# On finding the perfect balance

## Painter Jordan Casteel discusses the process of trying to strike a variety of balances: between work and creativity, inspiration and expectation, and confidence and humility.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3764 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Education, Independence, Success.

**Like many professional artists, you balance your creative with being a teacher. Is that difficult?**

I love my students more than anything. They keep me grounded. They are always inspired by whatever is around them and I love that. Everything is always new. They're fun. Education's always been a passion of mine, alongside art, so it feels good to be able to occupy both spaces from time to time.

**Does teaching ever put a strain on your ability to paint?**

Funny you say that because I was emailing the dean on my way to the studio today because I am starting to panic a bit. It's technically a tenure track position and the expectations around my availability are much greater than they are in actuality, so I'm trying to negotiate with the university to have a course reduction. I've been trying to figure out how I can do my work and still be in the realm of the students. That's what's important to me, not necessarily the academic bureaucracy.




*MegaStarBrand's Louie and A-Thug*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 78 x 90 / 198.12 x 228.6cm






*MegaStarBrand's Louie and A-Thug*, 2017 (detail)

**If you can't strike the right balance, eventually you're no good to anyone—not to yourself, to your work, or your students.**

Exactly. I'm always saying I have three full time jobs: my health, which is just my mental and physical stability, my job as a teacher and then, my career as an artist. All three demand quite a lot of attention.

**Are you habitual in your studio practice? Do you need to go there every day?**

Yes. I feel like I'm a little atypical to a lot of my artist peers in that I'm very controlled around my practice, and the way that I exercise my energy and my time. I generally can only work during daylight hours. I was like this in Grad School too. As soon as it got dark, I just was like, "Peace! I am done." I'm not at all productive anymore in the studio at night, nor do I feel like the things that I'm creating are thoughtful

anymore, after a certain point. I tend to be a daylight hours worker, around 11am to 6pm.

I feel like the time I have in the studio is feeling less and less lately, even though it should be more and more right now. I think that will level out eventually, as I was saying, around teaching or whatever. I would say I'm in my studio around four times a week, sometimes five. Those who are close with me say that, especially when I have self-imposed deadlines, I get a little bit more antsy about needing to be there. I'm really disciplined in that way, so, sometimes it is hard for me to take a break when I probably should. I've been trying to commit to myself at least one day out of the week where I'm not responsible for anything but myself.

**For any kind of creative endeavor the ideal is that your work can develop at its own organic pace. There are so many ways that progression can get distorted when you start to have a certain amount of success. How hard has it been for you, to let your work go where it wants to go without thinking too much about what it is that people want from you?**

It's really hard, honestly. I think the challenge for most of us who make creative work as a profession is that it also becomes about livelihood and this delicate balance within the art market. Suddenly we're talking about the collector base and those who drive interest. People who write about the work or people who are interested in the work all begin to form public ideas around what they think is valuable or not. That begins to function outside of my studio. Of course, it influences things to a degree in that it becomes a part of my psyche. Whether I feel like I'm directly in opposition to it or not, it's always been in the back of my head. There are days when I become very anxious, where I'm like, "Ahh!" I feel this pressure and this pressure is confusing because as much as I care about this thing I'm doing that people seem to like, I also want there to be freedom to explore something else.

I think there's some strategy that has to be involved at a certain point. I'm in that place where I get to be creative and think and push the envelope within the context of my own studio, but I'm also considering 10,000 other people in that process now—it's no longer just me and the work, it's me and the work and those that have become involved in my process. That goes as far as the people who are sitting for me and the people who are representing me or speaking on my behalf. There are a lot of people I feel responsible for.




*Amina*, 2017. Oil on canvas 90 x 78 / 228.6 x 198.12cm


Prota Braids



*Amina*, 2017 (detail)

**If you were to say tomorrow, "You know what? I've decided I'm no longer interested in portraiture. I'm doing something else now." What would happen?**

Well, that sort of happened. For my recent show, I did a piece which didn't have an explicit figure in it. Yes, it's kind of like a still life and it has a caricature or the reminiscence of a person or a body, but it wasn't explicitly such in the way that I have historically done. That was sort of intentional for me. I think that it wasn't an easy painting, at least initially, for my gallery. There was some, "Oh, this is new. Oh, what is this? Where does this fit in to things?" That's the big question: "Where does this fit in?" I was like, "I don't know, I just know it needed to be made and I need other paintings to be made with this existing in the world already and maybe, it'll make sense eventually." And, I feel like it did.

