illusion of space on a flat 2D picture plane—and that technique opens a window to potential worlds. When colored lines intersect in my work they instigate that process of illusion and the creation of new colors and images I cannot anticipate.

Printmaking is just amazing. I appreciate all that goes into making a line or that goes into making a typeface to make an image to be multiplied. When a photograph is broken down into a line or into a dot and pulled into the printmaking process—I am fascinated with this idea that the photograph can become a drawing. That was my question: Does the photograph becoming a line make it a drawing? Is it a drawing now because it’s a line on a surface?

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Tomashi Jackson, *Among Heirs (Niamuck and Azurest)* (detail), 2021. Acrylic and wampum dust on canvas, cotton textiles, and paper bags with archival prints on PVC marine vinyl mounted on a handcrafted walnut awning structure with brass hooks and grommets, 75 x 77 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches. Courtesy Tilton Gallery.

Rail: It sounds like we're going into the weeds, but this discussion about techniques and process is important because we're getting to the basis of the methodology for what you've been creating recently. There is this methodology around being a maker of objects, but there is a methodology around your work as a social historian.

There are all kinds of primary information that you've gathered while pursuing *The Land Claim* project and this body of paintings. While that process is part of the work, it's also creating this separate resource, and as a historian, that effort is important in its own right. We now have all of these interview tapes photographs, and this small library in the reading room is crucial for a history that is underrecognized.

Jackson: It absolutely is a scholarship. As a student I was interested in exploring research driven methods to produce imagery. There is a legendary LGBTQIA+ art collective called Papi Juice. It is an NYC institution co-created and facilitated by brilliant human beings, one of whom was my classmate and dear friend when I got to the city in 2005. Adam R. grew up in New York and his people are from Belize. He took me and my best friend Nia K. Evans with him to Belize for autumn break one year. While we were there I started to develop questions about the landscape, waste management, and art education. Nia and I also double as creative partners and we've been having a 20-years long conversation about education and art.

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Adam's grandparents, Gene and Felicia Hernandez, were touchstones of Garifuna cultural history, education, and labor in their community. I was able to go back there with the help of the Benjamin Menschel Fellowship for Creative Inquiry that Cooper Union offers to art, architecture, and engineering students who are selected from proposal submissions. I used that to facilitate my first real research project, *Fever Grass*, asking questions about the relationship between collective memory and waste management in a small Central American town. I started using the pictures that I took while I was in Belize to make halftone line images and printing onto things that were transparent and translucent. That's when I started having my first experiences with the projection of shadows—when the line becomes a shadow and it's projected onto the ground and wall behind it.

I started with my own photographs and videos from Belize. I still think about having this feeling that something magical was happening when this line was moving from place to place and acting like a sundial in the gallery. That fascination and experimentation continued at MIT. I wanted to be in a graduate program that was grounded in research driven, multidisciplinary practices that address public space, the built environment, and the relationship an artwork has in the world. It is never just about what's happening in the gallery, it's about what's happening all around.

I definitely consider this new scholarship. I realized while working on *The Land Claim* that I'm learning so many new things that I often forget that many of the ways that I'm working are ways that I've been working and thinking my whole life.

Rail: It always comes back to childhood curiosities, isn't that it?

Jackson: I always asked a lot of questions. My mother and I had a lot of fun driving around Los Angeles listening to music and talking. I always just had a lot of questions about stuff.

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Tomashi Jackson, *Among Protectors* (Hawthorne Road and the Pell Case), 2021. Acrylic and wampum dust on canvas, paper potato bags, and paper bags with archival prints on PVC marine vinyl mounted on a handcrafted Douglas fir structure with brass hooks and grommets, 74 x 76 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Rail: I want to transition to talking about the materiality of the work in *The Land Claim*. It's kind of a nerdy museological question, but the descriptions of the materials are so rich in the wall labels. I don't know if you felt this while exhibiting in museums, but in my experience working at museums, it's a rarity in a wall label to make it look the way you want because of certain style conventions. Which can be frustrating because of course the wall label is so integral to mediating the work. Your works are not only a "mixed media," right? That description adds nothing to the understanding of how you source the materials and how they come together. The armatures are made out of particular woods but also out of paper potato bags and shopping bags where you retain the handles and binding. You consider the DNA of the materials and it is satisfying for me to be able to see a reference to that in the label.

