

SFMOMA Debuts *Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love*

First Major Museum Retrospective of the Painter's Inspiring Creative Life Spanning Six Decades



Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love
September 27, 2025–March 1, 2026

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (March 25, 2025; updated June 18, 2025)—The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) announces the first major museum retrospective devoted to the full breadth of the work of painter Suzanne Jackson, on view from September 27, 2025, to March 1, 2026. Developed in close collaboration with the artist, ***Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love*** celebrates Jackson's groundbreaking artistic vision through more than 80 lyrical paintings and drawings from the 1960s to the present that explore her use of color, light and structure to expand the parameters of painting and illuminate the persistence of peace, love and beauty.

Debuting at SFMOMA and co-organized with the Walker Art Center, this comprehensive survey spans six decades, from Jackson's early ethereal compositions on canvas that layer luminous washes of paint and depict figures intertwined with nature to recent three-dimensional paintings that suspend acrylic paint midair. SFMOMA will also premiere a new large-scale commission by the artist, inspired by her longstanding close observations of the natural world. Looking at influences beyond the artist's studio, *What Is Love* examines how Jackson's paintings have been informed by her experiences as a dancer, poet and theater designer, as well as her collaborations with radical artist communities.

Following its presentation at SFMOMA, the exhibition will travel to the Walker Art Center (May 14–August 23, 2026) and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (September 26, 2026–February 7, 2027).

“*Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love* promises to be a groundbreaking exhibition, bringing much-deserved attention to Jackson’s achievements as an influential painter who has created awe-inspiring compositions informed by her deep respect for ancestral traditions and the natural world,” said Christopher Bedford, SFMOMA Helen and Charles Schwab Director. “In the sixth decade of her career, Jackson continues to innovate by extending paint into three dimensions and embedding it with found materials to reflect on personal and cultural histories.”

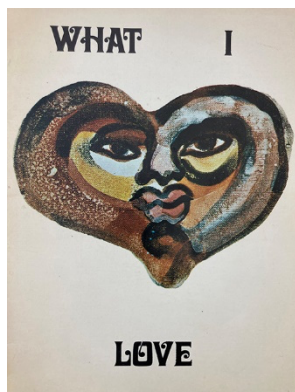
“Suzanne Jackson’s life has been driven by an insistent search for creative freedom and a bohemian spirit that is indebted to the San Francisco ethos in which she was raised,” said Jenny Gheith, curator of the exhibition and SFMOMA Curator and Interim Head of Painting and Sculpture. “*What Is Love* captures the curiosity, wonder and resilience of Jackson’s life’s work, which is marked by adventurous experimentation, a dedication to supporting other artists and a persistent belief in the connection between all living things.”

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

For decades, my figurative forms and challenged shapes have pushed paint beyond the expected. With intentional reflective layers and floating luminous pigment, my work pursues alternative ways of seeing and interpreting spatial relationships of historical events, the lives of Black, Indigenous, and all global people, existing as “environmental abstractions” of our world.

—Suzanne Jackson, 2025

Suzanne Jackson was born in 1944 in St. Louis and shortly thereafter moved with her family to San Francisco, where she would spend the first eight years of her childhood. Her family relocated to Fairbanks, Alaska, in 1952, and the remote natural landscape inspired her to learn to paint. In 1961, Jackson returned to San Francisco and spent her formative college years among the bohemian counterculture, studying art and theater at San Francisco State University and dancing with the Pacific Ballet. In 1967 she moved to Los Angeles, where she studied drawing with artist Charles White and became part of a radical artist community.



From 1968 to 1970, she ran Gallery 32, a self-funded exhibition space, out of her Los Angeles studio. At Gallery 32, Betye Saar and Senga Nengudi were among the artists featured in *The Sapphire Show: You’ve Come A Long Way Baby* (1970), credited as the first survey of African American women artists in Los Angeles. *What Is Love* brings together several artworks originally shown at Gallery 32 by Saar, Nengudi, David Hammons, Timothy Washington, Dan Concholar, John Outterbridge and Emory Douglas, among others, and will surface new research on its exhibition history. Jackson has reflected, “Gallery 32 functioned as a meeting space for its members to question history, culture and risky improvisations.”

In 1971, Jackson gave birth to her son, a major life event that sparked tremendous creative growth. The following year, she self-published her first book of poems and paintings, titled *What I Love*. More than 50 years later, the title for Jackson's retrospective turns "What I Love" to "What Is Love," a provocation that broadens the understanding of the creativity that Jackson has pursued throughout her career.

Organized chronologically, *Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love* begins with Jackson's first mature paintings and drawings that she made during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, many of which are the largest she has made to date. In these paintings, Jackson treats acrylic paint like watercolor by setting down layers of washy pigment to create an ethereal, translucent quality. Depicting images from her dreams, Jackson's lyrical symbolism often includes animals, plants, hearts and hands that communicate human connections to nature, universal love and unity. Jackson's deep respect for ecology, continual study of dance and movement, and belief in her ancestors' integration with the natural world can be seen in her most ambitious painting on canvas, *In A Black Man's Garden* (1973), a large-scale triptych. Jackson exhibited these early paintings at Ankrum Gallery, an important Los Angeles space for African American artists, along with Brockman gallery and Heritage Gallery.

