



Twin brothers from a small Alabama town turn heads in the New York art world

By Anne Kristoff

February 8, 2019



Twin brothers Jarrett and Jon Key are winning a lot of attention in the art world with their distinctive styles and creative exuberance. The Keys work separately but had their first joint exhibition at the Spring/Break Art Show in New York. (Anne Kristoff/Alabama NewsCenter)

Jarrett Key knows how to make an entrance. You'll hear him before you see him. After straightening his hair with a hot comb, like his grandmother used to do, putting it up in a ponytail and donning a pair of overalls, he enters a room with a full-throttled bellow, "Heavenly mother guide me." Then, he walks barefoot through the audience, sticks his head into a bucket of tempera, and begins to paint ... with his hair.

Somewhere in the crowd will be Jon, his brother, also an artist. They are twins, but not identical. Their work, similarly, is adjacent and complementary but separate and wholly its own.

The Key brothers grew up surrounded by family in Seale, Alabama – their grandfather's cows, their grandmother's lessons and their parents' business acumen and collaborative efforts in creating a life together shaping them both.



), he thought he was going to be “the tenor from Alabama,” and paired Menu ☰
 ses. After doing an internship in Washington, D.C., he realized the world of
 for him. He then began making art.

“Now I can’t do anything else but make art,” he said. “I can’t imagine a world where I’m not making. I have to make work. It’s an important part of my survival and the way that I see myself and how I value my time.”

Jon’s path was a little more linear. His early coding experience catapulted him into design. He began doing posters for church and logos for local businesses in high school. It wasn’t until he thumbed through a college prospectus that he learned there was a name for this set of skills – graphic design. Until then, he had his sights set on Georgetown University, where he planned to study to be a psychologist. That all changed when he saw that art and design could be a career. He ended up in Providence, same as Jarrett, but at the esteemed Rhode Island School of Design (<https://www.risd.edu/>) (RISD).



Jarrett and Jon Key in Columbus, Georgia, which is a short distance from their hometown of Seale, Alabama. The twin artists live in New York but consider their Southernness essential to their perspective and their work. (contributed)

“Our parents forced us to imagine ourselves larger than life and told us that we could make anything possible if worked really hard and we believed in ourselves,” Jon said. “And it was really present in our family because our dad ran a business.”

That business is Key Construction, where Jon and Jarrett worked every summer. Their mother is a certified public accountant and worked at a financial institution in addition to running the business end of the construction company. Despite their parents having seemingly pedestrian jobs, the brothers feel that they come from a family of artistry.



(building homes for craftsmanship,' which elevated his whole perspective on (9) and how important the craft and artistry was," said Jon. Menu ≡

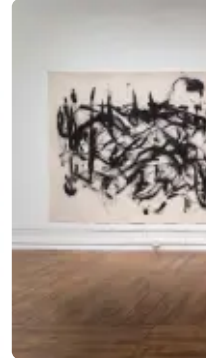
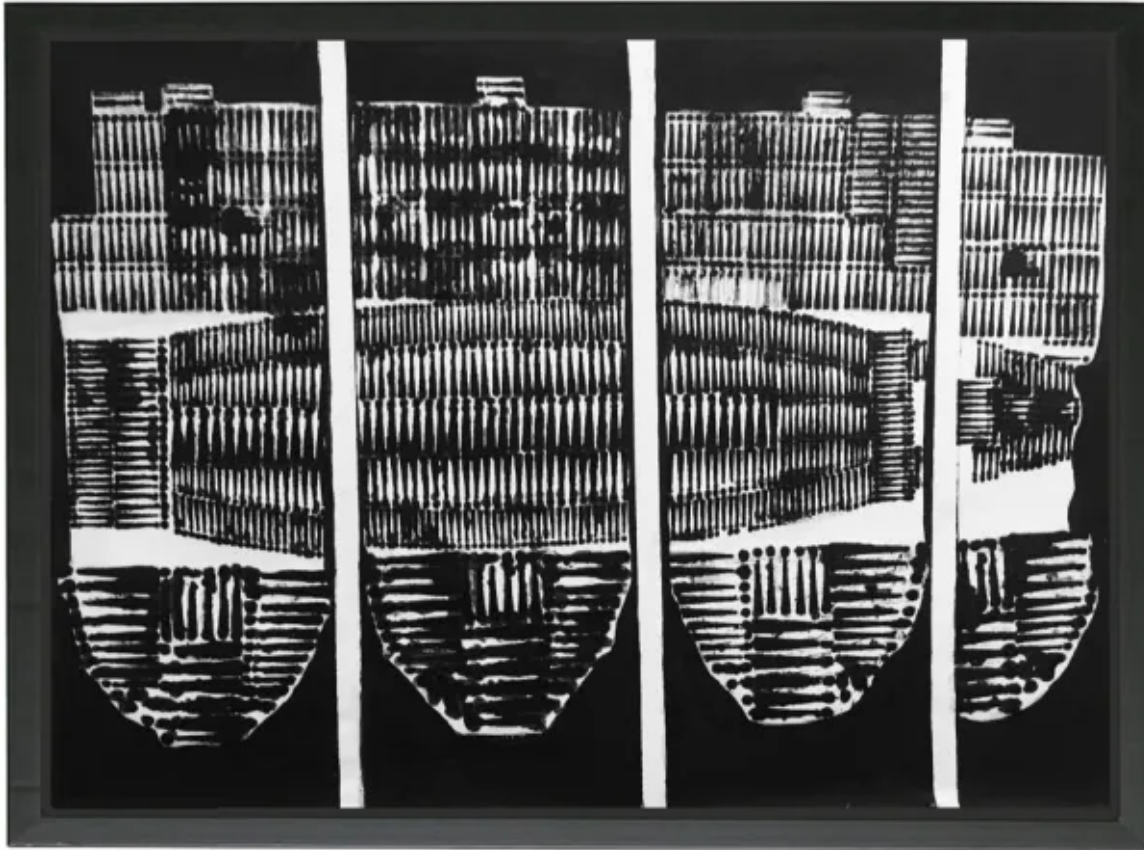
When they weren't crunching numbers, their mother was doing things like writing and singing original lullabies for her sons. She had a sketchbook of pencil caricatures of people that blew the brothers away when they discovered it in a closet. When they asked her where this came from she casually offered, "I just wanted to draw something and this is what happened."