Many of the paintings have wampum dust and soil from the Parrish's site that used to be a potato farm. At museums with collections, conservation is actually picky about allowing soil into the galleries. Did you run into that? There are ways of freezing it.

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Jackson: I started using soil when I was in Texas on another creative fellowship for students. The JUNCTURE: Art and Human Rights Law Fellowship from Yale Law School and the Alice Kimball English Traveling Fellowship took me to Houston, Texas to retrace Thurgood Marshall's steps. That was the site of his first successful case of school desegregation, *Sweatt v. Painter* in 1950. I was there during a particularly horrific summer for a Black woman and girls in Texas at the hands of police and vigilante racists and I didn't feel safe moving around in public space. The day after I got there Sandra Bland was found dead in that jail cell. She had been kidnapped only yards away from the entrance of Prairie View A&M University, her alma mater and was one of the places I had intended to go to access archives and ask questions about Thurgood Marshall's presence in Houston. After that happened to her I was like, "Well, I'm not going down that road." I didn't feel like I could go to McKinney, Texas where that pool party assault on Dajerria Becton and the rest of those children took place. I thought that I was going to go there and perform tableau vivant endurance poses while wrapped up in one of my new color studies. But after Sandra Bland was killed I thought better of driving around Texas by myself and going into hostile areas for public art experiments.

I ended up doing all of my work at Project Row Houses. That was the first place I started asking myself how I can embed a site into a surface. I didn't feel safe going out into space, how do I visualize landscape without relying on the figure as the centerpiece? I continually come back to these issues of human experience but I was still really trying to challenge myself to resist my compulsion to lean on the portrait as the centerpiece of my logic. I was trying to resist my own urges and trying to force other conceptual muscles to be developed. How do I visualize the space without images of people? I kept running up against conceptual and tactile walls in Houston. How do I tell this story when I don't feel safe and the public library didn't have any images that documented Marshall's work with the community in Houston? I started considering the soil in front of the row houses and embedded it into the dyed gauze surfaces I was using then.

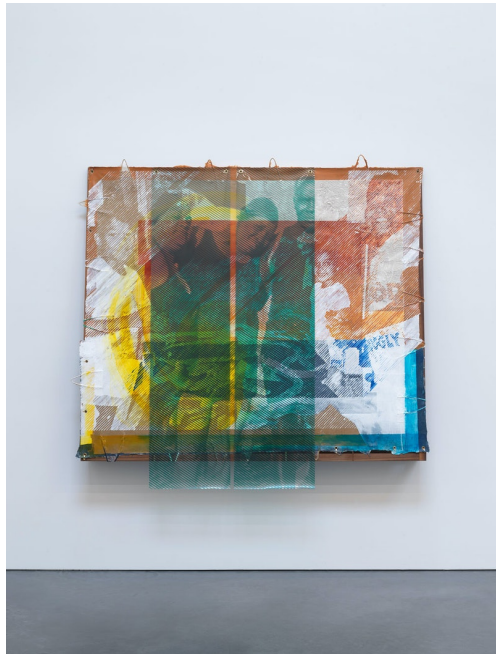
I have a method now and I can meet with conservation departments without feeling ashamed or scared of the outcome. In fact *The Land Claim* is actually very solid. The awning structures are inspired by my introduction to the built environment of New York. The vinyl strips are inspired by warehouses and bodegas in the city, which is all very different from California where I grew up. There are some things that have stuck with me from walking around in new places. The awning structures are made in Los Angeles by a brilliant woodworker and friend, Rubén Palencia. When I went to LA to finish the work for *Forever My Lady* (at Night Gallery, 2020), we were working in the same studio building. I feel like I had been waiting to meet him my whole life. The wood is so soft that one could not micro-dermabrade their face with what he does to that wood!

