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Depicting the nuance of identity within the Black queer community, Jon Key's works are powerful and arresting

The artist, writer and designer from Seale, Alabama, talks us through the motives behind his colour-blocked, narrative-driven paintings.

“All of the story and meaning behind my work is truly inspired by my life and my own personal history,” says Jon Key, a painter, writer and designer from Seale, Alabama. Through the harmony of these three mediums, Jon harnesses the power of four colours – green, black, violet and red – to unearth the lineage and history of his own identity. Such a quest is performed through the dissection of four themes of southernness, Blackness, queerness and family, each of which is explored in signature palettes of primary colour. “Respectively,” Jon tells It’s Nice That, “these colours intertwine my memory and intimate recounting of the four pillars grounding my work.”

Reflecting back on his childhood growing up with his twin Jarrett, the two would often spend their time creating art and crafts at the kitchen table – supervised by their mum, of course. This initial induction led to an interest in music and theatre, whereby Jon would attend church choir, pageants in school, theatre camps and play the piano, and so forth. All of which was aided by the “bulky” family camcorder that the twins would use to create their own film shorts – “think TikTok without the choreographed dancing and more costumes and horror movies”. This was followed by the arrival of a painterly interest at the age of 10, before turning towards a new-found curiosity for HTML where he’d spend hours coding “Kid Klubs” and online landing pages for his

Graphic design has always played a key role throughout his creative upbringing, and Jon went on to pursue a six-week scholarship programme at RISD to continue as such. But painting and writing have always been patiently waiting at the sideline – like understudies prepped and ready to go, so long as the influence strikes. After realising his underlying interests in the arts, each medium started to become heavily intertwined in the type of art that Jon seeks to create – an outlet that sits alongside Morcos Key, a design studio he runs with Wael Morcos. Orderly, bold and structured,

Jon's paintings pull references from many elements, including painterly giants like Picasso and Kerry James Marshall, historical photographic references of Frederick Douglass Portraits and Louis Agassiz's enslaved African daguerreotypes, plus Sachplakat posters from the early 1900s or Aaron Douglas' illustrations from *Fire!!* magazine in 1926. There's also a pivotal moment after the Orlando Pulse nightclub massacre in 2016, where Jon began examining the spaces and frames in which queer and trans people of colour inhabit as safe places.



Above Jon Key: The Man No. 7 (Red). (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)

Jon's painting *The Man in the Violet Suit* [pictured below] arose as a response to the mythology of the QTPOC lived experience. "This work is really focused on the tension and anxiety of performing and existing as a queer Black man," he says, interested in depicting these narratives through flat, graphic and figurative paintings spotlighting interiors or exteriors in the background. Challenging perception and performance, this particular painting sees the subject morph and respond to the space in which they inhabit, affirmed with a strong gaze directly at the viewer, "with unrelenting strength, power and will". Throughout, there's a characteristic use of polka dots, hailing from his Grandmother's nickname Ruth Mae 'Polka Dot' Giles, and plaid square patterns that re-interprets his father's uniform from work at his construction company. Each of which has become trademark for Jon, combined with a continuous Black Power Fist and open hand gesture. "The figure is always barefoot," he says of a further motif. "All of these are symbols and messages retelling specific memories as it relates to my family, identity and society."

With a selection of new works featured in an upcoming group show titled *Breakfast Under the Tree* at Carl Freedman gallery in Margate, Jon has started to realise a slight turn in direction with his painting process. Using the same four-colour palette, he'd previously paint mostly himself or his twin, plus his intermediate biological family. The newer pieces include his "chosen family" – "meaning friends that become brothers and sisters, mentors that become parents; a constructed community of support and survival." He's also introduced gold ochre as a new colour to the mix, inspired by the introduction of additional subjects – his partner, who's from Lebanon, and two of his closest friends from Brazil and South Korean descent. "This is the first time that I am not painting just Black folx and wanted a colour that similarly didn't focus on colourism but more an abstracted code or reference to their identities."

This is representative of Jon's shift in focus, too, where his quest to unearth his own identity has now traversed into a more holistic and universal approach – that which depicts the nuance of an individual's body, identity and experience, plus the importance of community and having support in order to thrive, especially in the context of queer people of colour. "I hope people feel happy, sad, tense and empowered," he says on the concluding matter of his powerful messaging – "all of the emotions. But mostly, I hope they leave with questions for themselves and others."



Above Jon Key: The Man in the Violet Suit No. 13. (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above Jon Key: Family Portrait No.2. (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above Jon Key: Family Portrait No. 5 (My Southern Family). (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above Jon Key: Family Portrait No. 3 (Linda). (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above Jon Key: Chosen Family No.1. (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above

Jon Key: Man in the Red Room No.3. (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above

Jon Key: The Man No. 6 (Black). (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above Jon Key: Family Portrait No. 4 (Polka Dot). (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)



Above Jon Key: Man Violet Suit No.14 (Violet Bedroom). (Copyright © Jon Key, 2020)