

Jonathan Green: The Interview

Written by Margaret Evans

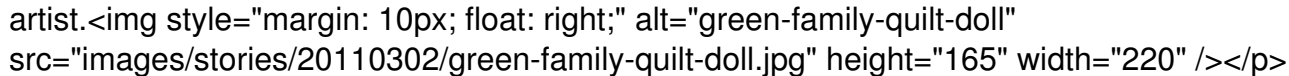
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who has remained close to his mother and the rest of his family. That's who I am to them. A famous artist means very little to them compared to Jonathan Green, the child they knew the child who grew up with the veil.

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

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.

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 the government? Is that what you're saying?

JG: Everybody. This is kind of a wake-up call, I think. I'm actually excited quietly that they're proposing to take [state and federal funding] away. Because it's going to wake people up! All people. You know who should be the main supporters of the arts? Grandparents. They've lived long enough, they've seen enough, and they know art works. It's an integral part of a child's development.

ME: You do a lot of work with children. Do you see education as an important part of your role as an artist?

JG: I think the goal of artists is to educate all people. I'm particularly interested in children because I'm a believer that art should be part of every aspect of a child's development. What's the first thing a young child does? He picks up something to make marks on. That's an early form of self-expression. When a child is in trouble, what's the first thing the police department psychologists do? They get the child to look at and draw pictures.



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height="309" width="220" /></p> <p>ME: And studies have shown that training in the arts improves student performance in academics, right?</p> <p> </p> <p>◆</p> <p>JG: In everything! Absolutely. It◆s like this: Say you have a blueprint for life. If you removed 40 % of the image of the blueprint, it would be pretty difficult to follow. When you remove the arts from the lives of people, it makes them very difficult to draw into a community and a culture.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>When we reach the age of maturing and changing and developing, we need the arts in our lives to help us express and process that change. Look at many of the kids today who are disturbed or troubled◆ You◆ll find they don◆t have any arts. They don◆t have a culture.◆ All over the world we have festivals, symposia, seminars, about moving from childhood into adulthood via dance, music, visual performance, body paint ◆ <i>expression.</i> But in so much of our modern American culture, we don◆t have any of that; so the kids don◆t know what to do when they reach the age of 10 or 11. They don◆t know how to express themselves, how to decorate or adorn themselves for specific rites or festivities. It creates this major void their lives, and they really don◆t know what to do with themselves for about five years.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>ME: It seems to me that ignoring arts education is like teaching to only half the child. You◆re ignoring a big part of the human brain◆ the whole right side, really.</p> <p> </p> <p>◆</p> <p>JG: You◆re exactly right.</p> <p> </p> <p>◆</p> <p>ME: My daughter is a 4th grader at Lady◆s Island Elementary. You came to visit her school last year, and spent a great deal of time with the kids. When I told Amelia I was interviewing you today, she was over the moon. She fancies herself quite the little expert, too. She said, ◆Mom, don◆t be nervous. He◆s really, really nice.◆</p> <p> </p> <p>◆</p> <p>JG: (Laughs) I◆m their hero, because they know I◆m giving them something they can enjoy, appreciate, and live by forever. And with this gift of art, they can influence other people, too.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>ME: You <i>are</i> their hero, Jonathan, I can tell you that. Lady◆s Island is the arts-integrated elementary school here in Beaufort. My daughter has extensive classes in visual arts, music, drama and dance several times a week, along with all her academics. I could not be happier to see the kind of bright, well-adjusted kids that are coming out of this school.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>JG: They◆re going to be great people! And they◆re going to change the culture and community where they came from.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>ME: Shifting gears a bit◆ Here in the Lowcountry, it◆s impossible to turn around without seeing artwork that◆s been influenced ◆ sometimes quite heavily ◆ by Jonathan Green. How do you feel about that?</p> <p> </p> <p>◆</p> <p>JG: I love it! I copied when I was young, and a student, and I know that it◆s through the copying, through the mimicking of other artists, that you learn about the materials of art. Not only that ◆ you learn other ways of expressing imagery that speaks to your culture. If I◆m a vehicle for more people to become immersed in art, then that◆s a wonderful position to be in!</p> <p>◆</p> <p>ME: What a generous response. You know, you◆ve got quite a few adult ◆copycats◆ too ◆ not just students ◆ and some of them seem to be doing pretty well.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>JG: (Laughs) Some of them are doing better than I am!</p> <p>◆</p> <p>ME: I don◆t know about that, but they seem to be having a good deal of success painting in the style you popularized. To be fair, they all have their own variations on

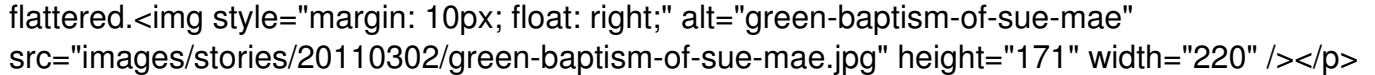
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JG: Sure they do! That's part of making the art your own. They're not taking anything from me, really they're just borrowing. I'm flattered.



ME: You're also very gracious. And you're bringing that gracious spirit here to Beaufort on Friday, March 4th, as an honored guest and speaker at the USCB Center for the Arts. What will be the focus of your lecture?

JG: I'll be talking about my life as an artist coming out of the rice culture. My ancestors planted rice as late as, say well, my great aunt, Emily Albergotti. That was as recent as 1960. As a child, I got to see the fields got to see people winnowing the rice.

ME: And you've launched something called the Lowcountry Rice Project. Can you tell me a little about it?

JG: Well, it's an educational effort. I'm working with a group of organizations, including USC, the College of Charleston, Penn Center, the Charleston Public Library, and several other major entities that deal in history and culture. We created this project around rice, in part, so that we could use RICE as an acronym for Race & Culture. But also, because it's just a very natural connection.

Rather than talking about enslaved Africans being slaves, we want to focus on their incredible contribution to the rice economy, which lasted well over 200 years. It literally built the Southeast.

We want to look at all that it took to prepare the rice fields: Moving hundreds of cypress logs, 10 to 15 feet in diameter, creating the dykes, the infrastructure Who were these people who made this possible? Where did they come from? How was it that Europeans knew about them, specifically? And why did they export well over 10 million Africans to North America? With the Lowcountry Rice Project, we hope to educate people about this shared heritage of ours to create a platform for honest, informative discussions around the culture of rice.



ME: As I listen to you, Jonathan, the two words that keep coming up are education and culture. I know you see yourself as an educator. But you also see yourself as a keeper of the culture, don't you? And specifically, the Gullah culture a culture that's otherwise slipping away?

JG: Absolutely. And really, that's my job. That's what I've done all my life, and will continue to do for the rest of my life.

ME: We're all very excited that you'll be here for [Celebrate the Arts](http://www.uscb.edu/art/2011-qcelebrate-the-artsq-at-uscb). It's the first community-wide Arts Festival to be hosted by USCB since it committed to an emphasis on the visual arts here at the historic Beaufort campus back in 2009. The university has also just created the Center for the Arts, and is producing some wonderful theater productions. What do you say to all of the above?

JG: Glorious! Wonderful! Perfect!

ME: Just like this conversation. Thank you so much, Jonathan. I look forward to seeing you March 4th at USCB.

<http://www.jonathangreenstudios.com/Jonathan-Green-details>
[Read more about "Celebrate the Arts" at USCB.](http://www.uscb.edu/art/2011-qcelebrate-the-artsq-at-uscb)

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