Outside of the studio, Jackson continued her advocacy for other artists, bringing together nearly 180 artists for the 1972 Black Expo in San Francisco. She also served alongside Ruth Asawa, Noah Purifoy, Gary Snyder and Peter Coyote on the California Arts Council (formed in 1976) and helped secure funding for public artworks through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), including two of her own murals, *Wind* (1978) and *Spirit* (1977–79).

In the 1980s, Jackson moved between Los Angeles, the small mountain town of Idyllwild, California, and the San Francisco Bay Area. In Idyllwild, where she taught painting and dance, she created small-scale studies of leaves, trees and the mountains that surrounded her. This section of the exhibition brings together rarely seen paintings, works on paper and handmade books. After the unexpected death of her father in 1981, she began *El Paradiso* (1981–84)—a quintessential composition from this period—named after the bird of paradise, a symbol of freedom for the artist.

Jackson stretched her artistic practice further when she earned an MFA in design at Yale University in 1990 and continued to work full-time designing costumes and sets for the theater. With limited resources and time for her studio practice, she began to experiment with leftover scenic Bogus paper (thick sheets of paper that cover the floor when sets are painted). Jackson's paintings on this material often feature sculptural textures, a darker palette and rougher edges, with forms that bridge abstraction and figuration, as in *Sapphire & Tunis* (2010–11).

In 1996, Jackson moved to Savannah, Georgia, where she continues to live and work. The charged Southern landscape prompted Jackson to further research her ancestral history and to work again in nature, often bringing her students from the Savannah College of Art and Design to sketch in locations with histories significant to enslavement. During this time, she began creating otherworldly paintings that suspend acrylic paint in midair, embedding the surfaces with personal ephemera and various found and sourced materials. These awe-inspiring, three-dimensional paintings are the most experimental of her career, with a focus on structure, light and the environment that relate to her background in theater and dance. *Crossing Ebenezer* (2017), which includes red netting from fire log

bags that suggests both spilled blood and a distressed flag, memorializes a Civil War-era massacre of emancipated African Americans who were drowned in Ebenezer Creek, a tributary of the Savannah River.



Jackson's recent paintings also convey reflections on spirituality and aspects of her autobiography. *Hers and His* (2018), one of her most personal paintings, is dedicated to her parents and incorporates “his and hers” pillowcases and segments of her mother’s quilt block patterns. Created nearly 10 years after her mother’s passing, this work was inspired by a lecture by artist Faith Ringgold, who said that if your mother left unfinished quilts, it is your responsibility to complete them.

The exhibition will conclude with *¿What Feeds Us?* (2025), a new commission that reflects on the global environmental crisis. This large-scale installation, integrating organic materials such as moss and tree bark with plastic and trash, is built around a central sculptural component. Additional hanging elements combine acrylic paint with found materials, such as African

fabric scraps, Indian sari curtains, Korean and Japanese papers. Addressing themes of migration and improvisation, this new work honors connections that exist across all living things.

PUBLICATION

The exhibition will be accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue that charts the full arc of Jackson’s life and multifaceted artistic vision. This 272-page monograph published by SFMOMA in association with Princeton University Press is edited by Jenny Gheith and includes essays and contributions by Kellie Jones, Paulina Pobocha, Tiffany E. Barber, Taylor Jasper, Molly Garfinkel and Jodi Wayneberg, Taylor Renee Aldridge, and Meredith George Van Dyke. Jackson’s voice features prominently in a series of dialogues with fellow artists Senga Nengudi, Betye Saar, Fred Eversley and Richard Mayhew and a conversation about her process and new commission with SFMOMA paintings conservator Jennifer Hickey.

TOUR VENUES + DATES

SFMOMA: September 27, 2025–March 1, 2026

Walker Art Center: May 14–August 23, 2026

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: September 26, 2026–February 7, 2027

EDUCATION + PUBLIC PROGRAMS

In support of the exhibition, SFMOMA will invite several speakers to discuss different aspects of the artist’s work for the **Suzanne Jackson and Friends** program on Friday, September 26, 2025. In addition, programming for the museum’s [First Thursday](#) on November 6, 2025, will focus on live performance and choreography, in resonance with Jackson's experience with these artistic disciplines.

SFMOMA will also organize a K–12 Teacher Institute for *Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love* in the fall and will offer opportunities for K–12 teachers and higher education instructors to schedule self-guided tours of the exhibition.

CREDITS

Suzanne Jackson: What Is Love is co-organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. The exhibition is curated by Jenny Gheith, Curator and Interim Head of Painting and Sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, with Taylor Jasper, Susan and Rob White Assistant Curator, Visual Art at the Walker Art Center. Curatorial support is provided by Auriel Garza, curatorial assistant, San Francisco Museum of Art, and Laurel Rand-Lewis, curatorial fellow, Visual Arts, Walker Art Center.

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San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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Images:

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