

JORDAN CASTEEL: WITHIN REACH



Jordan Casteel, *Fallou*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 90 x 78 in (228.6 x 198.1 cm). The Dean Collection.
Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

About this Guide

This guide offers information and images from “Jordan Casteel: Within Reach,” focusing on how making and viewing art may be a means of seeing and forging relationships with people and places in one’s communities. Educators will find lesson plans that focus on two themes, each paired with selected works from two of Jordan Casteel’s painting series.

- Focus on Community I: Relationships to Place in “Nights in Harlem” (pgs. 4-8)
- Focus on Community II: Relationships to People in “The Practice of Freedom” (pgs. 9-14)

The ideas, questions, and activities in these plans may overlap in relevance and be applied beyond the suggested image and series pairings here. Lesson plans are created with 6-12th grade students in the United States in mind, but may be adapted across age, grade, geography, and developmental readiness with shifts in vocabularies, art-making mediums, and emphasis educators employ. For similar activities designed for young children working with teachers or caregivers, see the [New Museum Kids Menu](#).

Each Lesson Plan offers:

- **Series Background:** A brief text is included to introduce each series.
- **Warm Up Questions:** These questions introduce key concepts for discussion, journaling, or a worksheet of writing prompts.
- **Series Image Selection:** Each image is paired with quotes from Jordan Casteel, excerpted from the exhibition catalogue and/or audio guide and discussion questions. Each page can be shared with students for independent homework or learning together.
- **Art Making Procedure:** Plans are inspired by the work of Jordan Casteel and designed considering minimal availability of art-making supplies as well as remote or classroom learning. Lessons can be adapted for teachers and students working across various painting and drawing materials and digital media.
- **Art Making Reflection Questions:** These questions are designed for small group or class discussion, journaling, or a worksheet of writing prompts.

About the Exhibition “Jordan Casteel: Within Reach” (New Museum, 2020)

Bringing together nearly forty paintings spanning her career, including works from her celebrated series *Visible Man* (2013–14) and *Nights in Harlem* (2015–2017), along with recent portraits of her students at Rutgers University–Newark, *The Practice of Freedom* (2018–2019), “Within Reach” is Jordan Casteel’s first solo museum exhibition in New York City. In her large-scale oil paintings, Casteel has developed a distinctive figurative language permeated by the presence of her subjects, who are typically captured in larger-than-life depictions that teem with domestic details and psychological insights.

Portraying people from communities in which the artist lives and works—including former classmates at Yale, where she earned an MFA; street vendors and neighbors near her home in Harlem; and her own students at Rutgers University—Casteel insists upon the ordinary, offering scenes with both the informality of a snapshot and the frontality of an official portrait. In these richly colorful works, Casteel draws upon ongoing conversations

on portraiture that encompass race, gender, and subjectivity, connecting her practice to the legacy of artists like Alice Neel, Faith Ringgold, and Bob Thompson, among others. Casteel's studies in anthropology and sociology also inform her works, which can often be read as a reflection on the presentation of the self in everyday life and as an investigation of the relationships that tie together intimacy and distance, familiarity and otherness.

Jordan Casteel (b. 1989, Denver, CO) lives and works in New York City and is Assistant Professor of Painting in the Department of Arts, Culture, and Media at Rutgers University-Newark. She received her BA from Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA, and her MFA in Painting and Printmaking at Yale University, New Haven, CT.

Further Resources: To hear more work in the exhibition "Within Reach," [watch a virtual tour](#) with Jordan Casteel and the curator, Massimiliano Gioni, Edlis Neeson Artistic Director, or [hear the audio guide](#) with the artist on the New Museum website. [View two short "New York Close Up"](#) videos produced by Art21 following Jordan Casteel through aspects of her process.

