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Painting in Black and White: Race and the New Figurative Art

In their electric new paintings, Jordan Casteel and Celeste Dupuy-Spencer fly the flag for a new wave of American figurative painting that casts the subtleties of race in a newly engaging light.

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Aruna D'Souza

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Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *Durham, August 14, 2017*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 71.1 x 88.9 cm. Courtesy of Marlborough Contemporary, New York

GARAGE is a print and digital universe spanning the worlds of art, fashion, design, and culture. Our launch on VICE.com is coming soon, but until then, we're publishing original stories, essays, videos, and more to give you a taste of what's to come.

Jordan Casteel paints the street life of Harlem and its black residents, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer the quirky, and often decrepit, trappings of whiteness. But don't let their subject matter fool you. At heart, these two young artists—both of whom are having buzz-worthy solo shows in New York galleries right now—share a common idea: that to deal with our racist past and present, we need to see the world with empathy and care. The results are compelling, and transformative, and, in very different ways, beautiful.

Jordan Casteel's exhibition at Casey Kaplan is titled *Nights in Harlem*, and that's precisely what almost all of the 10 oil paintings on view (all from 2017) represent: the people who occupy the sidewalks and stoops of a neighborhood that has always been synonymous with the African American experience in the US. Her

Casteel's choice of subjects stems from something far more personal, however: conversations with her two brothers in the aftermath of the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, and the acquittal of his killer the following year. Casteel came to realize that there were relatively few images of black men that showed them as the kind of people she knew her brothers to be: fully human, that is to say—people who had social lives and were integral, valued members of families and communities.

From that point, she devoted herself almost exclusively to painting black men and boys, first in interior settings, and now on the street. "I needed to find a way to combine my desire to create a sense of visibility around my family and my brothers that was feeling absent at that time," she has said of her decision.



Jordan Casteel, *Joe and Mozel (Pompette Wines)*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 198.12 cm. Photo: Jason Wyche, courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York

Finding her subjects means, for Casteel, forging relationships—she prowls the streets with her (serious) camera in tow, making eye contact, striking up conversations, learning about people's lives, and taking their pictures. She gets their contact info so she can email them the photos later, and often stays in touch long-term, too; a number of the subjects of the paintings in this show attended the opening, she says. "Q [one of the men she depicts] gave me fifty hugs when he saw the show last night," she laughs. "And he said he would have given me a thousand more if he could! There's something really powerful about knowing that someone has seen you."

So we see *Zen* walking his dogs, *Q* having a beer on his stoop, *Cowboy E*, *Sean Cross*, and *Og Jabar* hanging out in front of a parking garage, *MegaStarBrand's Louie and A-Thug* selling t-shirts on the street, and so on. Each one of these works is highly particular, showing the people represented as individuals through their unique body language, facial expressions, surroundings, and even skin tone: while they are all African American, none of these men are black—instead, their skins reflect the light around them to become peach, purple, orange, brown, red.



Jordan Casteel, *Henry*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 198.12 x 152.4 cm. Photo: Jason Wyche, courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

knockout works in the show, *Harold*, depicts an older gentleman—and really, *gentleman* is the only appropriate word—sitting in a plastic chair in front a laundromat, with another, younger man standing behind. The fluorescent lights from inside the shop contrast sharply with the reds and yellows cast on the figures outside. Harold and the other man look, not without kindness, at the viewer, bodies relaxed, fully at home; Harold is slightly apprehensive, hands folded in his lap, while his younger companion is confident but also a bit bemused. The surface of the painting is lush and colorful—Casteel is someone who enjoys the sensuality of paint, and the freedom it offers.

If the results seem almost anthropological in their care and specificity, she comes by that approach honestly. "I was always the kid sitting in the corner watching people interact—trying to figure out how and why people developed relationships with each other, in a sort of sociological way," she said in a recent conversation. "I studied sociology and anthropology as an undergraduate, so that way of looking at the world has always been really important to me, as has social justice. When I got to Yale [School of Art, where she completed an MFA in 2014], by my second year I figured out that I could use painting to say the things that I wanted to say on that front—art could be a vehicle to do that. I could focus on a body's humanity—through the idea of empathy."

Jordan Casteel, *Amina*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 198.12 cm. Photo: Jason Wyche, courtesy of the artists and Casey Kaplan, New York

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's subjects can be a lot harder to love. Her current exhibition at Marlborough Contemporary is an inventory of white experience, a project that has taken on an added urgency in the age of Trump. "I'm really trying to paint this moment in America, this moment that white people in America are being called towards," she said in a conversation at the gallery the morning after the show opened. "Now we get to *not* shake off what we are, to acknowledge it. And after violent deconstruction there is actually a possibility of redemption. It's hard, because it produces a lot of fallen heroes, fallen ancestors. But once you do it *honestly* you get to look at the ancestors again in a more complete way."

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It's fitting, then, that the first thing you see when you walk into the space is a small image of Dupuy-Spencer's maternal grandfather (*Not Strangers [Jack Dupuy 1924-1961]*, 2017). The artist grew up in the Hudson Valley, but her

us away to be the aristocracy of the swamps. We're bad! So I have the pride of my family's blood running through my veins, but really it's poisoned blood."

"It's important for me to talk about what I'm seeing when I deconstruct my family's history," she continues, "because now I have the complicated task of balancing love and gratitude with clarity and responsibility. One of the conversations I am hoping to have with this work is one with white people, to ask them to really look hard at their history, and locate where their history lives on inside them today. I think the strong resistance against doing this is that the majority of white people would find that they very clearly and directly owe reparations."