Every once in a while I want to allow a painting to exist that is in opposition to the way that I've been perceived thus far in my career. That perception being the young Black girl who paints Blackness. I'm trying to create a narrative that can be more expansive in the long term. I'm trying to think about the longevity of my career with every painting I make because I'm always interested in the painting that's gonna come next, not necessarily the painting that's happening right now.

**A friend who is a painter once explained her process to me by saying, "Well, I've been making paintings like this since I was a little kid, this is just a more evolved version of something that I've done my whole life." While some people stumble around in the dark trying to locate their voice, other people always seem to just know it. Was that the case for you?**

Totally. My experience was, I guess, sort of like your friend. I just started being this thing and I didn't really find formalism or technical ability in its traditional sense, possibly ever. I didn't go to art school until I ended up at Yale and at Yale I was like, "Oh, where do I sign up for painting?" And they were like, "We assume you've done that by now." I had a little bit of a jarring introduction to art school. I saw a lot of people experiencing frustration around finding their individuality. I felt like many of my peers had gone to art school their whole lives and were now trying to unlearn what they had spent years learning. And, because they had so much previous educational direction, they felt just like everyone else because they had *all* learned the same things that they were now fighting to unlearn. Whereas, I just came in and was like, "Yeah, I don't know, I was making these paintings in my basement and I'm just gonna keep making them, even though they suck right now and hope that they'll just get better."

My journey is uniquely, or maybe *not* that uniquely, based off the experience of self-discovery. When I first found out I was gonna be teaching, my mom thought it would be funny to mail me a book that said, "How to draw" or something. She was like, "I know you don't know shit, but you just got this job, congratulations!" I thought it was funny. But in reality, it did terrify me at first—the idea of teaching people. Still, what I knew that I could offer students was a sense of confidence and vision around their childlike or intuitive aesthetics. What it is that they bring to the classroom is valuable—whatever it is—and it will only increase in its value as they put more time, energy and effort into it.



*Flight*, 2018. Oil on canvas 32 x 26/ 81.28 x 66.04cm



*Flight*, 2018 (detail)

They are always joking with me because I'm a big picture professor. I'm really invested in their ideas and their passion and curiosity and their desire to learn and grow. I want to help them grow as human beings in the world. What I tell them is there are some things that I wish I had known going into Yale and I don't want you to ever be in a position where you feel that you don't have the knowledge of something. You can make the choice to disregard it but I want you to have, at least the groundwork that I felt I was missing. Most of that I had to figure out on my own by asking a lot of questions.

**How important is it for students to be able to talk—and perhaps also write—articulately about their work? It seems important not only to understand what you do and why you do it and, maybe, what it's actually about, but also that you can go forth into the world and actually articulate it clearly.**

I believe in that very strongly. That was evident when I made the choice not to get my undergraduate degree in art, and to get a liberal arts degree instead. My intention around getting the liberal arts degree was that if I could write and communicate effectively, then I could do anything. I think that I was lucky because my mom, who majored in Communications and had her own little local talk show growing up, was always an advocate for feeling pride around one's voice and the power in one's voice. Especially, moving through worlds in general, whether it be the art world or me photographing my subjects on the street in Harlem. It's the idea that communication plays a huge part in my ultimate success within those environments. I felt that being able to write could take me wherever I needed to go. I could write an artist's statement, and if I wasn't able to get my artwork poppin' off, then I could at least get a job to support myself. All those things were important. I definitely preach that a lot to my students.

Being able to be a critical observer in the world will always be valuable, whatever your practice may be. It is a practice of its own. It's a practice to have a critical mindset all the time. It can be exhausting and you can choose when and where to shut it on or off. Something I witnessed in school was something I think of as "art speak," and then there's just speaking with truth. Sometimes in the art world, those things don't always feel aligned. You can tell when they're actually far from people's personal experiences or truths because they're just trying to sound like they know what they're talking about but they're not entirely sure.

**When you are making work that's so tied up with identity and race and representation, did you leave school feeling prepared to talk about that stuff? Or was that also something you kind of had to figure out as you went along?**

I was lucky in that my familial background played a huge part in me feeling fairly comfortable talking about those things already. My mom is the director and CEO of the Women's Foundation in Colorado. She's been working in philanthropy and a social justice advocate my entire life. I remember growing up watching *Dumbo* and there's the scene where the crows are on the wires singing. She was hanging over me like, "That represents Jim Crow and this is actually very problematic." She always told me, "These are histories that you should know." And I was like, "What?" Her father was a Civil Rights leader during the Civil Rights Movement. He was one of the Big Six, they called them. He was a very public figure, particularly in the context of speaking on behalf of others who might not feel heard at any given time.

