

Jonathan Green

Contributed by Hank Whitsell
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Like many of us do, I love art—paintings, sculptures, well-wrought tapestries, lithographs, and unique pieces done by great artists and artisans. My mother was a painter when we were kids, gave it up to work two jobs and raise us, and returned to her art when we were out of the house and long gone. My sister is a botanical sculptress—which means she moves beyond holly and baby’s breath wreaths to topiaries made out of deer antlers and statuary crafted from bicycles, violins, and local flora and fauna that she makes grow over the man-made or human-crafted items. I got the verbal gene on the DNA of creativity, and therefore, though this piece will not likely show it, am the writer in the family. I collect books and other resources about writings. I tell you all of this to preface, with a note on how I often surf the web to view art, my discussion of particular paintings and one particular artist. I just discovered the art of Jonathan Green. Is he one of the culture’s best-kept secrets, or am I just way behind in my awareness of contemporary artists?

The first Jonathan Green piece I came upon online is a painting titled “White Breeze,” done in 1995. An African-American woman, of middle age, wears a white dress with a simple black geometric pattern. The woman is in profile. The dress is fitted (the viewer can infer) from the waist up, and the skirt of the dress is multilayered, multi-folded, and full and flowing. The woman wears a wide-brimmed straw hat with a blue and white polka-dotted band that meets in a large bow at the back of the hat and that matches what peeks out between her head and hat as a kerchief. She is bangled (earrings), poised, and holds with her right hand at her side the folds of the flowing skirt of the dress. Jonathan Green walks his subject, who has draped over the shoulder of this semi-formal dress a pure white sheet, through the hanging, flowing folds of two large white sheets—or drapes of material. As the white of the material whips in the wind, against a perfect blue sky and white clouds, the woman appears to move with upright dignity and fluidity through these flowing folds. Jonathan Green’s painting is realistic, so I do not mean in my description to suggest there is any ethereal, mystical kind of “flowing” going on. The painting is sharp, crisp, bright, and the contrasts are equally vibrant, sharp, and stunning. His subject is one who is depicted in like form in numerous paintings, as Jonathan Green, considered a “master of historical memory,” incorporates the culture of the south, the rural nuances of South Carolina where he grew up with his grandparents in the fifties and sixties, and the African-American community he observed and experienced as a kid. Jonathan Green uses the past and his present eye, and creates the color and other contrasts that are viscerally stunning and emotionally and intellectually evocative. I only wish my written word could do justice to Jonathan Green’s painted worlds. Brilliant.