Key Words

Relate: 1) to find or show a connection; 2) to identify with, to understand due to familiar experience; 3) to tell a story, or describe a series of events

Community: 1) a unified body of individuals: such as people with common interests living in a particular area; or *broadly*, the area itself; 2) a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society; 3) people who share something in common, such as professional interests, scattered geographically; 4) a group of people or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests

Portraiture: the art of making portraits; representations of particular people, and sometimes places

Representation: 1) the action of speaking or acting on behalf of someone or the state of being so represented, e.g. "asylum-seekers should be guaranteed good legal advice and representation;" 2) the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way, or as being of a certain nature; 3) the depiction of someone or something in a picture or other work of art; 4) formal statements made to a higher authority, especially so as to communicate an opinion or register a protest

Gaze: 1) to look at intently, to stare; 2) the gaze can also signify a relationship to power, in which the person who gazes assumes a position of power to the person/object of the gaze

Focus on Community I

Relationships to Place in “Nights in Harlem”

Objectives:

1. Students will evaluate how built environments contribute to the artist’s sense of place, and how she communicates this through her paintings.
2. Students will closely observe spaces where they live and consider how visual culture, encounters, and activities found in public space, or outdoors, form their relationships, associations, and identifications with place and community.
3. Students will create drawings or paintings of places that express their sense of community and consider how their work might be received within their community and apart from it.
4. Students will interpret how art and images can expand (and sometimes limit) our understanding of place and communities, both new and familiar to us.

Warm Up Questions:

1. What does community mean to you?
2. What do you know of Harlem? If you do not have lived experiences with Harlem, what images, art, stories, songs, authors, or artists may form your impression or knowledge?
3. Have you lived in a place (city, town, area, or neighborhood) that has images or histories associated with it, images created from outside and/or within the community? In what ways might these stories and images align or differ with your experience of place and community?
4. Have you ever moved or traveled somewhere with expectations based on stories and images? If so, how did your experience align with or differ from your initial impressions? Would holding longer conversations or spending more time there offer different perspectives?

Series Background “Nights in Harlem”

Jordan Casteel moved to Harlem in 2015 to work as an Artist-in-Residence at Studio Museum in Harlem. While she had not lived there previously, she has extended family members who do and family history there. The historically black community of Harlem formed during the Great Migration, when many African Americans moved north following the abolishment of slavery. The community was home to a rich and influential period of cultural production known as the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. The legacy and institutions of this period, as well as everchanging cultural work across music, art, writing, scholarship, entrepreneurship, and activism have continued, while the community and residents have also undergone changes and challenges of racial and anti-black violence, including financial inequities, discrimination, and displacement through gentrification.

For the series “Nights in Harlem” Casteel set out to engage and connect with people she encountered in her new neighborhood through taking their photograph and then create a painting. She also focused on relationships to a sense of place and belonging. In her words: “...whether I’m painting a figure or not, I am always representing the spaces in which people live. The paintings in ‘Nights in Harlem’ were definitely more engaged with the spaces in which people move and live....I still went out and met people, at night or in the evening this time, but I was trying to catch the light and the reflections and the space around the people...The actual spaces that they occupied were my primary focus at that time. I was interested in the way some people in Harlem, in particular, created domestic spaces on the street. They literally carried the home with them...” [Catalogue, “Jordan Casteel: Within Reach,” pg. 21]

Discuss a selection of portraits by Casteel of small businesses, street vendors, and entrepreneurs who Casteel befriended, photographed, and painted when she moved to her Harlem neighborhood:

James, 2015

"I moved to Harlem and found myself drawn to the people and the energy of 125th Street. It just happened naturally. I grabbed my camera and put it around my neck and thought: 'I'm going to walk around and just try to introduce myself to people'...I set out with this idea that I would like to meet people and paint people on the street. You could say I just set forth to make friends..."

"James, for example, was the very first person I photographed in that series and he was sitting out in front of Sylvia's Restaurant selling CDs. That man is so dapper—he embodied the energy I had always imagined Harlem would have." [Catalogue, "Jordan Casteel: Within Reach," pg. 21]



1. How would you describe the energy in this image?

2. Casteel works from what she sees and captures in photographs, rather than her straight from imagination, but consider some creative choices: the repetition of building windows; a typically black Fender speaker painted a flat, glowing yellow, without texture or shadow. What other choices do you see that create a sense of energy and mood?

3. If the figure was seated on a stool indoors, in a painting studio, or with a simple background, how would it change your reading of the portrait? What do we know of James or where he works and lives?