I've always felt an inherited sense of importance around giving voice or feeling confident speaking out against injustice in whatever form it takes. That doesn't always happen seamlessly, there are plenty of times in my life where I walk away from instances and I'm like, "Oh, fuck, I wish I had said something differently or said something better." At least in terms of talking about my work, I can feel great confidence in sharing why it is what I do what I do and my relationship to it, as a result of systems in the world.

**There are plenty of artists and filmmakers, whatever, that say to me, "I make it and it means this certain thing to me, but when it goes out in the world, how other people react to it, is none of my business." If you're making something and it's going out in the world and people are seeing it and saying, "I think this is what it's about" and if that's *not* what you think it's about, is that a failure of the work? Is it important that it reads the way you want it to read in the world? Is that something that you should even spend time worrying about?**

Yes, that's actually something I spend a lot of time worrying about. I feel a great sense of responsibility because I'm dealing with imagery around people who really exist in this world. I make portraits. These are human beings who have lives and stories and nuance in and of themselves that deserve to be treated respectfully. Often these are people who, historically, have perhaps not been considered respectfully, so I feel there's great need for me to be cognizant of the power of the images and where the images go and the context they're being seen in. I have to be cognizant of the fact that those places are also often very elitist and ostracizing and maybe also unfamiliar to the people I'm actually painting.

I feel my role is to mediate in some ways, or to create a bridge between those worlds. The subjects of my paintings will sometimes come to the opening. I want it to feel like a celebration. This isn't about me, this is about them. It's about honoring. It's about creating and telling their stories, and also sharing those stories with people who might often feel unseen and giving them a platform. That's our focus. I don't care if the lead curator from MoMA is in the room. I mean, I *do* care, maybe, but I care about them just as much as I do about how comfortable my guests are. I think about that a lot. That's where I prefer to be like, "Yeah, it matters."

I like to think that if I do my job well, then I'm enacting that thoughtfulness in advance. I'm doing all the hard work on behalf of the portrait sitters, to ensure that wherever they go, there's at least a sense of power that they hold. The only thing that's super, super consistent about my paintings—outside of the subjects being Black men—is that their gaze is always outward. It's intentionally so because I want there to remain a sense of active participation as the sitter, that they are actively participating in whatever conversation is happening around that painting. Also, that the person who owns the painting, or is looking at it, has to engage as well, or confront something, or make eye contact with someone that they might not have, otherwise. That's my way of trying to push a power in a place where it could easily lose power. I can now also be a little bit more intentional about

considering who’s buying it and ensuring that they’re thoughtful about it, even if not perfect, thoughtful.

**That’s something that I never really thought about—having control or power in any way over who purchases your work and what they do with it.**

In reality, I think every artist has a story of the collector who bought something and then put it in storage so they could later flip it. I think as a result of those experiences, I recognize that I’m in a privileged capacity to be able to enact a certain level of choice in the matter because I’m not in a financial need. For example, four years ago, anybody who knocked on my door and was like, “I wanna buy a painting.” I would’ve been like, “Great! Just pay me whatever!” because I desperately needed it to pay my rent. I knew that I needed to survive. So, there’s privilege in being able to be question, “Okay, what’s best for me and what’s best for the work?” because there are options. There’s choice and I think the conversations I have to have with my gallery, constantly, or whoever it is working on behalf of these paintings now, is that they are thinking about that as much as I do.




*Benyam*, 2018. Oil on canvas 90 x 78 / 228.6 x 198.12cm



*Benyam*, 2018 (detail)

**A filmmaker told me once that they abandoned painting when they were younger because it felt too lonely and isolating, which are the exact same reasons certain painters love it. You're not dependent on anyone else to do it—it's just you and the materials. What do you make of that? The psychology of the painting practice?**

It's one of the only spaces that feels like a very spiritual experience. I feel kind of silly saying that because I think the notion around spirituality could be confused, but I mean it's sort of meditative. This world is so nuts right now, not even just politically, I mean just being a human being in the world, riding the roller coaster that is being a human being, feels nuts. It's a lot. Being alone in the studio—when I'm just there with a canvas—is one of the only times that I feel fully free to process all of that and sometimes, not process *any* of that. It's one of the only times that I can have total autonomy around how I wanna exist.

I need to do it in order to survive, but I also recognize that it requires a certain amount of presence. I have to be aware of it. I don't know, I'm publicly capable of appearing an extrovert but I love my time alone and I need it. I think with a lot of painters, there's a loneliness involved, but I haven't necessarily felt the loneliness in the studio. I feel the loneliness the more I ascend in my career, in some ways, because there's also an ostracizing effect. Even as loved as you can feel, it's so complicated.