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *George Jones Greeting the Newest Members of Heaven's Band*, 2017. Oil on linen, 165.1 x 215.9 cm. Courtesy of Marlborough Contemporary, New York

The show is filled with paintings that resonate with Dupuy-Spencer for similar reasons—if not coming to terms with her literal ancestry, then coming to terms with what it means to be white. An image of the Cajun Navy, a group of Southerners who went out in their motorboats in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (and more recently, Harvey) on rescue missions (*Cajun Navy, August 2016*, 2017); a painting of her first love holding a fawn in his arms (*R. DiMeo III*, 2017); a group of the locals she grew up with hanging out on the porch of the grand Hudson Valley estate that they inherited, without having been left the money to maintain it (*Rokeby*, 2017)—all of these speak tenderly, if in a complicated way, to her history. The people she paints are often those to whom she feels a deep connection, I observe. "Yes," she replies. "But empathy doesn't necessarily mean a free pass."

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 50.8 cm. Courtesy of Marlborough Contemporary, New York

At the same time, works like *Not Today Satan* (2017) and *Love Me, Love Me, Love Me, I'm a Liberal* (2017) are unflinching and even a little caustic. The first shows a police car manned by skeletons—a surreal, Book of Revelations-type image of vengeful demons wreaking havoc that seems straight out of James Ensor or even (per the artist) Michelangelo. The second shows a white liberal woman all but hidden by the expected accouterments of her species: photographs of her at the Women's March on Washington, an "I heart NPR" mug alongside a vase of flowers, a mortgage statement, and a profuse bouquet in a vase made by her

goodness, but as the artist said, laughing, "if it did I'd be totally on it"): *The Burden of Blame*, the title blares, *How to Convince People That It's Not Your Fault*.

Some of the paintings were done in one sitting, such as *Durham, August 14, 2017*, which she completed hours after seeing the video of anti-racist protesters pulling down a confederate statue in the aftermath of the white supremacists' riot in Charlottesville. Talk about fallen ancestors. Others took far longer. She jokes about her "untrained" technique. She says she bought books on Amazon to help her work out some finer points of her medium—a self-deprecating comment from someone who studied painting with the likes of Amy Sillman and Nicole Eisenman at Bard College—but the slightly naïve approach, awkward spatial relations, jarring color juxtapositions create an effect that is, ultimately, vulnerable, open-hearted, and immediate.

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The emotional impact of the work is important for Dupuy-Spencer. "I'm asking people to slow down to look again, to absorb, to feel," she says. "It's the scariest thing you can ask people to do right now. Giving space to feel."

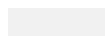


Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *Not Today Satan*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 35 x 28 inches. Courtesy of Marlborough Contemporary, New York

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Jordan Casteel: Nights in Harlem is on view at Casey Kaplan through October 28.

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer: Wild and Blue is on view at Marlborough Contemporary through October 7.



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Republican leaders Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell. Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty

The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is probably one of the most popular and uncontroversial initiatives the federal government operates. It **provides low-cost health insurance** for some 9 million kids and hundreds of thousands of pregnant women in families that make too much to qualify for Medicaid but still need assistance. **This has helped** reduce children's uninsurance rates from 14 to under 5 percent over the last 20 years. So it's alarming that at the end of September, **Congress failed to renew CHIP** and other healthcare programs before their funding authorizations ran out, because Republican leaders were busy with **an ill-advised last-ditch attempt** to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

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On November 3, the House passed a bill renewing CHIP for five years. The bill also extends some of those other neglected health programs, like community health center funding, for two years, and provides \$1 billion to bolster Medicaid programs in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands as they struggle to cope with the aftermath of recent hurricanes. It seems like a hopeful development, a delayed but real attempt to revive the program before states run out of leftover funds and must wind down their programs, potentially leaving **up to 4 million kids uninsured**. (Some states would instead put those former CHIP recipients on Medicaid.)

But the House's bill is deceptive: **It's an old proposal, littered with poison pills**, that has no chance of passing. In reality, legislators have done almost nothing to save CHIP since their failure in September; the House bill may actually set reauthorization back by weeks. And the country may not see any resolution on this matter until the end of the year—in time to save the program before a widespread collapse, but not in time to stave off possible damage or coverage losses.

“We certainly find ourselves in an unprecedented situation today, with funding having lapsed for this amount of time,” said Joan Alker, a Georgetown professor who has studied CHIP since its inception in 1997. (**Funding lapsed briefly** during a reauthorization process in 2007 thanks to a presidential veto.) “This is a very unfortunate situation when we have a bipartisan, successful program that everyone says they want to get done. And it’s not done.”

The stakes in this debate are high, and the clock is ticking: A couple of states had warned they’d run out of cash for their CHIP programs within weeks of the September deadline and would send out notices to families, alerting them of potential coverage losses by the start of November. **Up to 11 states were**, as of early October, set to run out of funds by year’s end. (Most have managed to procure last-minute extra funding to keep their programs running a bit longer than expected, a temporary fix.)

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Congress has actually been in bipartisan agreement on the core elements of CHIP renewal since mid-September. **The idea is** to extend the program for five years while winding down an ACA provision that increased the feds’ share of funding for it. As Alker told me, coming to an agreement like that is usually the heaviest lift for legislators, so she was surprised and heartened to see consensus on a reasonable compromise so early on. It seemed possible that, with ACA repeal efforts out of the way, Congress could tie up loose ends and secure CHIP’s future within weeks, demonstrating a capacity for bipartisanship and giving Republicans a chance to show that they aren’t totally ineffective at running Congress.

The only barrier was finding bipartisan agreement on how to pay for the extension. CHIP has been **reauthorized three times since 1997**, and each time these negotiations were fairly easy, notes Edwin Park, a CHIP policy expert at the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. **Even in 2015**, not a period of great Congressional harmony, legislators managed to carry out quiet but productive negotiations and agree on offsets both parties could get behind in time to renew the program several months ahead of the deadline for its funding wind-down.