

Three articles about artist Jonathan Green

Restless artistic temperament brings painter back to Lowcountry roots

By Adam Parker

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After 10 years living in Chicago and more than two decades in Naples, Fla., painter Jonathan Green is coming home to the Lowcountry. The artist, widely known for his use of intense colors and emotional explorations of Gullah culture, will take up residence on Daniel Island by the end of July, he said. The move is partly a consequence of a restless artistic temperament, he said.

"I'm returning to Charleston because I think I've done enough in Naples as an artist and resident," he said. "I have to move around a little bit ... to gain experience and knowledge."

Green, whose work has been featured at the Gibbes Museum and other institutions, is an art activist, promoting the idea that art education should be an intrinsic component of any school curriculum. "People just don't understand the importance of the arts," Green said.

Black culture in particular is poorly represented in the world of visual arts, yet exposure to painting, a universal language everyone can understand, is a critical way to learn about identity, faith, history and contributions to society, he said.

"We focus strongly on everybody else's culture," he said, adding that it's time to do a better job presenting black culture.

Green, 53, said his passion is informed by his childhood, growing up in rural South Carolina and New York City and reared by his mother and grandmother. In those years, he did not see his own culture represented in major U.S. institutions despite the significant contributions of black people, he said. Black culture still is woefully underrepresented, he said.

He is involved in the development of an arts-infused curriculum for the new Sanders-Clyde Elementary School scheduled to open in January. He has designed a mural for one of the school's outer walls.

Born and raised in Gardens Corner, a rural community not far from Beaufort, Green attended Huspah Baptist Church, a reincarnation of the Tabernacle Church founded by Robert Smalls. From an early age, he was made aware of history and celebrated his cultural inheritance, he said.

In the Windy City, where he attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he became active in politics, then disenchanted by the city's political turmoil, he said. Still, it left him with a clear notion that art must take politics into account.

He said he is driven today by two main ideas: To make sure art is ensconced in our community — its public facilities, schools and churches — and to help women understand that they are the "force and guide" ensuring that their children conceive of themselves as free to pursue all opportunities.

"No mother would not want her child to have human rights," Green said. Any mother who fails to stand up for her children — white, black, straight, gay — has abdicated her responsibilities, he said.

Angela Mack, executive director of the Gibbes Museum, said Charleston can only benefit from having someone of Green's professional character and reputation.

"I think it's not only natural, but a wonderful chain of events," Mack said. The Gibbes long has provided Green with a forum for his art and ideas. The latest show dedicated to his work was the 2004 exhibition "Rhythms of Life: The Art of Jonathan Green."

He has worked extensively in the Charleston area, creating a Spoleto Festival poster, joining panel discussions, producing his famous painting, "Seeking," which hangs in the library at Mepkin Abbey, and promoting the arts in the community. Mack said his relocation to Daniel Island will raise Green's profile regionally and result in new opportunities.

"This could begin a new chapter in his life," Mack said. "And aren't we all lucky that we get to observe this firsthand?"

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COMING HOME AGAIN: ARTIST JONATHAN GREEN RETURNS TO HIS GULLAH ROOTS

By Carroll Greene Jr.

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When artist Jonathan Green talks about growing up in South Carolina's Low Country in the 1960s, one begins to realize that through his art he hopes to recapture a quintessential part of himself. There is a certain urgency and depth of purpose.

"My culture is in me, Jonathan Green says. "And my art is connected to the spiritual, mental and social concerns of the global environment." He seeks to recall the feel, texture and color of a way of life he knows is rapidly disappearing. And quite literally on some of the islands near his mother's home, a way of life is being bulldozed out of existence in the name of progress: condos, highways, fast-food chains and displacement of people.

"I know I can't save a whole culture," laments Jonathan Green, "but as an artist I can help create greater awareness perhaps. All of the change is not bad. But are they throwing out the baby with the bath?"

Some 250,000 African-Americans known as Gullahs in South Carolina and Geeches in Georgia are clustered along the Atlantic Coast--from Jacksonville, N.C., to Jacksonville, Fla. The word Gullah probably came from Angola, home of some of the Africans brought to the region during slavery. The Low Country is a place of broad flatlands, marshes, numerous inlets, rivers and islands bordering the Atlantic--romantically called Sea Islands.

Jonathan Green learned the Gullah dialect and culture as a child growing up in the home of his maternal grandmother. After leaving the area to study art, he has now returned to give the Gullah life he recalls his own aesthetic vision. It is an artistic odyssey that has come full circle.

Through the years many African-American artists, such as painters Eldzier Cortor and Ellis Wilson, photographer Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, and the late folk artist Sam

Doyle, a native to the area, has featured the colorful Low Country and its people in their work. But Green's body of work, about 150 Gullah works, is perhaps the most ambitious artistic expression of Sea Islands' culture ever successfully undertaken.

