

JORDAN CASTEEL

BY WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women.

—Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992)

It would be easy and reductive to see Jordan Casteel as a documentary artist. This is not to discount documentarians, but it is important to consider Casteel as resonating with a different timbre, something specific to her treatment of bodies as coextensive with paint. She combines representative and abstract methodologies, akin to Lorna Simpson, Joan Semmel (see page 94), Julie Mehretu, or Nicole Eisenman (see page 110)—pioneers of black, queer, and feminist painterly strategies who, like Casteel, understand the body's multifaceted and sometimes mysterious resonances. Casteel's paintings are records of people and places in the documentary tradition, to be sure, but she imbues biographical detail with expression so forceful that the everyday becomes extraordinary, or, perhaps more importantly, its everydayness becomes valuable as such without some requisite transcendence. Colors melt into bodies and bodies expand into fields of pigment. Casteel does not just elevate the mundane, which is enough in itself; she moreover suggests that the mundane is already breathtaking in countless small ways that may initially go unnoticed: a gaze directed outside the frame toward some unknown event or perhaps nothing at all, a vibrant plaid shirt, an unknowable conversation.

Casteel's figures become both immediate and opaque, resisting thereby the documentary legibility that has often been assigned to artists of color. We may be able to touch Casteel's figures, or even identify who they are, but they insist, rightly, on a degree of privacy. It is this life-affirming desire for a separation between the viewer and her subjects that makes Casteel's world so politically and aesthetically powerful. Her figures often regard us, but can we purport to know the plenitude of their experiences? Surely not. As Julie Mehretu has suggested, "Opacity is radical and

a site of potential," especially for artists of color, on whom we often foist unwanted interpretations and responsibilities centered on sociopolitical legibility.¹ We must allow these paintings to exist in a beautifully inscrutable fashion, awash in pigment and finding chromatic enjoyment quite separate from us.

Casteel thus problematizes identity and representation. She certainly depicts communities of color, but she also shows us communities of color, that is, harmonies among hues and lines that come together to form a subtle crescendo of meaning. These individuals emerge from color, and while color constitutes them, it can never contain them. Representation as it regards identity politics implies a boundedness of the body and groups of bodies. Casteel invests in the sociopolitical potential of painting, but there is also something beyond and beside that potential—a site of meaning with such plenitude that easy explanations or narratives fall away. Color, in all its iterations, has a story that we think we know. We assume its history and how it might resonate in contemporary times. We imagine with certainty how color ought to speak to us. With Casteel's paintings, however, color sings with endless voices—some quietly, some with a strident shout, and others with a powerful harmony.

Around the same time as Morrison wrote *Jazz*, Harryette Mullen wrote *Muse & Drudge*:

if I can't have love
I'll take sunshine
if I'm too plain for champagne
I'll go float on red wine

The narrator indicates simultaneously aspiration and contentment—a permeating sense in her marrow that the world has something for her, something satisfying if only momentarily, something both breathtaking and banal. We might likewise turn to Casteel for love and sunshine, champagne and red wine.

1. William J. Simmons, "Julie Mehretu: 'That Indeterminate Space, That Indeterminate Space,'" *Flaunt* 145 (2016). www.flaut.com/content/art/julie-mehretu.



Amina, 2017
Oil on canvas
90 x 78 inches (228.6 x 198.1 cm)