

CULTURE

This Queer Artist Uses Their Hair to Create Epic Performance Art

Jarrett Key's bold performances defy all genre, and the result is leaving audiences in rapture.



BY KIBWE CHASE-MARSHALL

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There's a nearly indescribable way in which one is changed after experiencing fine artist Jarrett Key's boldly experimental performances. Their genre-bending work forces viewers to reconsider their assumptions about art, race, gender, spirituality, and much more, and in their latest performance, "Hair Paintings and Other Stories" (currently on view at New York's La Mama Galleria), a will witness the artist apply pigment to stretched canvases, walls, and other surfaces, using their own hair as a painting implement. The song and movement that accompanies the process – at times pre-conceived, at times improvised – can result in a soul-stirring, church-style rapture for the audience. The painted works that result serve as lasting documents of both Key's unbridled artistry and strenuous labor.

Key, who has explored Blackness, queerness and other facets of identity in their work, is also a co-founder of Codify Art, a collective of queer and trans artists of color who are elevating and showcasing each other's creativity via project-based collaboration. After the opening night performance of "Hair Paintings and Other Stories," *them.* caught up with Key about their work, the excavation of family roots that inform their Hair Painting performances, and what adventures (creative and otherwise) they may be embarking upon next.

Tell us about your journey to becoming a fine artist.

My twin brother Jon and I grew up in Phenix City, Alabama, and attended schools where our creativity was enthusiastically nurtured. In elementary school we were immersed in painting and drawing, but in high school I became more focused on performance. Dance, singing, and drama were a big part of those years. Afterwards, I headed to Brown University, and I actually went there thinking I was going to be an opera singer... a Black gay tenor from the South. After I finished at Brown in 2013, I went to NYC to intern at the Public Theater. That same year Jon and I founded Codify Art alongside a few friends from Brown.

What are some of your favorite projects from Codify Art thus far?

One of my favorite projects is the Survival Library, which was created in collaboration with Pioneer Works' School of Apocalypse. It's a collection of written and multimedia works that center the personal experiences of Q/T/W/POC. As the project's description has it, it acts as "a confirmation that you are not alone in your experiences, a torch warded against these gaslighting times of 'alternative facts.'"

Over the last four years, we have also produced six shows at Bau Haus, a live/work project in Bed-Stuy. I live there with my roommate, Son Kit, and we like to describe it as somewhere between a studio, an exhibition venue, a halfway house, a community lab, and a great party. It has been incredibly formative to me and many other artists as we continue to expand and develop new work.

You were really theatre-focused for a bit when you moved to New York; what resulted in your work pivoting more back to your fine art roots?

Honestly? When I learned about Trayvon Martin's killing, I had to take a break from traditional theater. Theater is very collaborative, and that's what makes it great. But I needed space to process my own emotions and thoughts. I was so triggered, just realizing that I could walk outside and get killed just like Trayvon. I was trying to figure out what a meditative healing practice could be, one that would acknowledge and affirm my Blackness, my queerness, and my gender identity... and I was looking for the "space" where I could do that practice.

The "practice" that resulted — as you call it — is very dynamic. I'd never seen anything like it previously. What inspired you to try applying paint to surfaces with your own hair?

When I was a junior in college I stopped cutting my hair. My grandmother — who has inspired a great deal of my work — used to say that "your hair is your strength." Ruth Mae Giles. She used to press her hair with a hot comb that she would heat over a gas stove. As I started to plan my post-graduation move to New York, I decided I needed all the strength I could get. So in keeping with her words, I stopped cutting my hair. As my hair grew I began claiming my own individuality, my own voice. My father always said that Black men should keep a "clean cut." My hair was a clear objection to that, asserting that I had control over my body. One night I was up at 2:30 in the morning, painting — I had work the next day, mind you — and as I stared at the finished piece, I just couldn't shake feeling a little dissatisfied. As I tried to go to sleep, it was like my grandma woke me up in the middle of the damn night and said, "your hair is your strength... paint with your hair." The next day I got tempera paint, straightened my hair, and went for it.

When was the first time you performed a Hair Painting live?

In 2016 I applied to the Harlem Arts Festival with my Hair Paintings as the primary project. They loved the work, accepted me as one of their featured artists and invited me to perform a Hair Painting live for their gala at the Alhambra Ballroom. That was my third Hair Painting at the time. When I stepped on stage I realized that only 20 people out of 150 in the space were even paying attention to the performance. That was when I realized that I have to perform each Hair Painting for myself, like I had done in my apartment. The point was creating a connection to my grandmother and the story of our family. So I started singing along to the score for the first time while making this Hair Painting. Singing seemed like the only way to fully commit to the performance, on top of the painting and dancing.

Can you tell us more about what inspired the song and movement you've incorporated into these performances?

My literal "hair brush" transcribes my movements and gestures as I reimagine the bodily rituals passed down from my grandmother to five generations of our family. The physical gestures that I perform as part of the Hair Painting performances are inspired by things that I saw my grandmother do or things that her children told me she did, like rocking in excitement when she was at church. And singing is a natural complement to movement. I make my own soundscapes for these performances, scores that are composed with recorded conversations about my grandmother with her children, the lullaby my mom used to sing to my brother and I, prayers, bible verses, original music... During live performances, the soundscape collides with my voice as I sing prayers and my grandma's favorite hymns. At times, the performance results in a call-and-response dialogue with the audience bearing witness. It's such a grounding experience for me.

What is the most unexpected thing you've experienced during one of your hair-painting performances?

In the midst of creating Hair Painting No. 27 live at my first solo show at La MaMa Galleria, I sang the words "Heavenly Mother" in response to a call in the score. Then my brother Jon sang "Heavenly Mother," and joined me in song. Again, I sang the words "Heavenly Mother." And then a third person joined in the repetition of these words. As I continued to paint,

dance, sing, and jump from the ladder, I realized that the audience was truly participating in this performance with me, this ritual.

You prefer that gender-neutral pronouns be used to describe you; how has your evolving relationship with gender manifested within your work?

Interesting question. I think that gender expression isn't necessarily a major theme in all of my work. It factors most notably in a series of exclamation mark sculptures I created, pieces that are decidedly gender-neutral. Each sculpture is meant to represent an enslaved African brought to the "New World" during the transatlantic slave trade. The exclamation mark connotes human expressions of rage, sorrow, and joy, and most importantly, it demonstrates the inherent values that define personhood. While the slave economy (much like contemporary incarceration, the prison industrial complex) worked to commodify Black bodies, these sculptures stand as testaments to the value of the Black voice and recognition of our personhood and autonomy.

What's next for you, creatively and otherwise?

I'll be showing work with my brother Jon at the UNTILL booth at New York's SPRING/BREAK Art Show in March. It will be our first duet show. I'm also in the process of finding out about MFA applications I recently submitted. So I might be moving soon to continue my work while I study. We'll see, I might end up on the other side of the world!

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Kibwe Chase-Marshall was born in Trinidad, raised in D.C., styled in New York, and schooled in New England, all before falling in love with Los Angeles. Words and wearables also have his heart.

TAGS EVERGREEN JARRETT KEY Q&A