Figuring out the wall texts and didactics were very important for this body of work. I make the painting but the paintings are influenced by interactions and conversations. Jeff and José print the vinyl strips at Duggal Visual Solutions and the images are significant given that many of them are pictures from historic and family archives suggested by people that I interviewed during this project. It is formally necessary for all of this information to be accessible.

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Tomashi Jackson, *Among Heirs (Niamuck and Azurest)*, 2021. Acrylic and wampum dust on canvas, cotton textiles, and paper bags with archival prints on PVC marine vinyl mounted on a handcrafted walnut awning structure with brass hooks and grommets, 75 x 77 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches. Courtesy Tilton Gallery.

Once I got to Long Island I realized, when talking with people about their families and communities, that I had employed the same methodology in my attempt to better understand my own. For those who value art history as social history it's not even an argument whether or not this is scholarship, being that it fulfills a need to answer archival absences that are born of historic racism and misogyny.

Working on the *Brown II* project at Harvard Radcliffe Institute (on view September 2021–January 2022) brought me together with K. Anthony Jones, Martha Schnee, Kéla B. Jackson, and Rachel Vogel. I offered our research method to the Parrish Art Museum. We ended up with video, audio, transcriptions for the manuscript, original drawings of discussants, and photographic materials. Normally I'd be running around from library to library doing all of this by myself. What became the study room, arranged by Lauren Ruiz, at the Parrish is a product of this process and is one of the benefits of getting to work with other people.

Rail: Can you talk about the process of creating a painting, and your decisions as a colorist?

Jackson: The paintings ended up creating a system for themselves. They are informed by all this background and they make their own logic based on the research.

When I got to Long Island in May, I had to spend a couple of weeks setting up the studio, lining the walls with plastic, and preparing the work space. My supplies and arrangements were provided by the Inga Maren Otto Fellowship at the Watermill Center but I also had to go around Long Island and find textiles to use in the surfaces. *Among Heirs* (2021) is part canvas and part textile from this little shop in Sag Harbor.

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The timeline for making these was incredibly tight, like uncomfortably tight. Although all the interviews had been done, I didn't start painting and constructing the surfaces until May 15 and the show opened on July 10. I didn't know what they were supposed to look like and I didn't know what the image combinations were supposed to be. *Among Heirs* was special because it reminded me why and how I needed to make the work. I was super nervous about that painting because I felt like I did not know what I was supposed to be doing with the surface. When I construct the surface of a painting I embed paper bags and handles. That process defines the framing that happens inside and the mounting later. The geometry of the composition builds from there. So I have to wait for that to happen before I have any idea of what the shape of the thing is going to be, let alone the color combinations. There was a lot of juggling of other responsibilities that were happening while I was in the studio. My first museum book is coming out with this show. We were also still working on the transcription and editing of the interview excerpts at that time and I remember struggling to focus.

One day one of the interviewees, Tela Troge, who's also a fulltime attorney for the Shinnecock Indian Nation, came by on a particularly frustrating day. She took me and Nia to the reservation. All this time that I was on Long Island I didn't spend very much time at all in the communities of the people that had been speaking with me over 18 months because I needed to be in the studio. Tela wanted to show me all the places she had been talking about in the interviews, all the places that they had fought to keep, and all the places that they were trying to get back.

Then she took me to the extended area of the reservation that meets the sea and overlooks one of their bays. The Shinnecock people are the people of the bays and the ocean. We got to the beach just as the sun was setting. When we came through the thicket of the foliage I looked out at this image—it was incredible and I just started crying. I've seen a lot of beautiful places but it just completely overwhelmed me how beautiful it was. I realized that I didn't want to take anything more. I had been trying to figure out what the formula would be for each of the paintings. I thought some of the paintings would have soil from the reservation and some of the paintings would have soil from this town where one of my interviewees grew up, and some of the soil would be from where the Parrish now sits. At that moment I wanted them to have everything that they could have back. I didn't want to take anything.

