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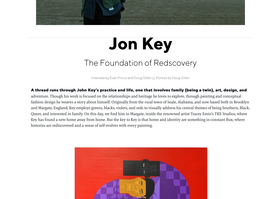
Jon Key

The Foundation of Redscover

Interviews by Ever Prisco and Doug Ginter // Portrait by Doug Ginter

A thread runs through John Key's practice and life, one that involves family (being a twin), art, design, and adornment. Though his work is focused on the relationships and heritage he loves to explore, through painting and conceptual design, he's also made a name for himself by adorning the walls of some of the most well-known spaces in the cities of Brooklyn and Westport, England, his origins spaces, blacks, whites, and reds so visually address his central theme of being Southern, Black, Queer, and interested in family. On this day, we find him in Margate, inside the renowned artist space Every Estate's TKE Studios, where Key has found a new home away from home. But the key to Key is that home and identity are something in constant flux, where histories are rediscovered and a sense of self evolves with every painting.



Evan Prisco: It's unique that you have studios in two cities, one on each side of the Atlantic. So where do you tell people where Jon Key is based?

Jon Key: I would say I'm based in Brooklyn and Margate. We can say that, maybe that sounds cute. Now, we are in lovely Margate in the TKE Studios in the beautiful marte gallery space.

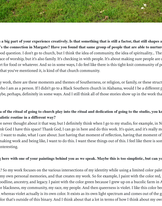
Doug Ginter: How do you end up with a studio being across the world? Was convenient is the?

Jon Key: Yeah, I guess it's convenient. I'm a twin, and so, I guess, and this is literally the same amount of time to go the opposite direction. So casual and in Margate." But how did it even end up here? I worked with the Carl Freedman Gallery, go back 10 years here, and I've been working with them for a couple of years in that period. TKE Studios came about when Every Estate and she was opening this studio space. We did a tour where I was all bigger contraction, and I was like, "I want a studio here." Tracey loved it, She loves that we love Margate, and I think she's always trying to find and figure out reasons to bring interesting people here. So lucrett, my twin, and I, that is. So when I'm here, I see it. When I'm there, I see it.

I really just love Margate. It's just because of the community, the vibe, the people. It's nice being in a small town and walking around, and people know who you are. People say, hi, you know, people stop you. It is just a small town part of life. And then, of course, there's the beautiful beach and the beautiful scenery. Every single time I come to Margate, once I get off the train or get out of the car, my stress relaxes, my jaw releases tension, and I just feel so much better. And it's filled with creatives.

DG: How does this compare to Sussex, Alabama, where you grew up?

Sussex is very small. I grew up on farm of land, acres around me, with horses, cows, chickens, and all of that. Completely different. It's not the same at all.



EP: Can you articulate a little what growing up in small-town southern America was like? How did you get into and first encounter the arts?

My mom would set up an arts and crafts table for my twin and me when we were younger. That's where we would first experiment with paint, glitter, and all of this stuff. Then we started making home videos with our camcorders when we were maybe seven or eight. We would make movies, and we would make our friends and our family members, we would make them dress up in costumes and be the first grads, and then sunglasses, trumpet, and piano. Then I found time dramas (laugh), dance camps, and all of these different things. So I just feel like at a very early age, we were really exposed to so many different types of arts. My mom was really supportive and put us in these programs, really allowing us to play around with that. I guess for me, it became our realm to high school that there are a million ways that you can express yourself and tell your story through the arts.

I was doing dances and I was still doing band, and I was still doing choir in high school. When I was flipping through this book, I FOAD (laughs) and I was like, "Oh, I forgot about that." I was also doing graphic design and I was doing comic book stuff. When I was 15 years old, my mom brought home an IC3M, coding book that one of her coworkers gave her. And I figured out how to do coding. As a 15-year-old I was trying to figure it out, making little websites. And then that translated to me also learning painting at the same time, just playing with the digital and the design, but also with the analog and the oil painting.

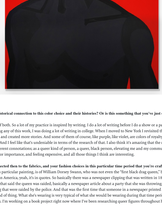
I think because doing theater, doing acting, doing all those kinds of things just allows you to be able to communicate better. It allows you to be confident in front of a room, allowing you to be able to stand up and know who you are as a person. I feel like a lot of that, at least from my mom's perspective, was definitely trying to make sure we were well-rounded, adjusted kids that could really go out and do anything while having the ability to do it, although never imagining an actually being full-time artist. I did think, while in high school, that I was going to be a psychiatrist...

EP: I sort of feel like I have both that you could have been?

Yeah, I could have been a psychiatrist. I could have been a dad was, like, "I just don't know what I was thinking. Of course, you were going to be artists. Every single thing that you did growing up was leading you to this." And I think that was a really nice revelation for her, just to realize it has been this lifelong pursuit, and it has been a passion for both my twin and me forever. My dad was a construction company, and in some ways, it's like an art form in terms of there being a piece of land, and then you make a beautiful house. There's lot of interesting things there. My mom had these sketchbooks growing up, and we saw the sketchbook of her drawings, and she's so good at drawing.