Jordan Casteel, *James*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 72 x 56 in (182.9 x 142.2 cm)
Collection Dr. Anita Blanchard and Martin H. Nesbitt

Tito, 2017

"I felt acutely aware that I was approaching a subject like Harlem, which had been central to the work of many artists like [Romare Bearden](#), [Dawoud Bey](#), and [Beauford Delaney](#), even after he moved to Paris. There are so many people who've been inspired by Harlem, and I felt like I was seeing Harlem through them as well. My grandfather's funeral procession happened down 125th Street. I felt that I was walking in my own lineage and in a great lineage of artists." [Catalogue, Jordan Casteel: Within Reach, pg. 23]



Jordan Casteel, *Tito*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 78 x 60 in (198.12 x 152.4 cm)
Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection

1. Without knowing any narrative (storytelling) details, do you find that this painting visually expresses an experience of walking through a place that has unique lineages and histories? How?

This is a painting of a Harlem community member, Tito, sitting outside of his family's business, a laundromat. The mural behind him depicts his father at different points of his life.

2. How might a work of art such as the mural, or Casteel's portrait of Tito in this setting, communicate a sense of home or belonging? To what degree does it do so directly through visual representation, or through the storytelling and questions the work generates?

Amina, 2017

"I realized I felt seen and heard and comfortable in Harlem in a way I hadn't felt anywhere in New York yet. "Amina" is an echoing of all the spaces and places that I have walked by and thought about, or seen community being built and wanting to share that with others." – [Jordan Casteel](#), Audio Guide "Amina"



Jordan Casteel, *Amina*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 90 x 78 in (228.6 x 198.1 cm)
Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

1. Why do you think the business (and painting) is named Amina? How does that compare with your associations with the names of national chain stores, like fast food restaurants?
2. The sidewalk is emptied of people in this depiction of Amina at night. Do you think this painting expresses a sense of community, or isolation? How?
3. When Casteel described seeing "We make the difference," she said, "I thought, we do make a difference!" How might a phrase "found" in a landscape resonate multiple meanings?

Art Making

Focus on Community I

Relationships to Place in “Nights in Harlem”

Students will make a portrait of community by picturing a place they identify as meaningful to their sense of home and belonging.

Materials

- sketchbook or notebook; camera (cell phone); or laptop/device with internet access to source images
- Pencil (a no. 2 pencil works well; if you have colored pencils, those can be used too)
- Paper

Procedure

1. For home/remote independent work, ask students to consider a façade (exterior/face of a building) in their community that informs a sense their sense of home, familiarity, history, or belonging to place. It could be surrounding their home, school, job, or other space they move through frequently.
2. Ask students to take pictures, create a sketch, and/or take notes about details; consider multi-sensory experiences and memories associated with this place too: might they visualize how a place sounds, smells, how the air, light, and textures feel?
[If students are unable to document the place they have chosen, they might look up images of places on a street view map on the internet to help remember details.]
3. On another sheet of paper, students will draw the place they relate to as part of their community, remembering some of the ways Casteel creates a sense of energy. Whether they are capturing the dramatic lighting of night, the feeling of a warm spring day, a bustling, or quiet sidewalk—how will they use a range of light and dark, warm and cool (if using color), detailed lines and frenetic textures, or smooth/flat pauses, to capture the energy they associate with this place? What detail do they think are important: name of the business, homemade or hand drawn signage, graphic design, messages to customers or community, objects in the windows, or details that identify this place and offer clues about how the people who work there are part of the community?
4. Optional: A large part of Casteel’s practice is further connecting with people and communities she paints by sharing her work with them. Students might write a letter, or a simple message with their picture that communicates why this place and the people who work there are important to them and their community. Deliver, mail, email, post and tag a digital image, or physically post the image and message near the business to share with the community.
5. Ask students to share their images as a class or in small groups or partners to see where they have similar or different stories, associations, relationships, and identifications with the places they chose.

Reflection

Ask students to reflect on the following questions through discussion, worksheet, or journaling:

1. What did you notice while sharing and discussing these images of place with peers?
2. What stories, questions, feelings, or new ways of seeing might your picture generate? Would this change depend on the viewer’s relationship to the place and community?
3. Does your picture capture the sense of community you relate to and wanted to share with others?