Jon and Jarrett have definitely inherited that trait.

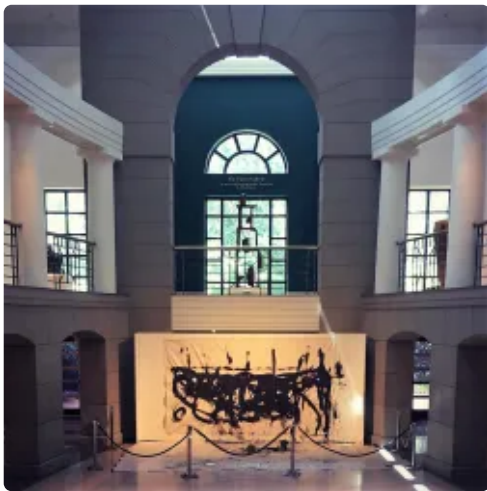
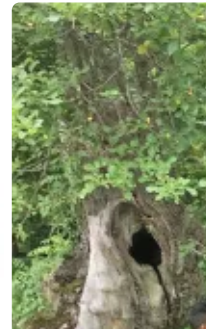
The Key brothers have an air of being able to do anything they want. It's not cocky or entitled, but matter of fact. A true belief instilled by their parents.

Jarrett recalls wanting to enter a singing competition during high school. His father said, "OK, but you have to win. If you win you can continue singing. If you don't win, you have to stop." The same thing happened when they wanted to attend the Savannah College of Art and Design (<http://www.scad.edu/>) summer program or RISD pre-college. "If you get a full scholarship, you can go."

"The standard was: You can achieve the best for yourself, work hard and believe in yourself," Jarrett said, "which was so formative." It would be easy to dismiss it as earnestness except they have actually accomplished a lot in their 27 short years.



(<https://i0.wp.com/content/uploads/2019/02/Jarrett-Key-exhibition-in-New-York-ssl=1>)



(<https://i2.wp.com/alabamane.wscenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Jarrett-Key-hair-painting-on-view-at-Columbus-Museum.jpg?ssl=1>)



In addition to graduating from two of the top universities in the country, they formed a collective while at school called Codify (<http://codifyart.com/>) through which they have done projects at the Whitney Museum of American Art (<https://whitney.org/>) and the Harlem School of the Arts (<https://hsanyc.org/>) in New York City. “We look for opportunities where we can go into spaces where conversations don’t normally happen and change the discourse, change the perceptions, bring a new idea to that space,” Jon said. They’ve exhibited at crucial spaces around Manhattan and Brooklyn (La Mama Theater (<http://lamama.org/>), The Public Theater (<https://www.publictheater.org/>), Jeffrey Deitch Gallery (<http://deitch.com/>), MoCADA Museum (<http://mocada.org/>)).

Although both brothers are pursuing art outside Alabama, their Southern roots remain important.

“Being from Alabama definitely influences my work,” Jarrett said. “The [hair] painting series would only have happened if I was born in Alabama. The rituals and the lessons and the narrative.”

