

The quintessential Lowcountry artist talks about his life, his work, the future of art without public funding, the culture of rice, copycats, and the joy of coming home.



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."

– Pat Conroy

Jonathan Green: The Interview

Written by Margaret Evans

Thursday, 24 February 2011 15:17

I'd heard he was "enigmatic." This made me nervous. Much like the figures in his iconic paintings – most of whom look away from the viewer, lost in concentration or some sacred reverie – I feared he might be private... reserved... a little standoffish. What I encountered, instead, was a man just as warm and welcoming as the exuberant, sun-drenched landscapes those cryptic figures inhabit.

What can I tell you about Jonathan Green that you don't already know? With the possible exception



of writer Pat Conroy, no living artist has done so much to capture the world's imagination and focus it squarely – longingly – on the South Carolina Lowcountry. His career has been one long series of bright, beautiful postcards from his native land. "Wish you were here," they whispered and sang... even though the artist, himself, was not.

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Now, more than 35 years after leaving this place with which his name is practically synonymous – first for Chicago, then Naples, FL – Jonathan Green has come home. He spoke to me by telephone from his new studio in Charleston...

Margaret Evans: Jonathan, what possessed you to leave Naples after 25 years and return to the Lowcountry?

Jonathan Green: Well, so much of my work has always been here in Charleston. Exhibitions, public speaking engagements... so much of it was here. The travel expenses were adding up, and frankly, the recent economy has been terrible for artists. So, I figured this would be a great opportunity to slightly alter my lifestyle. I would be closer to my work, closer to my subject, and more important, closer to most of my relatives. Many of my people are getting older and even dying... This just seemed like a perfect opportunity at a perfect time.

ME: You've said that 95% of your relatives are still in the little town of Gardens Corner, where you grew up. It's not too far from Charleston. Do you make it over there very often?

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JG: (Laughs) I'm in church every other Sunday serving as an usher.

ME: They must love having a famous artist in the congregation...



JG: Well, I don't know about that. (Laughs) They love having *me*, I guess. The people at my church see me as the person they knew as a baby and watched grow up... someone who moved away, but who has continued to participate in the community, and give back to the community, over a lifetime... who has remained close to his mother and the rest of his family... That's who I am to them. A "famous artist" means very little to them compared to Jonathan Green, the child they knew... the child who grew up with the veil.

ME: So it's been a good move, then? You're glad you did it?

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JG: Ecstatic. It's been natural and easy. And you know, I'm just so fortunate that I had a place to come back to. Most people, once they've left home, find it very difficult to return. I think Thomas Wolfe talks about this, doesn't he? (Laughs) You know, I read that a long time ago, and I refused to believe that from him... All of my career as an artist, I just refused to believe that you can't go home again.

ME: Well, some would say you never really left, judging by your work. And now, with this move, you've decisively proved Wolfe wrong! Sounds like it's been good on a personal level. How about business-wise? I'd guess Charleston is a pretty good location for Jonathan Green, the artist.



JG: A great location. And since moving back here, I've started something new. I'm now doing works on paper, which are only a fraction of the cost to create. This has helped to spur a whole new generation of collectors.

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ME: Speaking of a whole new generation... lots of people are worried, right now, about the future of the arts – not just in South Carolina, but across the country. The U.S. House of Representatives is looking to make deep cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA); and closer to home, our new governor, Nikki Haley, has proposed doing away with the SC Arts Commission. At the risk of asking an all-too-obvious question... do you think this is a bad idea?

JG: (Laughs) Of course it's a bad idea! But you know what? It's also a wonderful opportunity. It's an opportunity for us as a community – as educators, as supporters – to realize that until we, *as individuals*, support our own arts, then we cannot propose a culture. We cannot *talk about* a culture. If people are not supporting the arts, then they don't really care about the culture. Until there are art classes at every level of school, churches collecting art, various institutions collecting art – fraternities, sororities, clubs, corporations, you name it – then we simply can't propose a culture. Everybody should be supporting the arts.

ME: So, not just

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Jonathan Green's painting 'The Interview' is a vibrant and surreal work. It depicts a woman in a purple dress and white apron, holding a long wooden staff, standing in a grassy field. In the background, there is a yellow house with a red roof and a red barrel. The painting is a copy of the original, which is a painting of a painting.



Jonathan Green's painting 'The Interview' is a vibrant and surreal work. It depicts a woman in a red dress and white apron, holding a long wooden staff, standing in a grassy field. In the background, there is a yellow house with a red roof and a red barrel. The painting is a copy of the original, which is a painting of a painting.



Jonathan Green's painting 'The Interview' is a vibrant and surreal work. It depicts a woman in a white dress and white apron, holding a long wooden staff, standing in a grassy field. In the background, there is a yellow house with a red roof and a red barrel. The painting is a copy of the original, which is a painting of a painting.

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