

ArtSeen

# Jarrett Key: *from the ground, up*

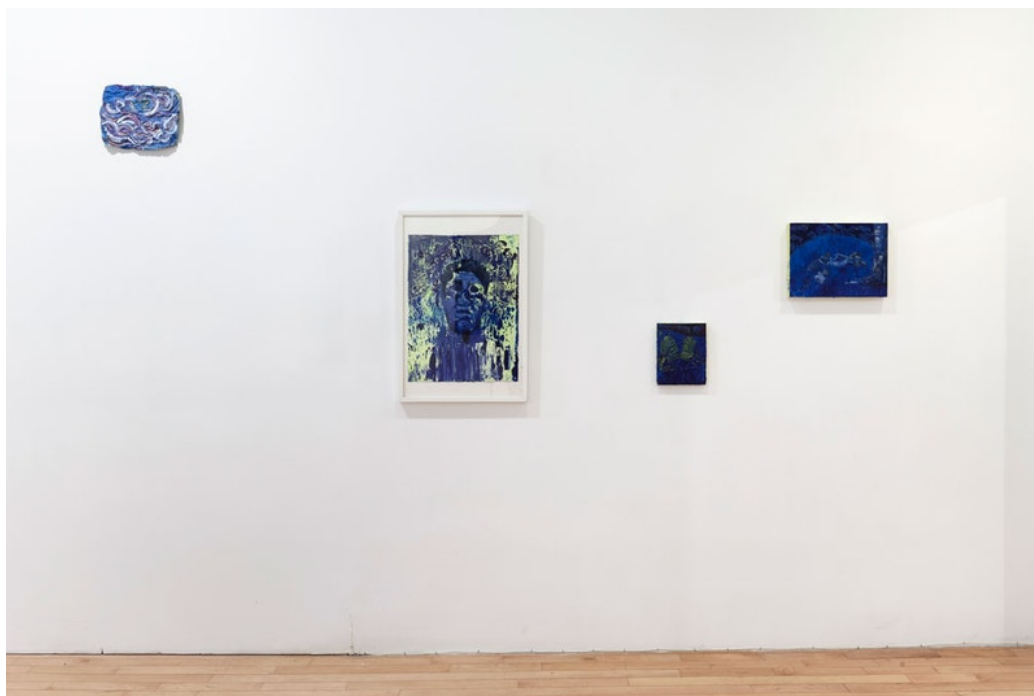
By [Andrew Paul Woolbright](#)



Jarrett Key, *We Were Dancing*, 2022. Oil on panel, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery.

Jarrett Key is interested in the slow, germinating speed of folklore and the gradual repetition needed for world-building. Where histories may be marginalized or erased, the cultural memory of the dispossessed is stored in ballads, in folktales, and in lore. Through a visual language that builds momentum at the speed of oral history—an important language of historical alterity—Key considers the South and the freedom that can be cultivated through myth-building. The heavy, impasto paintings on concrete, panel, and paper in their first solo exhibition culminate in something that shares proximity to the languages of magic realism.

The archipelagic chunks of concrete, panel paintings, and drawings send your eye up and down the walls of the gallery with a weightless bounce. A number of works in the show are frescoes—dense slabs of concrete the artist has drawn into to delineate form and space before covering them in oil paint. It is helpful to interpret the installation as a narrative excavated from a lost wall. Through this valence, the negative space of the gallery becomes an index of what couldn't be preserved; allowing each chapter of the story to grow and exist in our mind from an affected space of loss. For instance, the section that goes from *Jon Is Up* (2022) on the left edge to *We Were Dancing* (2022) on the right creates a fragmented narrative scene where Jarret's sibling Jon is flying above a group of figures looking up. Looking in this way, there are multiple narrative constellations throughout the gallery that provide rhizomatic points of entry into the sequencing of the myth.



Installation view, Jarrett Key, *from the ground, up*, 1969 Gallery, 2022. Courtesy 1969 Gallery.

Haint is a pigment created from the Indigo plant, and the desire for it accelerated the trans-Atlantic slave trade. For the Gullah, who were forced into slavery to harvest indigo, the hue carried a mythical quality of protection and was used to ward off haunting spirits. Key uses the color pigment Haint Blue as an Ur-Site, with all of its entanglements in colonial extraction and slavery, primarily in two settings—the open field and blue sky as one coordinate, and the nocturnes in the forest as another. The night, the field, and the spaces beyond the tree line offer a hidden space of comfort and refuge; while the paintings themselves recontextualize the pigment of haint as a condition of hope and possibility. Key initiates a color theory of reclamation, using the color to light the skies of magic worlds that offer a present capability; a romantic, utopic magic that is accessible now, can be dreamed now, can be shared and believed in now.



Installation view, Jarrett Key, *from the ground, up*, 1969 Gallery, 2022. Courtesy 1969 Gallery.

The concrete fresco forces a directness in the work; a procedural urgency that commits to form quickly, against the setting speed of the concrete. Its urgency to develop permanence has a parallel speed to the spread of language, of oral tradition—a medium that privileges rhythm over the entanglement and distraction of style. While the oil paint that is committed to its surface becomes impossible to revise or erase, it preserves the ephemeral but real experiences of freedom, making them substantial and permanent. While acting against the quickness of the material, the scenes and subjects feel ludic, sincere, metonymic to the attributes of its subjects the way people feel in memories.

They resist reification, fidelity to depiction, or illusion while avoiding the anti-aesthetic of deskilling. Instead, Key works in a direct language that is intended to be remembered. Removing the consideration of texture, Key's style shares some of the tendencies of community murals which have long formed an aesthetic alterity to the institution, and visually index the oral tradition and storytelling. Hale Woodruff used the directness of the mural to challenge the visual presentations of history in public space; repeating curvilinear forms similar to the ways the Mexican muralists and WPA muralists used them to create a pictorial rhythm intended to register deeply eidetic memory in the viewer. The community mural is a site that stores the emotional history of place—preserving local memory and invisible records of interiority. The mural carefully negotiates the zone of semblance, between distinct and symbolic representation, allowing figures and settings to register simultaneously as universal stand-ins and recognizable individuals. It is a painterly language of myth, and importantly, de-centers the role of the author to free the myth to extend and be shared beyond them.

Within Key's new folklore, there is an argument for slowness—as a form of refusal and as a form of expansion and utopic hope. Each night, there is safety beyond the tree line, and places to recover, to process, to touch, to be free. Each morning, there is the glory and resistance of hope at the clearing of all limitations, set in concrete, permanent and hoping to be interpreted as a saved relic, a forming edifice of record; hoping to persist as a new folklore. *Did you hear that Jon flew?*

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#### **Contributor**

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