

Tomashi Jackson's *Love Rollercoaster*: The Quiet Parts Out Loud

By Dionne Custer Edwards

By hand, before or behind the ballot, the citizenry, civic rhythms and behaviors, Tomashi Jackson fastens, tints, and shapes *Love Rollercoaster*: a solo exhibition of five new works that consider the associations of “the political and the aesthetic,”¹ access and barriers, identity and abstraction, and color in all its volumes, dialects, and intentions. Jackson is an American artist, born in Houston, Texas, who grew up in Los Angeles, California, and studied at Cooper Union School of Art, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture and Planning, and the Yale School of Art.

She often works across several mediums, including painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, video, and combinations of these. Jackson found formative inspiration and influence in Josef Albers's grounding and instructional text on the study of color (*Interaction of Color*, first published in 1963), and she credits Albers's seminal theoretical frameworks as both foundational and insightful for her own investigations. Jackson explores experiences both with and of color, along with the manifestations and implications of race and segregation, the social and the political, in public life. Her work suggests a generative helix of the study of color theory and of painting and multimedia practices as they intersect with contexts such as social capital, political opportunity,

and Critical Race Theory.² Her paintings soaked in formative and fertile elements thread new language into dialogue as she traces policies and the practices of people, specifically Black people. Narrative lines move as material acts, critical passages, and illusions—the way color behaves and fields certainty and façade across a surface, along the wall, inside a space.

Love Rollercoaster is realized in a careful wading in and tearing of the exterior to uncover what is held up and bare what is beneath. Each composition has a sense of immediacy and depth. The paintings reimagine social and political contexts, shallows and burials, with multiple dimensions and canopies, and surfaces dripping with images, text, and vinyl. They embody the artist's process: grounded in a range of research tactics, including engaging with historical texts, collaborating with strangers through storytelling and interviews, and excavating materials. With an abiding historic and figurative weight, the paintings and their surrounding space stream a fire hum of funk, rhythm and blues, and freedom. Playing in the space is duration—a mélange of Ohio Players' music drifts in, out, and in between a party of testaments, acts of existing, patchworks of truths, polite and painful textures of injustice, past and present periods of Black life, steady, bold, sensual, referenced in color blocks and fragments of words, volumes, and shapes.

What do these works have to say about democracy?
The artist pursues this in the listening and the labor.

The composition of each work crafts and expands, complicating color and lines, carrying form and precision, yet resisting an absolute or fixed perspective. The paintings are moving. They embody the exactness of record and the immediacy of revelation. There is room for effort and for change, room for jutting out from the walls, dripping as paint, pain, or perseverance.

The large-scale compositions have an enduring audible quality that keeps as much as it reveals. The quilted surfaces defy singularity of hue and define new intersections and angles, layering a language towards access to color and to experiences. Images and sounds are stretched and pressed into these works, which hold a bit of grit and shine, moistened with soil from Lucy Depp Park in Delaware County, Ohio. Lucy Depp was the daughter of Abram Depp, of Virginia. The elder Depp, freed from slavery in the early 1800s, settled in Ohio, acquired land, and created a community active in the Ohio abolitionist movements. Jackson's paintings seek stories and hold histories. Ideologies sit as ink, as sacred conceptual structures of democracy. Jackson pursues these ideas with intention: she uses Pentellic marble dust from ancient Greek quarries as a provocative element and reflective echo to mark time and interrogate early notions of the body politic and of democracy.

How, where, does one hold their civic engagement? Does it glow and shadow with time? How do fixed lines and deep bureaucratic trenches drive people to engage in the

political process? What is the color of persistence? Do the holes and corners of a veiled political system breed apathy as much as stimulate immense effort and resistance? Is disenfranchisement a kind of erasure working in some enduring and quiet way? How do you paint abiding injustice?

To investigate, Jackson is artist, researcher, witness, citizen. For *Love Rollercoaster*, she composed a template of inquiries from a set of conversations with current and former central Ohio residents. In those conversations, she examined the civic behaviors of these citizens and how that aligned, interacted, collided with Ohio's social and political histories, and with the landscape of now. The similarities and differences are as stark and significant as a brush of lucent story saturated and brimming over the sides of each painting in the exhibition. Jackson gathered political, campaign, activist ephemera as notes of varying practices of democracy, as multiple ways we evidence a process. Those notes show up in her work as memory, myth, candor, rituals, reconstructions, the evidence of behaviors.

As with past work, Jackson's creative process is often immersive, in the research, in the community, in the making. Deliberate time is spent sitting with truths, with social illusions, revisions, and concepts, allowing space for surprise and more questions. Jackson often draws herself into the landscape of a region, into the swath of its social fabric, to discover the residue of a political space and fold those narratives into the work.

What makes Ohio a critical place to cast a vote? Ohio continues to be an electoral “battleground” in reference to national elections. Swinging a pendulum of red to blue to lavender, amethyst, deep shades, complicated and wavering. The three major metropolitan areas in Ohio: Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati are surrounded by smaller towns, flat lands, and a sometimes-unpredictable political compass coupled with a sharp sensibility and undeniable accuracy when it comes to electing US presidents. Historically, with great consistency, if a presidential candidate won Ohio, the chances were high that candidate would win the US general election.

When Tomashi Jackson explores an original idea, a question, a notion, she often gives it space to gather its own matter and conclusions. *What do you remember about the first time you voted?* Jackson asked. *How has voting changed for you over time?* As Jackson asked each question, she listened with interest and intention. Through physical, structural, and technological barriers, she created a room where strangers uncovered vastly different accountings of personal experiences and ideas of democracy: how local schools are funded, differences in local, state, federal governance and policy, Ohio as a theoretical swing state, participatory grooves and mood. During these conversations, most of the participants danced around pointed political views. They focused on the process, on the practice. Some of the people Jackson interviewed expressed how the act of voting traveled with them from state to state—like a calling, a

familiar exercise of right and desire. Other narratives told of the local, state-wide, and national barriers to the electoral process. Of how one voices an opinion, through a poll, on a ballot, against many odds. Others seemed to grapple with whether that one vote mattered or made a difference in a system entangled in a long history of segregation, disenfranchisement, discrimination, fluctuating electoral representation, partisan gerrymandering, and myriad other social, economic, and political barricades.

Full in the gallery conceptual figures and acts are embedded in an examination of civic practices. A sound tapestry of primary sources—the remnants of dialogue, storytelling, remembering—act as exercises of discovery and bleed through the space as evidence of bodies, of histories as concrete, active lived experiences. Curled inside or around ambient discursive content lie baselines, riffs, rhythms, audacity, desire. And along the walls each social mythical etching is brushed, affixed, dangling, and sculpted as objects, as steeps and bounds.

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1. This phrase and other pairings of “politics” and “aesthetics” circulate in the discourse about Jackson’s art as evidenced in the title of an interview with Jackson by Corrine Ermi cited in the References, among other examples.

2. Critical Race Theory is a field of study and academic movement whose notable scholars include Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, and Richard Delgado.

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