

Rose, Mary. "Martha Jackson Jarvis: What the Trees Have Seen at the BMA," *Medium*, 22 June 2023.



Martha Jackson Jarvis: What the Trees Have Seen at the BMA



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3 min read · Jun 22, 2023

While recently visiting The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century at the Baltimore Museum of Art, I found myself walking through the familiar contemporary art wing where I found a new exhibition installed that I had not planned to visit. This exhibition, Martha Jackson Jarvis: What the Trees Have Seen, swiftly became my favorite recent exhibition at the BMA.



Martha Jackson Jarvis: What the Trees Have Seen at the Baltimore Museum of Art, image by the author.

Martha Jackson Jarvis is an artist based in Washington D.C. whose practice includes many different media, from works on paper to sculptures and public installations. From her artist's statement:

"I create imagined space and form that signify action, ritual, repetition, and innovation. My works are attentive to ecosystems, decay, rebirth, sedimentation, and transformative form."

Jackson Jarvis created *What the Trees Have Seen* to honor her great-great-great-great grandfather Luke Valentine, a free Black militiaman who fought during the American Revolution. Jarvis learned Valentine's story through court records from Valentine's appeals for his veteran's pension.

In 2019, the artist followed in Valentine's footsteps, taking a twelve month hike from Virginia to South Carolina, and this series is a response to those experiences.

The works are large abstract mixed-media paintings on paper. Many of them attempt to visualize the experience of Valentine's journey from Virginia to South Carolina during the war.

They drip with atmosphere, you get a sense of the humidity of the South, the harsh beating down of the sun, the respite of the shade, the dangers lurking around each corner.

The colors are truly stunning: vivid oranges take up residence beside navy blues and emerald greens, while pops of black and white provide elegant contrast. I was also captivated by Jackson Jarvis's treatment of texture, which certainly reflects her sculptural practice.

The exhibition is accompanied by a sonic compositions created by Herman Burney and poetry by Carol Beane.

You can find *Martha Jackson Jarvis: What the Trees Have Seen* at the Baltimore Museum of Art until October 1st, 2023. This is atmospheric abstraction at its finest. If you're in the area, I think you owe it to yourself to stop by and experience these works in person.