EP: Did your parents know that you end up engaging such other in your creative endeavors?

Well, we had our rule growing up that Janet and I were the only siblings that we had, and we had to be best friends. We had to support each other. We had to depend on each other. We had nobody else but each other. And obviously, it's still super nice now that whenever we're doing something, either having a show in San Francisco or whatever, or carrying a box down the street, you have someone to help you do it, or be there to support you.



DG: Church was a big part of your experience creatively. Is that something that is still a factor, that still shapes and informs your practice? Where is the connection in Margate? Have you found that same group of people that are able to nurture that?

I think that's a good question. I don't go to church, but I think the idea of community, the idea of spirituality... The Black church obviously is a space of worship, but it also family. I'm checking in with people. It's about making sure people are doing okay, supplying support for food or whatever. And so in some ways, I do feel like there is this tight-knit community of people in Margate that I guess now that you've mentioned it, is kind of that church community.

And I think in my work, there are these moments and themes of brotherliness, or religion, or family in these structural things that definitely have who I am as a person. If I didn't go to a Black Southern church in Alabama, would I be the person I am and would I do some points, maybe, perhaps, definitely in some ways. And I still think all of those stories show up in the work that I do in some ways.

EP: Does the idea of the ritual of going to church play into the ritual and dedication of going to the studio, you know, keeping some sort of ritualistic routine in a different way?

Interesting. I have never thought about it that way, but I definitely think when I go to my studio, for example, in New York or even here, it's like, thank God I have this space! Thank God, I can go in here and do this work. It's quiet, and it's really on-brand for everything, what I want to make, what I care about. Just having that moment of reflection, having that moment of manifesting in the studio, I think is very much and being like, I want to do this. I want to make this work. I want to make this piece. I want to make sure that someone to help you do it, or be there to support you.

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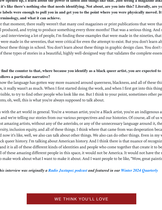
EP: We're sitting here with one of your paintings behind you as we speak. Maybe this is too simplistic, but can you describe your work?

What is my work? In my work focuses on the various intersections of my identity while using a limited color palette, using motifs and things from my own personal memories, and that comes into work. So for example, I grew with this color red, which for me, it's family, bloodline, ancestry, and legacy. I grew with the color green because I grew up on a hostile farm in Alabama. I used the color black for blackness, my community, my race, my people. And then queerness to video. I like this color because blue and red make purple, whereas violet actually is in own color. It exists as its own light spectrum and comes out of the ground as violet. So it's like this color that's outside of this binary. And I think about that a lot when I think about my own queerness.

And I'm not trying to be more masculine or feminine, or all these things. It's really like I am this own being. I have my own presence, space, autonomy, and agency. And that's one those patterns, for example, the polka dots. My grandmother's nickname, my mom's mom's nickname was Polka Dot. And so that shows up a lot in my work. And my dad would wear these construction uniforms to work, with plaid, checker board designs on his shirt. So that translates into my kind of checkerboard patterns. I think, again, having this matriarch and the patriarch, and having these two sides to my family, relatively, these two sides of my family, make up who I am as a person. And allowing that to come to life in the work as a foundation for the visual language, I think is really fun, powerful, interesting, and abstract, but somehow keeps it on the nose. So all of the work, regardless of what I'm working on, whether it's about myself, sometimes my family, sometimes this painting, I'm talking about queer figures through history. There will be my personal connection to the work.



DG: Is there a historical connection to this color choice and their histories? Or is this something that you've just quietly crafted over time?

I think it's a bit of both. So a lot of my practice is inspired by the work of Kerry James Marshall. I'm a show on a painting. And even before I was doing any of this work, I was doing a lot of writing in college. When I moved to New York I ventured this writing and added more to it and created more stories. And some of those stories, like people, like relatives, or family members, like my mom's mom's nickname was Polka Dot. And so that shows up a lot in my work. And my dad would wear these construction uniforms to work, with plaid, checker board designs on his shirt. So that translates into my kind of checkerboard patterns. I think, again, having this matriarch and the patriarch, and having these two sides to my family, relatively, these two sides of my family, make up who I am as a person. And allowing that to come to life in the work as a foundation for the visual language, I think is really fun, powerful, interesting, and abstract, but somehow keeps it on the nose. So all of the work, regardless of what I'm working on, whether it's about myself, sometimes my family, sometimes this painting, I'm talking about queer figures through history. There will be my personal connection to the work.

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DG: So you are attracted to more of history's tables, stepping away from the home and stories that we know already?

Exactly. And going through, again, because my practice is based in design, the print aphoresms, and going to the archives, and looking at these photographs and these stories, I'm just really, really, really,