“Similarly, Southernness is one of the pillars of my work,” Jon continued. “The culture and those nuances of hospitality, behaviors that people have, pleasantries. For Southern people it’s very specific and they have a very specific performance that I think carries and translates very differently than New Yorkers.”

“I’m just an Alabamian and there’s no way around it,” Jarrett added. “And it informs the way that I live and exist. Now I live in New York, some people would say I’m a New Yorker, some people wouldn’t, who knows, but Alabama is really important to us.”

At the Spring/Break Art Show (<http://www.springbreakartshow.com/>), the scrappy counterpart to the big New York art fairs, that Southernness was on full display.

The Key brothers were showing work together for the first time in an exhibition called UNTILL. The room was covered in Jon’s hand-painted pale yellow wallpaper adorned with magnolia leaves and cotton bolls. Paintings using his signature colorway – black (blackness), red (family), green (Southernness) and purple (queerness) – hung next to Jarrett’s take on the Brookes slave ship diagrams. In the middle of the room, two exclamation marks from those paintings have come to life in a sculpture called “Comfort Mark.”

“UNTILL was an excavation of our own past, present and future,” Jon said. “Thinking about our family stories, our family traditions, our history as black people, our history as queer people, and transcribing that into very specific objects that related to time periods.”

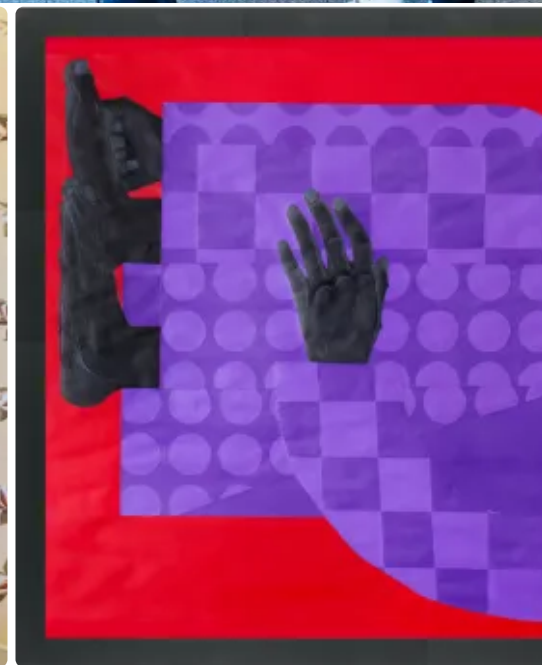


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(<https://i1.wp.com/alabamane.wscenter.com/content/uploads/2019/02/Jon-Key-Violet-Dreamscape-UNTILL.jpg?ssl=1>)



(<https://i0.wp.com/alabamane.wscenter.com/content/uploads/2019/02/Jon-Key-has-a-design-studio-called-Morcos-Key-with->



In addition to painting, Jon is a creative director, photographer, teacher and writer. He owns a graphic design studio, Morcos Key (<https://morcoskey.com/>), with partner Wael Morcos.



his Master of Fine Arts at RISD, is a multidisciplinary artist working in performance. Jarrett is best known for his hair-painting series, which he says his grandmother came to him in a dream. She told him that his hair was his strength and to paint with his hair. The hair paintings incorporate song, dance and public space. He just completed one performance for a commissioned piece at the Columbus Museum (<http://www.columbusmuseum.com/>) in Columbus, Georgia, about 15 miles from Seale. It was the first time many of his family members saw him in action. In an interview with the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer, he said, "I wanted to be able to come home, do this work and have it permanently hang in my community. It's very special."

One might think there is rivalry between the brothers, but there's not. If anything, they are each other's biggest cheerleaders, which includes a hefty dose of constructive criticism.

"It's not, 'yes, you're right, everything you do is beautiful.' It is not that," Jarrett said. "It is true, honest, real feedback that's direct. I think that's so valuable because I actually have someone in my life whose opinion I can always trust and who can be real with me even when I don't want to hear it."

It's part of the tapestry that is brotherly love.

"Our mom told us we're all we've got so we have to support each other," Jon said.

Jarrett Key's "Hair Painting No. 29" is on view at [The Columbus Museum](https://columbusmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/BCC56AAD-E13C-43E7-9492-917336626744) (<https://columbusmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/BCC56AAD-E13C-43E7-9492-917336626744>) in Columbus, Georgia.

Jon Key has a solo show opening today at the Rubber Factory (<https://rubberfactory.nyc/>) in New York City. He'll be part of Spring/Break Art Fair (<http://www.springbreakartshow.com/>) in New York, opening March 5.

During Black History Month, Alabama NewsCenter is celebrating the culture and contributions of those who have shaped our state and those working to elevate Alabama today.

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