Jonathan Green's most vivid memories of Gullah life are culled from the 160s. " I can remember things as a child that are on now-such as hair wrapping, men weaving fishing nets, farming and hunting. There is very little of these activities going on now. What fishing and hunting that goes on is mainly sport and not out of necessity as before. Food used to be preserved in various ways drying, canning, and smoking. Now, only gardening seems to continue. Mattresses were made of Spanish moss, and men made furniture for use in the community."

Within the community each family was known for providing some specific goods or services. For example, one family would sell seafood, another family would sell produce and another family, and moonshine and so it went. "My grandmother was a quitter." Jonathan Green recalls. One must bear in mind that the first bridge connecting one of the Sea Islands to the U.S. mainland was constructed only after World War II. Indeed, many of the island residents had never been on the mainland before that time. Jonathan Green, who was born in 1955, grew up in Gardens Corner, a farming community on the mainland near the South Carolina coastal town of Beaufort, where the Gullahs also live in large numbers. He is the first known artist of Gullah heritage to receive formal training at a professional art school, the Art Institute of Chicago, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in 1982.

Jonathan Green readily admits that he did not always have much appreciation for his Gullah heritage. Like many others, he had to leave home and journey to faraway places to comprehend the value of his Gullah roots. Prior to living in Chicago, he served in the Air Force, which took him to North Dakota, Colorado and Texas. He also traveled through Europe and Mexico.

After all of this, he reminisces, "I wanted to go back to my roots. The older people were dying, and I began to see people (the Gullahs) differently. I saw them as a people with a strong link probably the strongest link with Africa of any of the black American people. I had studied African Art, and I began to appreciate a certain uniqueness." Jonathan Green's background provides him with an insider's understanding of the Gullah people and their traditions. For instance, in *Tales*, the artist shows a group of men at the end of the day gathered under a huge live oak listening in varying degrees to the yarns of a storyteller. The scene is a continuation of the strong African oral tradition transplanted to America. Another painting, *Banking Yams*, illustrates an unusual method of storing yams by putting them in little huts made of dried cornstalks and straw. Through art, at least, such traditions will be preserved.

Jonathan Green's Gullah art is a testimonial to harmony of style and content. Human figures, which have always been the artist's favorite subject, are rendered featureless in the Gullah paintings. The viewer is not permitted past the dark oval faces. At first the figures seem to bar introspection, but these featureless persons are not anonymous beings. In their communities they are recognized by, size, shape, stance and gesture, the way one recognizes a familiar person whose back is turned toward you. The lack of features seems to suggest an archetypical human being and, in this instance, serves to universalize a people in their daily routines and special occasions.

Jonathan Green's earlier works showed considerable cubist influence, perhaps Picasso, Cezanne or others, though his strong interest in the human figures is evident. As Green matured, he shifted to figures on flat planes or solid color. Jonathan Green, whose preferred medium is oil, sometimes applied with a palette knife but more recently a brush, delights in the juxtaposition of one flat color field to another. His masterful combination of pattern and abstract color spaces are the stylistic basis of the Gullah series created between 1985 and 1988.

"I enjoy what can be done by abstracting the figures to express subjective emotion through an understandable form," Jonathan Green said of his work.

Observed Norman Pendergraft, director of the Art Museum of North Carolina Central University in Durham: "Jonathan Green's vivid effects of brilliant and warm color and his coordination of the abstracted human and abstract flat patterns meld into balanced and pleasing art."

Boat Men illustrates the basic stylistic approach to the Gullah series: the use of vibrant colors, dark featureless faces, the juxtaposition of bright colors against large color field, such as the expanse of white sand.

In another piece, Dressing Up, the artist takes off on POP art optical illusions as seen in the geometric design of the wallpaper in the painting. He goes even bolder by positioning one pattern against another, the little girl's green and white polka-dot dress with the wallpaper. The images seen through the mirror offer a sense of greater depth to the flat plane.

In the mirror we observe the figure of a young woman in a white slip about to put on a blazing red dress. The same young woman, fully decked out in red, appears in Hip City, where the artist again employs the masterful use of bold patterns punctuated by intervals of solid color on a completely abstracted background. A large hat of coiled sweetgrass hangs on the wall of Dressing Up. The hat is in the style of Gullah Basketry frequently used in daily life and scattered throughout Jonathan Green's paintings. A large sweet grass basket is a dominant image in the boat in The Escorting of Ruth. This painting, like Boat Men, reminds one of the distinctiveness of Jonathan Green's Low Country: You are almost always near the water. And in order to get to school, visit friends and family, and in this instance, to get the safe haven of a midwife, one had to negotiate a river or an inlet of some sort.

