

Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!), 2020
Oil on canvas

Private collection

For Packer, a painting can honor a life: Her largest painting to date is connected to the violent death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of the Louisville, Kentucky, police. The photographs of Taylor's home that surfaced in the media, and on which this work is based, strongly resonated with Packer; many of the details that she observed in the images evoked objects that might have existed in the artist's own home—connecting her implicitly to Taylor. "I'm interested in the co-dependency of humans existing in spaces," the artist has stated. "I'm interested in the environment as much as the figures that sit within it."

On the night of March 13, 2020, Louisville police officers entered the home of twenty-six-year-old Breonna Taylor and shot her five times. Ignoring standard procedure, they offered her no medical treatment. Although the officers later claimed they had been investigating a drug case, no drugs were found in the apartment, and they left their incident report almost totally blank. Both Taylor's killing and a grand jury's decision not to indict the officers sparked widespread protests—to this day, no one has been charged for her death. Taylor's family and many in her community continue to fight for justice.

Packer talks about creating a sense of interdependence and connection.

 801

The Mind Is Its Own Place, 2020
Charcoal and pastel on paper

Private collection

In this work, two seemingly fused figures function as the central subject of the composition, but Packer's highlighting of the knee of the figure on the right, establishes a distinct visual focal point within the work. With its hushed grays, blues, and browns the work suggests a certain vulnerability within her two subjects.

Packer has often used drawing as a place for heightened experimentation—as she does here and in other works on this wall. Her abstracted forms and frequent use of a highly limited palette, combine to yield drawings that are both distinct from and connected to her paintings. Acknowledging the specific possibilities for her own practice, Packer has said that drawing has become for her “a really fast way to say, I don't understand what I'm seeing or how I'm feeling . . . a way to kind of place myself.”

A Lesson in Longing, 2019

Oil on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Dawn and David Lenhardt P.2020.5

With its two figures staring directly out from the canvas, this large dreamlike work invites the viewer into their private world. Compositionally, Packer's predominant use of a pinkish-red palette (a color drawn from the 1982 Jean-Michel Basquiat painting *Moses and the Egyptians*) is disrupted only by flickers of green paint and white canvas. This formal decision unifies the painting, which seems to be as much about the two distinct figures as the objects that populate the work: multiple plants, a bicycle, and even the faint outline of a cat. Through her washy and drip-like painting technique, which yields incomplete figures that are based on individuals close to the artist, Packer limits the viewer's access to her subjects, suggesting that they need careful protecting from casual display and exposure.

Hear about Packer's use of negative space.

 805

Vision Impaired, 2015

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Packer began to experiment with monochromatic painting in 2015 as way to give “equal importance to negative space and the adornment of the environment” in her work. Using primarily one color became an editing device for Packer, allowing her to eliminate details that felt inessential to her, while emphasizing presence through color density. This painting’s title may suggest that when certain formal elements, such as tactility, are “impaired” or de-stressed in a painting, other aspects, like light and shadow, can be foregrounded.

Curator Rujecko Hockley speaks about Packer’s use of monochromatic color.

 806

The Body Has Memory, 2018

Oil on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Miyoung Lee and Neil Simpkins P.2019.7

This portrait of Packer's close friend and fellow artist Eric N. Mack is one of several she has made with him as her subject. In this work, Packer has painted Mack facing the viewer with legs crossed, underscoring their familiarity with one another, while leaving it nearly impossible to discern his facial expression or details. Mack's implicit refusal of the viewer's gaze underscores Packer's desire to get at something beyond a straightforward likeness of her sitter. She once remarked: "I used to say that I don't trust representation. I've never seen a painting that looked real to me. But I've seen ones that felt real." Here, she expresses that feeling or sensibility through her experimental and somewhat unlikely use of saturated color, bathing Mack entirely in red.

Say Her Name, 2017

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Nearly two years after Sandra Bland's death while in police custody, Packer made this painting in her memory. Grappling with profound grief and not wanting to make a spectacle of the circumstances of Bland's death, Packer chose to paint a still life to express her inability to reconcile herself to the visceral loss of someone that she did not know personally. Of her floral paintings, Packer has stated: "the bouquets like *Say Her Name* highlight something that's been true in my practice overall, which is this appreciation for [painting from] observation and also understanding the emotional resonance of things—the spaces in which we exist that surround the people that we care about, whether we know them or not."

Sandra Bland was twenty-eight years old when she died in police custody, three days after her arrest following a minor traffic violation in Prairie View, Texas, in July 2015. Local officials deemed Bland's death a suicide and refused her family's request for an independent autopsy. Protests arose, charging that the circumstances of Bland's death had been obscured, and that both her aggressive arrest and her extended jail time were excessive. Police violence against Black women became a new point of focus, as did the tendency of these incidents to be ignored by the media and excluded from racial justice campaigns.

Packer discusses this painting's expressions of celebration and loss.

 808

For James (III), 2013

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Carefully composed using geometric zones of color, *For James (III)* seems to immediately propose a fundamental alternative to the very notion of a portrait painting—a genre with which Packer is often associated. Through the painting's subject—a man lying alone on a bed—the work avoids a straightforward representation while also evoking a complexity and duality of feelings.

The painting is a direct reference to Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1575), which includes a central, upside-down figure being brutally flayed—often interpreted to represent the freeing of the spirit from the physical body. As in many of Packer's paintings, there is an implied intimacy between artist and subject—here resulting partly from the half-dressed figure's torso, resting only on a bare mattress and suggesting a domestic or personal space that inherently protects the individual.