**As a teacher, what do you find are the things that tend to keep people going? What keeps you going?**

I'm always talking to my students about the selfishness required, at least to some degree, to be an artist. It requires you to feel that you have the power and you're somehow important enough to make this thing and put it on display. Then, that thing is suddenly valuable, even if it's just to your parents, that thing all of a sudden holds value. There is also this high that one needs to seek where when you do feel it, it makes you want to keep going. I'd say that around 90% of time in my classes or working it's about me being unsure, but that 10% where

I’m in it and painting makes all the other 90% disappear. It’s that hit that allows me to breathe again, to be like, “Oh, yes.” It’s always pushing back and forth between these extremes of feeling.

**Is there some place where you can exist in the middle of those? To know that you’re adding something to the dialogue of art, but you also have some kind of healthy perspective on it—maybe it’s a weird mixture of confidence and humility where it’s not too much of one or the other.**

Yes, you’re always looking for the perfect balance. Absolutely. Just quote me as you.

***Photos courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. All photos by Jason Wyche.***

**Jordan Casteel Recommends:**

1. (Book) *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead
2. (Podcast) *Atlanta Monster*
3. Acupuncture — A little self-care goes a long way
4. (Book/Short Story Collection) *Difficult Women* by Roxane Gay
5. Antibacterial hand wipes — NYC is gross, help me help you.

**Additional Reading:**

Jordan Casteel’s Harlem portraits shine a magical light on Black experience

Jordan Casteel Is Making You Look

The New Face of Portrait Painting

Jordan Casteel: The Young New York Artist Tackles Black Male Stereotypes by Painting People She Meets on the Street

Jordan Casteel Stays in the Moment

Name
Jordan Casteel

Vocation
Painter

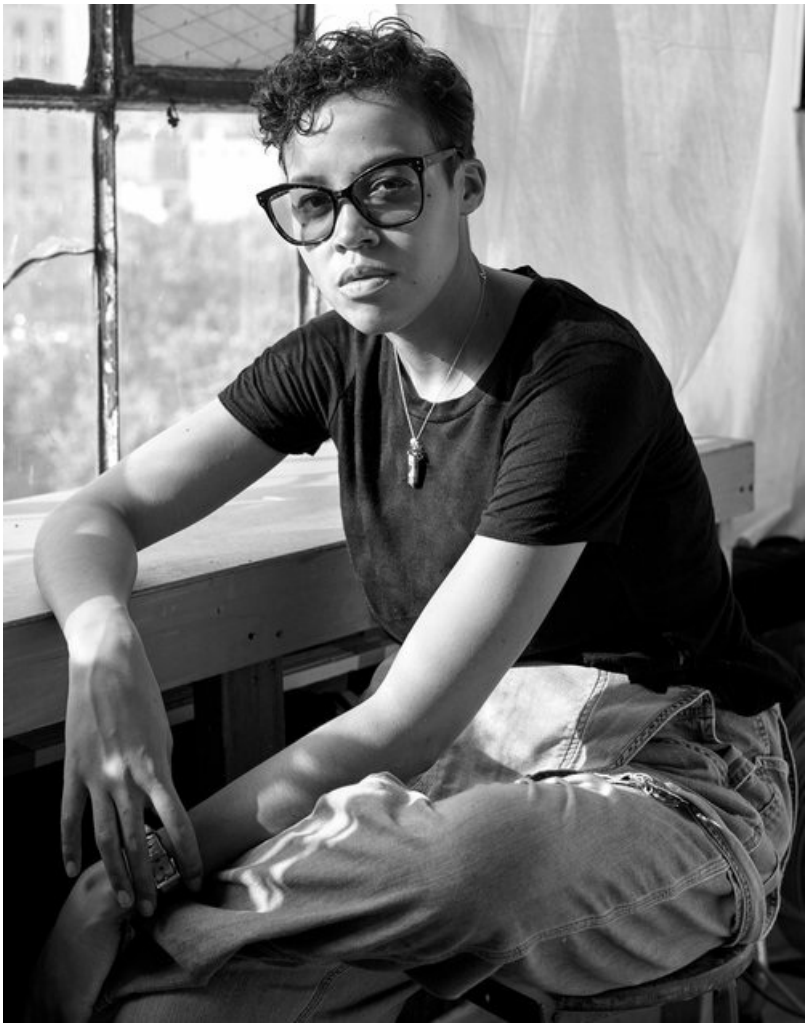


Photo: David Schulze