The pregnant Ruth is safely ensconced between two women companions who lend their support while the young men steer them safely toward their destination. The themes of family and communal support are a prominent one in traditional Gullah life, according to the artist, and that theme is graphically represented here. Such support was considered very necessary because it was believed to ward off evil influences.

In another family and community scene, the two parents of First Born are all dressed up in their Sunday best for their child's baptism. The large blanket drapes easily over the father's lap and over his knees creating the focal point of the painting. The young wife and mother cuddles close by, the vivid yellow of her hat and dress adding emphasis to the work. The couple is balanced by a woman to their left in a bright blue and white dress, while two other women, a little girl and a doll add unifying elements to both sides of the pew. The baby's things are lovingly folded and arranged in a Gullah basket sitting on a handsome floral-patterned rug. Funerals, like births are major occasions in the Gullah community. The Passing of Eloise is a formal statement rendered symmetrically

in subdued hues. All of the pieces are in place as someone leans over the corpse to offer a farewell kiss. A minister as a column of mourner's pay their last respects oversees the bier, centered. The formally robed choir seems, symbolically at least, to parallel the band of angel that await the soul of Eloise on "the other side," for she is merely "passing over," Green painted *The Passing of Eloise* in tribute to his beloved grandmother.

In another church setting, *The Shout*, the central figure is exhibiting a religious custom practiced among traditional Gullahs and other Christians who express their religious ecstasy in a joyful "dance." The shout is undoubtedly of African origin and represents an adaptation of the old culture to the newer African-American Christian experience.

In *The Mather School* the artist poses bold pattern against bold pattern. This work is in great contrast to his earlier more subdued paintings. The gesture of the pupils, arms here add a pleasant touch of movement and sense of depth. In *Colored Clothes*, we see again the bright plane, in this instance, a yellow sheet is counterpointed with a variety of patterns. With the older boy assisting his mother, the theme of family support is present. "Every Monday everyone washed their clothes, the white closes first, next came the colored clothes. You would see all of these wonderful colors blowing in the breeze." Jonathan Green recalls."

Jonathan Green's use of color has influenced other artists. Inspired by the strong design, vibrant colors and varied patterns of Green's work, French fashion designer Patrick Aubert has created his spring 1990 collection around the Gullah theme.

"I think it's wonderful to have another artist inspired by my work and taking his art to yet another step," Green says. Whether Jonathan Green will continue painting in a conscious Gullah tradition remains to be seen, he says. Right now the Gullah culture has a pull on him. "The sense of my art is in my culture," he said. "What is seen in my work comes from a time and place, but it speaks to all times, all places and to all mankind."

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Commentary by Pat Conroy, in *Gullah Images: The Art of Jonathan Green*

When Jonathan Green came into the world, he brought with him an inescapable sign of his specialness. He was born wearing a caul, an inner fetal membrane that covered his head at birth. In some societies, this is interpreted as a token of great luck or that this child will never know death by drowning. But in the Gullah society along the South Carolina coast, it insures that the child is touched by an uncommonness and magic that will bring inordinate grace to the community. From the beginning, Jonathan Green was marked and grew up known as "the child of the veil."

Jonathan Green, an artist indigenous to Beaufort County, South Carolina, is in the middle of a career that finds him painting the autobiography of his childhood. Jonathan Green paints what made him, the source he issued out of, the forms that inspired his rare sensibility. It is this singular, unshakable vision that gives his work its aura of astonishing originality. Each one of Jonathan Green paintings looks as though it were a commemorative stamp imagined out of the backcountry of Jonathan Green's unconscious. Jonathan Green is the immaculate, real thing, and his art is a cry of pure love for his community, his family, and the geography of the Carolina Sea Islands.

In his art, Jonathan Green is that rarest of twentieth-century painters in that he dares to tell a story. There is a strong narrative flow that binds his work to a central theme. By capturing the essence of the Gullah culture that raised him, there is a sense of both celebration and rediscovery to all his work. His paintings contain some of the primitive, raw beauty I once saw when I visited the cave paintings of our Cro-Magnon ancestors in the Dordogne Valley of France. They possess that kind of mythic grace and nameless grandeur that I observed in those thrilling, ill-lit French caves filled with fabulous images over ten thousand years old. Like those anonymous cave painters, Jonathan Green paints what he considers sacred and essential and mysterious in his own life. It remains a primitive urge for the artist to search for a definition of self that he can live by, and Jonathan Green chose to illuminate the life of his community along Highway 21 from Gardens Corner to Yemassee. By narrowing his vision so finely, he discovered himself as an artist and made his works both magisterial and universal. By returning to the source, he discovered the inexhaustible mainstream of his life's work. Because he so fully understands what he is doing and why, there is never a false note registered on his canvases. Few painters can match Jonathan Green's shining authenticity.