What I saw was the ground of what became *Among Heirs*. The bag lamination happened and I felt like I got my instructions for what the internal geometry was going to be and then I knew what needs to happen with color interactions. Right before we left my studio for the reservation, I looked at that painting and thought "It looks like it's turning into a seascape." I wasn't trying to make a seascape. The night before I'd added a tight wash of phthalo blue (green shade) against a very sharp, straight taped line. And when I removed that tape I was like, "I'll be damned, that's the ocean!" Then I got over there to the beach called Niamuck, and it was literally the scene from this painting that I hadn't understood.

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Tomashi Jackson, *Among Harvests (Aserrin de colores)* (side view), 2021. Acrylic and soil from the Parrish Art Museum grounds, a former potato field, on canvas, cotton textiles, paper potato bags, and paper bags with archival prints on PVC marine vinyl mounted on a handcrafted walnut awning structure with brass hooks and grommet, 73 1/2 x 78 x 9 1/4 inches. Courtesy Tilton Gallery.

Among Heirs is the outcome of that visit to the beach where I saw in the landscape and the seascape on this reservation, a painting that was emerging in spite of my confusion, uncertainty, and feeling rushed. It righted my relationship with the rest of the paintings. From that point on, whatever sacrifice I needed to make to be sensitive for what their needs were, I made those sacrifices. It is a great honor to have been charged with caring for them into existence. They are very good and I'm not saying that because I made them. They're very good because they needed what they needed, they told me what to do, and they were right.

The people who would come and spend time with me in the studio really illuminated things that the paintings are doing. I'm just working for the paintings. Shane Weeks told me about the process of tanning hides and that my paintings being stretched and cured before they're wrapped around the awning structure is reminiscent of hide tanning. Tela told me that the transparent red iron xide I used in the work turns out to be a sacred color for burial practices for her people.

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I just sent you a photo of the beach. I want to be with you on the phone when you see this.

Rail: Wow the color! It's not only in the sunset, but there is this gradient of color in the soil—rich pinks and purples and blues.

Jackson: Yeah, it freaked me out. It is really beautiful. I was crying. I also sent you a cellphone picture of Kelly Dennis standing next to the halftone line image of her as a child in her grandmother's basement in the painting *Among Heirs*. This is the same Kelly who told me about the Shinnecock land claim when she was introducing me to the Watermill Center. All of the discussants spoke of the land, matriarchy, and labor. I feel like this painting declared itself the "map legend" for everything else because it directed me from that point on. It reminded me that I needed to trust each of the surfaces to lead me.

Rail: That story reminds me of your trust in the process of printmaking. How there is a certain way of doing things to actually get an image. While that could be thought of as restrictive, in a lot of ways it's actually freeing to have a process as a starting point. Your decision to surrender to, as you said, "what the paintings need," sounds very freeing. I always find that artists who really think about the constraints of a site—where it is, what's there, what the budget is, all of these things—are the ones who create the most amazing projects, that re-imagine a context in a way that nobody has ever done before.

Jackson: It's comforting when things end up making sense. There's a comfort in arriving there. Having faith in the process of running yourself ragged. The work is not for nothing.

Rail: Sometimes the work doesn't result in the way you thought it would. But like the work is always worth it, in the end. I find that I still think about conversations I have had with artists or other interesting people, you know, five years ago that never really turned into an interview, or essay, or formal project. I still keep in touch with them, and those conversations eventually become something else that I didn't initially expect.

Jackson: It's pretty exhilarating. And, Maddie, what would we do without each other?

Rails: Relationships made and tended to. That's really all there is.

Jackson: That's it. You said it. Let's end this there.

Contributor

Maddie Klett is a writer and researcher based in NYC and Virginia, U.S.A.