Focus on Community II

Relationships with People in “The Practice of Freedom”

Objectives:

1. Students will identify how Jordan Casteel and her students use collaborative processes.
2. Students will create collaborative portraits that reflect aspects of how they wish to be seen.
3. Students will analyze on what they learned through the process and how it relates to community building.

Warm Up Questions:

5. Is a class or school a community? Do you feel you are part of one or more communities? Are you part of communities online, in school, out of school?
6. Do teachers and classmates know you in the same way people outside of school know you? Do you feel ok if people in different communities you move through know you differently? Do you wish there were things that people understood about you across these spheres?
7. Have you ever run into or seen a teacher or a classmate outside of school and learned something else about them, or have your impression changed or challenged?
8. In a journal/notebook, create a Venn diagram with two or more overlapping settings and the label: “In [name of place/community (School, Home, Basketball, Art Class, etc.,)] I am _____”; list how you see yourself and are seen in those spaces.

Series Background: “The Practice of Freedom”

“The Practice of Freedom,” completed in 2019, is the most recent series of work included in “Jordan Casteel: Within Reach” and feature the artist’s undergraduate students from Rutgers University-Newark. This represents a shift in her work from earlier paintings, in which she depicts primarily strangers who she met through her intentions to paint them. Most of the portraits in this series are set in domestic interiors such as the homes of students, often including their personal belongings. Each student considered how they wish to be portrayed in collaboration with Casteel. The title of the series nods toward resonances Casteel found with feminist and critical race theorist bell hooks’ 1994 text [“Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom.”](#) which advocates for reciprocity in which both students and teachers see themselves and each other as learners, having knowledge and experience to share and actively create an anti-oppressive community in the classroom. In the artist’s words:

“I have known the students in this latest series for a long time. I have been teaching them for three years and I have watched them develop in my classroom as artists and as young people who are trying to find their way in the world. And for the portraits I got to peek inside their homes: the portraits are set in their private spaces or in the settings they chose. Some of the sitters really wanted to be portrayed with their mothers, for example. When I started working on these portraits, I had to see my students differently, to see them how they want to be seen. Many of the sitters in the paintings have graduated, so there is also this sense of capturing them before they go, before they change. I think of them as being about freedom, or about the practice of freedom. My philosophy as an educator is that you’re never done being a student, and in the classroom, you are learning as much as you are teaching, and together we are practicing becoming ourselves.” [Catalogue, “Jordan Casteel: Within Reach,” pg. 25]

Discuss a selection of portraits of Jordan Casteel’s students in her series “The Practice of Freedom.”

Jahi, 2019

“Jahi is of Dominican and African American background, so he made the decision to have his shoes off specifically because of the U. S. [Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos](#), who won the gold and bronze respectively, in the 200 meter sprint, and they raise their black gloved fists. But another decision that they made in that moment was that they took their shoes off to signal to black poverty. They specifically were wearing black socks. Jahi, himself isn’t wearing black socks, but he did make the decision to take his shoes off. He wanted the shoes in the picture...he was very specific about that. In that moment, he was like...‘I’m making the decision not to be wearing them.’” — [Jordan Casteel, Audio Guide, “Jahi.”](#)



1. Do you feel the reason for Jahi’s decision to not wear shoes is expressed in this picture?
2. Jahi was very intentional about many decisions in the picture. What else might you interpret about Jahi through his clothing, pose, gaze, and expression?
3. What more do you want to know or ask Jahi that you cannot see in the picture?

Jordan Casteel, *Jahi*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 90 x 78 in (228.6 x 198.12 cm).
Collection of a Friend of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

Noelle, 2019

“The word collaboration is always on the forefront of my mind...I want them to feel empowered and powerful. [The sitters] can direct the image in a lot of ways, but the one thing I ask is that they look at me when I take the photographs, the gaze I replicate in the painting.” – [Jordan Casteel, talk Art podcast](#)



1. How would you describe Noelle's room and the energy in this image? How do her pose and surroundings contribute to this mood?

