

# Ronald Jackson

- American, b. 1970 in Helena, Arkansas
- Studied architecture at Mission Viejo College in California
- Served in the Army for 21 years, retired in 2014
- Lives and works in Fredericksburg, Virginia



## Body of Work

Ronald Jackson grew up in the rural Arkansas Delta is self-taught in art. Even though he studied architecture in college, he explained: “I realize that its more about observing things around us, whether its architecture, textures and things, or how colors collaborate together.” Fabric collage is a new aesthetic choice. He said, “I purchased a large piece of upholstery fabric [and] I was so moved by the feel of it and how it looked that I draped it on my wall, and it gave a different feeling to the room. Not just the experience of looking at the fabric, but it changed the environment of the room. And that’s a quality that the material gave to the observing experience.”

Jackson’s artwork combines fantastical elements of Realism and the emotional and psychological tropes of Romanticism. In his current work, he subtly references Arkansas rural culture and violent racist history, specifically the Elaine Massacre of 1919. He stated, “After WWI there is an incident that occurred in the small town of Elaine... The Black sharecroppers were organizing, and it was attempted to be stopped. A white man ended up getting killed, and after that point there was a mob of locals, when I say locals I mean the white population, they came from counties, from across the river, from Mississippi, and truckloads began going through and just pillaging the communities of the Blacks and it was open season to just target and violate or do whatever to the black community.” Instead of limiting himself to direct portraiture, Jackson has always felt he was able to render life-like faces, and he seeks creative departures with patterns and objects accompanying the figures. He said, “A number of my paintings incorporate foliage, or flowers, branch with leaves, particularly in the hands of young black men, [they will] have something that is considered non-threatening like rendering an extended olive branch as something that no one would find threatening in the hands of a young black man. Masks have two dual purposes; to hide/conceal or project an ideal. With the mask, I thought it would be an interesting concept to explore and present to the viewer who they are looking at and potentially the message that the portrait is giving to the viewer.”

Jackson stated, “May my work compel the viewer to reflect on their own experiences and become a catalyst to trigger the self-discovery of value, beauty, and significance among people who, in some way, may feel marginalized.” In 2010, he entered his first exhibition at the Fredericksburg Center for Creative Arts and received the Best of Show award. In 2011, he had his first solo exhibition at the Libertytown Arts Workshop in Fredericksburg. Subsequent exhibitions include the Gallery Golmok in Seoul, Korea; Elegba Folklore Society in Richmond, Virginia; Target Gallery, Alexandria, Virginia; and Galerie Myrtis in Baltimore, Maryland. His works are in national and international collections including the US Embassy in Gabon and Kenya.

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“When dealing with portraiture I’m looking for the viewer to self-reflect, to have an inner reflection facilitated by the painting, or the portrait that they are looking at. With the floral, foliage, flowers on the masks it’s a symbol for me of presenting yourself in a nonthreatening way, wishing the viewer to see you as desirable.” – Ronald Jackson

In *Profiles of Color*, the third iteration in an ongoing series of magical realist Black figuration, Ronald Jackson has created a collection of paintings that not only exuberantly visualize Black identities with agency and humanity, but also revise histories of portraiture that uniformly present nonwhite representations as submissive props. European portraits have historically relegated Black subjects to positions of service in the background of elaborate renderings of white nobility. Jackson’s portraits counter these histories by depicting Black subjects in imaginative and layered narratives that confront the gaze of the viewer and challenge representations of the Black body as barbaric or pusillanimous. He calls these renderings “collage portraits”, oil paintings that incorporate stylistic approaches of collage.

Jackson’s ornate collage portraits engage classical and craft traditions to actualize nuanced and fantastical portrayals of Black life. *Profiles of Color* offers a stunning appraisal of Black aesthetics inspired by literary works like *100 Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel Garcia, the emotional and psychological tropes of Romanticism in relation to Black and Brown identity, African Diasporic fashion, as well as historical and personal narratives of Black life in rural Arkansas. The vibrant collage portraits featured in this exhibition channel an emotive response from viewers that provokes empathy and queries predominant narratives that frequently associate Black identities with negative or dangerous tropes. By combining bright upholstery fabric with lush graphic figurations set in floral, geometric, or naturalistic agrarian landscapes, Jackson creates unexpected scenes - deeply engrossing moments in the imagined lives of the characters he depicts. Though the narratives he illustrates are often influenced by historic or lived observations, most of the characters Jackson features are entirely imagined.

The technique of overlapping recurs throughout the *Profiles of Color* series and elevates the work from flat 2D paintings to powerfully evocative mixed media constructions. These reference the radical tactile approaches of collage and assemblage but maintain the elemental structure and composition of classical oil paintings. Thick upholsteries become backdrops that saturate the negative space surrounding bold characterizations. Dense floral prints are converted to masks that partially conceal characters’ faces but accentuate stark racial markers like a nose, lips or hair. By covering the faces of his characters, who are predominantly African American, Jackson offers seemingly nonthreatening interventions that facilitate and problematize viewers’ relationship to Black bodies.

Selected works from the *Profile of Color* series: *Oh Pretty Marianna*, (2018), *No one knows Elaine* (2018), *The Boy from Coffee Creek*, (2018), *How Grandma Sees Me*, (2018), and *Elaine’s Girls Don’t Cry*, (2018), are preeminent examples of Jackson’s distinct style and unique aesthetic approach to portraiture. His characterizations are bold, fashionable, and determined reflections of Black identity that confront your gaze with unabashed directness. *Profiles of Color* is breathtaking, incredibly inspiring, and exquisitely executed.

- Angela N. Carroll, artist and archivist, Baltimore