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Approaching Identity: The Work of Jon Key

“You feel his Southern charm even through a blue screen. Maybe it’s this approachability that allows him to fearlessly switch from graphic design to painting, two worlds blended with a careful hand.” by [Rheagen King](#)



Jon Key in his studio. Courtesy Jon Key

The key to a distinguished design practice involves colored explorations of identity. That is, for designer Jon Key — as vibrant as he is methodical. Jon’s Zoom square serves as a frame within a frame. He sits nestled between his archetypal paintings and sketches, colored in four signature hues of violet, black, red, and green.

“Should I do a presentation or just talk?” Jon asks through his AirPods. The Zoom room encourages him to present his work, and Jon coyly obliges. But in contrast, his presentation feels intentional while giving us “I just threw this on” vibes, similar to his plush mustard sweater. Effortless and still meticulously curated.

Jon's charm exudes throughout his presentation, occasionally pausing to note that he has 12 minutes, 1 minute, 30 seconds left. The Zoom chat flutters with praise when Jon concludes his brief synopsis of work. His attention to detail allows him to simultaneously gaze out a window to note it's raining while also detailing the process behind a mural project he completed in Atlanta. This characteristic is present in his work as well, especially the recently published 500-page Black Futures publication.

Jon expresses great interest in representing his identity. He questions how his presence informs the spaces he inhabits in both majority and minority settings. In conversation, you can't help but feel a little more relaxed listening to him speak. You feel his Southern charm even through a blue screen. Maybe it's this approachability that allows him to fearlessly switch from graphic design to painting, two worlds blended with a careful hand.

He gestures to *The Man in the Violet Suit* №15 behind him on his right — — our left, as he describes what painting does for him that design does not. For Jon, painting is a personal mode of contemplation, a compositional way to tell stories. Yet, the rules and structures of graphic design support these very compositions.

His restrictive four-color palette of violet, black, red, and green is the most notable design convention applied to his paintings. Each color signifies critical aspects of his identity: a queer southern Black man interested in family.

One family member, chosen, works with him as the other half of Jon's studio Morcos Key. Woel Morcos and Jon met at Rhode Island School of Design during Jon's undergraduate pursuit. They began their relationship as friends, building a bond that informs how they approach collaboration on their projects today.

I ask Jon about his time in advertising before establishing his studio. Jon interned with SpotCo after graduating in 2013, moving from Providence to New York. This laid the nuts and bolts foundation for his multi-disciplinary studio but came with its own set of social obstacles. Representation of Blackness puzzled his creative directors. They often questioned why he was trying to include Black actors in commercials. To them, showing Black faces meant making political statements about diversity.

These moments push Jon to further represent Black people through a spectrum of mediums, like Codify Art, a joint collective for queer people of color. Jon declared, "Old school ways are crumbling and disappearing, not in a cancel culture way, but in a productive

culture way.” As one example, Jon recently joined the Type Directors Club after receiving criticism to diversify their board. “How can you participate if you don’t even access?”

Jon dives into the details of his current projects between sips of orange Gatorade, sharing his goals to serve more Black voices through print media and archiving. A publishing company is now picking up his recent MA thesis. Jon delightfully reminds us that we don’t need permission to create platforms for our voices.

What’s next for Jon? If the sky’s the limit, he would love to work with more institutions, embarking on a top to bottom rebrand for museums centering on Black stories. Jon’s laughs echo in my ears as we sign off Zoom, and I remember his shameless Insta plug @jkey13. I think I’ll take a look.