2. How many gazes do you see in this picture? Compare how the gazes are rendered.

3. Do you think Noelle chose to include the poster and the doll/pillow in the image? Why or why not?

4. What can we interpret from this image? What can we not tell from this image?

Jordan Casteel, *Noelle*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 78 × 60 in (198.1 × 152.4 cm)
Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

***Cansuela*, 2019**

"I'm most inspired by my students. The things that they make feel fresh and honest...there's a lot of sincerity in the things they are making that I hope to achieve." — [Jordan Casteel, talk Art podcast](#)



Jordan Casteel, *Cansuela*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 78 x 90 in. (198.12 x 228.6 cm)
The Komal Shah and Gaurav Garg Collection

1. Casteel has spoken about how her process intersects with trust and intimacy. Does this painting express trust?
2. What might a teacher learn from seeing where a student works outside the classroom?
3. These paintings are very large, the size of portraits historically used for powerful, well-known figures. What does it mean for Casteel to represent her students at this scale?

Art Making

Focus on Community II

Relationships to People in “The Practice of Freedom”

Students will work collaboratively to create portraits of someone in their community through listening and considering how they wish to be represented.

Materials

- This activity can be photo, drawing, or painting based, depending on available time and class emphasis.

Art Making Procedure (2-3 class periods, or abbreviated depending on overall emphasis of class and materials)

1. After the teacher demonstrates by sharing and discussing something of their own, students are invited to wear or bring something to their next class that is important to how they see themselves and/or a community with which they feel connected. *Students should aim for something symbolic, that they would not be upset if they lost or misplaced it in transit. If there is something they want to show, but would feel uncomfortable bringing in, they can also take a picture of the object.*
2. In small groups or as a class, students brainstorm and prepare a list of approximately 10 possible questions (enough to interview a partner for 10 minutes). List questions by priority. Questions should be respectful of privacy and mindful of one’s own assumptions. Questions should be open ended and create space for people to share what they want to about themselves, in their own words, rather than assume knowledge of who the other person is or what their experiences are. (10 minutes)
3. Pair students. They should take notes (or record one another’s voices using a recording device/app) and consider how they can make sure to pay close attention while they listen. They first are instructed to break the ice by talking about the object or clothing they brought into show and tell something about themselves. After three minutes, announce that the students should trade places of listener and teller, if they have not (total of six minutes)
4. Each student will interview their partner for 10 minutes and then spend five minutes discussing and posing for each other’s reference photos or a photo-based portrait. Tell students that can say “pass” to questions they don’t feel like answering or feel would not express how they want to be represented. (15 minutes than switch; 30 minutes total)
5. Students either work on quick representations or longer-term portraits of their classmates using their notes and photos as references.

Remote Learning Alternatives: How might we connect through portraiture during social distancing?

- At home: Students may work with someone in their family, emphasizing the domestic setting. Does the portrait capture an unusual time, or is it how the subject would choose to represent themselves and the environment they live in, at any time? Did the student learn something new about someone in their family, even if they are close, by asking them to choose objects they think are important to be in the portrait, or how they wish to pose, or what they’d like to wear?
- Online: Students may creatively consider how to represent a classmate through a virtual portrait. After interviewing a partner remotely, students create a playlist, poem, or collage representing what they have learned about their partner. Or, students may digitally alter photographs they exchange. How might they capture their classmate’s energy, interests, and what’s meaningful to them in the changes they make to the photo, or by making a drawing using the photo for reference?

Wrap Up: To conclude the chosen activities, students share the portraits they created with each other in small groups, interpreting and discussing what they see in each other's images and what they intended.

Reflection

Ask students to reflect on the following questions through discussion, worksheet, or journaling:

1. Did the process of making a portrait change your understanding of each other? If so, how?
2. Did the process of viewing classmates' portraits of each other, or the portrait of yourself, change your understanding of one another? If so, how?
3. How does your portrait of a classmate include aspects of how they wanted to be represented? Does the portrait capture your impressions or things you learned about your classmate?
4. To what degree was the process reciprocal? Did you mutually have power to share, express, listen, and learn? Did you feel more comfortable being represented or representing someone else through portraiture?
5. Imagine all of your class's portraits together. If everyone in the class knew the stories behind each of them, do you think it would change the classroom community?