If you study his work carefully, you can detect the peacock-tail love of color found among Haitian painters, then on a much deeper level, you begin to sense the timelessness of Africa. The influence of African culture is still found today in Beaufort County in rich and delightful ways and the imprint of the lost and scattered tribes is still written on the faces of the Gullah people. Jonathan Green himself possesses a face of exceptional beauty that makes you think of exiled princes. When he speaks of his dreams, you know that he sometimes paints from images stolen from his sleeping life. You also know that he dreams in fabulous colors. His use of bright colors is reckless enough that he could easily land a job painting new species of parrots and songbirds in some undiscovered rain forest. The Gullah people depicted in Jonathan Green's world look like they got dressed while staring at rainbows. His art is a love song to his past. You imagine him singing as he paints, an ode to joy and the bright astonishment of memory.

In the South where Jonathan Green and I were born, we could not have sat together on the same bus, drunk from the same water fountain, attended the same school, sat in the same waiting room at a doctor's office, worshiped the same God together, or voted in the same election. It was a hard, unregenerate South we were born into, one obsessed by race, and it was the one part of the country where a white man would never be asked to write an introduction to a book praising a black man's art. Both of us came of age during the Civil Rights movement and both of us lived in Beaufort when Martin Luther King and his lieutenants came to Penn Center on Helena's Island to plan the marches and demonstrations that would change our part of the world. The Ku Klux Klan would meet along the same Highway 21 where most of Jonathan's paintings have their origin. I attended an all-white Beaufort High School, yet he graduated from that same school, fully integrated, ten years later. Both of us share an ardent love of Beaufort County and both believe it is one of the loveliest parts of the planet, but our Beauforts are still two different places, worlds apart both texture and time.

I had been a fan of Jonathan Green's work, having admired his paintings Elayne Scott's Red Piano Too Gallery on St. Helena's Island long before His work reminded me with startling clarity of the one year I spent teaching black children on Daufuskie Island, the first year that white teachers were sent to formerly all-black schools. My stay on the island had ended badly when the superintendent fired me one Friday night, but he could not dim the powerful associations I had built up between my students and their parents. I had fallen in love with the people of Daufuskie Island and I wrote my book *The Water Is Wide* to give voice to that love. Jonathan Green's art took me directly back to that time when I steered a boat out across the marshes of Beaufort County to teach everyday. Here were the oystermen I passed in the river, the baptisms in the small creeks, the yards full of children and chickens and dogs, the companionship of women, the wisdom of old men, the dignity of cattle and hogs-all of it coming out in a great tide of artistic labor. He was painting the life that he had led and the one I had been allowed to visit for a single year of my life, and like a fine novelist, Jonathan Green was getting all the details right. One Saturday in March of 1996, I drove Jonathan Green through the lowcountry that we both cherish and both use as the basis for our art. I wanted to see his Beaufort and he showed it to me as we rode out toward Yemassee to his father's trailer and an amazing yard filled with derelict cars and bizarre, oddball collections of castaway fencing and building supplies, as hunting beagles barked at us from homemade pens. His grandmother's trailer was nearby and she welcomed us inside and instantly we were engulfed in color as though we had entered into a Byzantine tent in a story of the Arabian nights. An artist was destined to come from a family with such passion for color and sense of form.

Then we drove among his mother's people and I learned where Jonathan came by his extraordinary gentleness, his all-encompassing serenity. Many were farmers and they lived in simple but lovely houses off the main highway with wood-burning stoves and pictures of Jesus on the wall. I sat with his mother and aunt in Burton, South Carolina, and they talked about the early signs of Jonathan's artistry surfacing throughout the long, growing seasons of his childhood. In many of the houses we entered, there was an original oil painting that Jonathan had given to some of his favorite relatives as a gift.

We paid a special visit to his maternal grandmother's grave near the church of his childhood and he showed me the remnants of that church that had been destroyed during Hurricane Gracie. Jonathan described the rituals of total immersion in the saltwater creek near the church and the fasting for seven days and nights in the lowcountry woods that his congregation required of any candidate for baptism. He was telling me that his art had a spiritual origin intimately related to his mission as an artist to preserve the Gullah culture that had nurtured and cherished and brought him into manhood. No one we met that day, as we went from house to house along the country road off Highway 21, had any doubts about the great talent of Jonathan Green. Most had been there or close by on the day of his birth and knew that his gift had come preordained, that his artistry was written into the symbols and myths surrounding his birth, and that extraordinary things were expected of the "child of the veil" by the Gullah people who knew how to read the secret signs of the lowcountry.

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