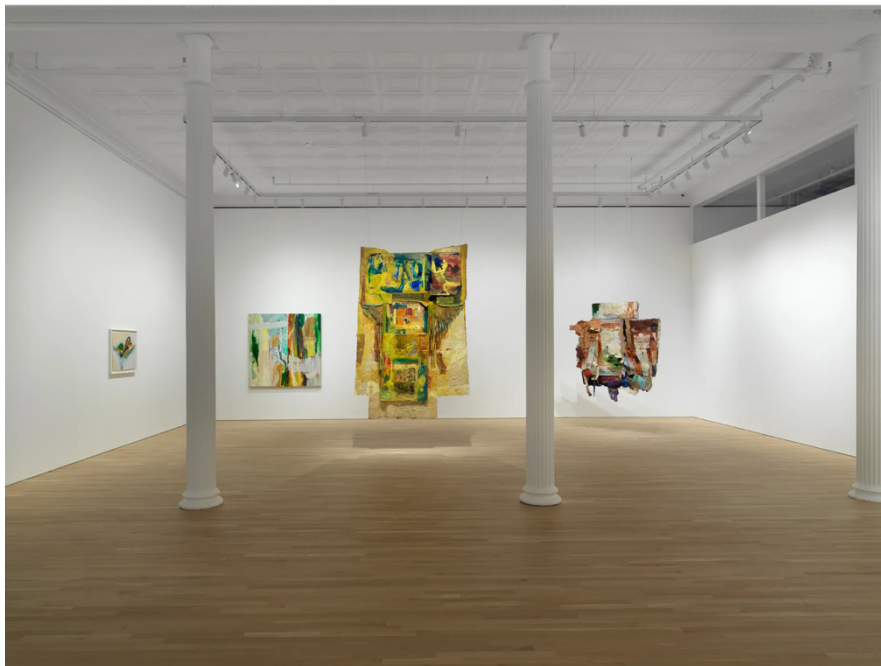


# BROOKLYN RAIL

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## Suzanne Jackson: *light and paper*

By Beryl Gilothwest



Installation views, *Suzanne Jackson: light and paper*, at Ortuzar Projects 2024. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

“I’m constantly trying to find nature,” Suzanne Jackson explained in a 2022 interview in this magazine. While she was referring to her life, this sentiment just as easily extends to her art. Jackson’s work over more than fifty years has engaged with the natural world in myriad ways, rooted in Black and Indigenous histories and often connected to the wide variety of towns and cities where she has lived and worked—from Fairbanks, Alaska; to Oakland, California; to Savannah, Georgia and beyond. She responds to these places more philosophically than literally, referencing them specifically but indirectly in her artworks. Her titles, which are bestowed intentionally, function as guideposts, highlighting places, people, spirits, or memories that are evoked in her figurative and abstract compositions.

This through line weaves its way through eleven works that span forty years in her latest exhibition, *Suzanne Jackson: light and paper*, at Ortuzar Projects in New York, which focuses on the use of paper in her practice. The fusion suggested in the show's title is quite literal in the painting on paper *Oakland Studio Light* (1992), which Jackson made during two years spent in the Bay Area during the early 1990s. The titular cool, blue-tinged light that permeates the painting echoes Richard Diebenkorn's similarly regionally specific "Ocean Park" series. In Jackson's painting, this light streams through minimally rendered white window panes across the top of the composition, embedding itself into gestural swaths of blues, greens, browns, and yellows below them.



Suzanne Jackson, *Oakland Studio Light*, 1992. Graphite, acrylic, and oil pastel on paper, 52 3/4 x 120 1/2 inches. © Suzanne Jackson. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

While the space, light, and architecture of the Bay Area resonated with Jackson, the particular natural environment of coastal Georgia instantly captured her attention when she took a teaching job at the Savannah College of Art and Design in 1996. Moisture hangs heavily in the air in the Georgia Lowcountry, and a constant orchestra of insects, birds, and frogs makes the atmosphere feel like it's breathing. Jackson was especially interested in this landscape in the context of its Black American cultural heritage. When she visited Hog Hammock on Sapelo Island, one of the only remaining Gullah Geechee communities in the Georgia Sea Islands, she remembers feeling "as if somehow I had been there, I had a spirit there."

The excesses of the Savannah landscape are palpable in these works, even in those that don't specifically refer to the natural environment. In contrast to her similarly gestural but comparatively minimal paintings of the 1980s—such as *Dance* and *Blooming* (both 1984)—her tribute to three Black jazz greats *9, Billie, Mingus, Monk's* (2003) is a cacophony of color and materials jockeying for position. Jackson layered a wide range of different textures—primarily different types of paper (flax, Bogus, Stonehenge, and tissue), as well as more unusual materials such as the netting from produce bags—on an armature of wood and canvas. Curator and critic Tiffany E. Barber has pointed out that Savannah's powerful humidity caused the Bogus paper in Jackson's studio to become warped and wrinkled, an effect that the artist incorporated stylistically into the work's three-dimensional surface. The city's air, detritus, and energy coalesce in the piece.



Suzanne Jackson, *9, Billie, Mingus, Monk's*, 2003. Acrylic, acrylic gel medium, flax paper, Bogus paper, Stonehenge paper, tissue, linen, nursery burlap, produce bag netting, canvas and wood; double-sided. 64 x 65 x 5 1/2 inches. © Suzanne Jackson. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

The visual and physical maximalism of *9, Billie, Mingus, Monk's* makes it feel more sculptural than painterly, an effect that is exacerbated by Jackson's decision to suspend it from the ceiling. While the work isn't overtly kinetic, air currents in the gallery cause it to sway gently and vibrate. Hung in the middle of the space and therefore visible from all sides, it appears differently depending on the viewer's position. By presenting the work in this way—as an object rather than a painting—viewers are forced to contend with it as a fellow actor in the ongoing drama unfolding in the gallery. This vitality feels like an extension of Jackson's multilayered experience of Savannah, which she says today is “still a culture shock.”

By highlighting paper-based works from throughout Jackson's career, *light and paper* showcases how she uses the material as a base for the limitless expansion of her visual language, from which unexpected details subtly emerge. Walking up to the nearly nine-foot-tall *Selu Stories* (2006), which references the Cherokee goddess of corn, it is easy to get lost in the work's thunderous color palette and texture-driven terrain. Slowly, a handful of cowrie shells dangling from cascading strips of canvas emerges in the center of the composition. The quiet inclusion of these natural objects—which come from the sea and have charged significance in both Native American and Black American cultures—evoke Jackson's particular synthesis of place, memory, and her own inner spirit.