



Here's Looking at You

Painter Jordan Casteel challenges viewers to a staring contest at the Denver Art Museum *By Hannah Lott-Schwartz*

Jordan Casteel's new exhibition at the Denver Art Museum isn't an interactive installation, per se, but something funny happens when you look at her portraits: They look back. The Denver-born, Harlem-based artist's first solo show at a major museum, *Returning the Gaze* (February 2–May 26), honors the value of human connection with 29 paintings in which neither the subjects—staffers at a family-owned Ethiopian restaurant (*Benyam*, pictured), a security guard on a stoop, the manager

of a Harlem wine shop and his friend—nor the eye contact is imagined.

"The one thing I ask of all the sitters in the full-scale portraits is to look at me," says Casteel, who turns 30 this month. "Eye contact makes so many people uncomfortable. I see these paintings as representing the times and spaces and people I saw and then said hi to."

As such, the exhibit can be seen as a scrapbook of Casteel's personal and artistic journey, from Denver to graduate school at Yale to New York. The

peculiarity of life in the crowded yet isolating Big Apple, in particular, influenced the search for connection evident in these works.

"The habit, especially living in New York now, is to put my headphones on and look down and get wherever I'm going as quickly as possible, even though there are 20,000 people around me at any given moment," Casteel says. "We have the ability to touch so many people. All it takes is a choice to return the gaze and create a relationship."