



JOYFULLY KING

For synesthete King Nobuyoshi Godwin, colours, numbers and emotions are the key to his uplifting art, as his brother explains

MALIK NOBUMASA GODWIN



opposite: *The Lyon is Having a Great Day Because the Sun is Shining "22"*, 2020, 11 x 14 in./ 28 x 35.5 cm

above: the artist at home in his studio in 2020, photo: Yuko Taylor unless otherwise stated, all images: acrylic paint on canvas; courtesy: Yuko Taylor

My brother King's journey as an artist did not begin with a brush or canvas. Now in his late twenties, he is a man of few spoken words, but expresses a deep sense of mindfulness through his artistic style. Sometimes he stares at trees and smiles as if he knows something that we don't. Sounds, such as the squealing of car brakes, and sights like the swaying of trees in the wind, can move him deeply. Paying rapt attention to things that the rest of us tend to tolerate, ignore or not notice occupies a great deal of his daily life.

He was born King Nobuyoshi Godwin, in 1991, in Raleigh, North Carolina, to our native Japanese mother and African-American father. At two-and-a-half years old, he was diagnosed with severe autism and throughout his

school years attended special education programmes.

As a child, King loved to vacuum. He would vacuum for hours, listening to the hum of the motor as it turned the brush. When he pulled the vacuum back, the pitch would drop as the motor fought against his pull. He was entranced with this ebb and flow of sound, intoxicated by it almost. For most people, vacuuming is a chore. Our awareness falls to the back of our minds and we switch to autopilot. But for King, vacuuming was a delight. The sensations of his everyday life occupy the foreground instead of the background, and it is this sensibility that is the foundation of the vision that defines his artwork.

After graduating from high school, he participated in a residential educational programme run

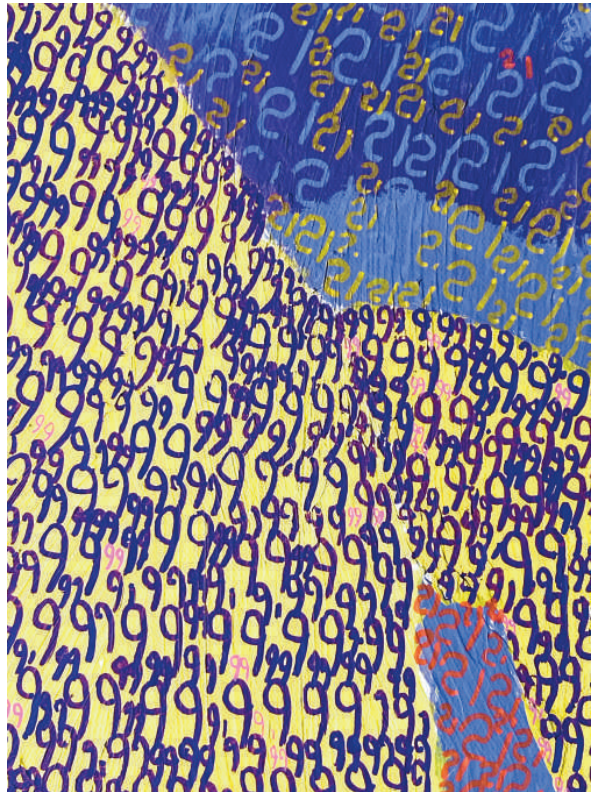
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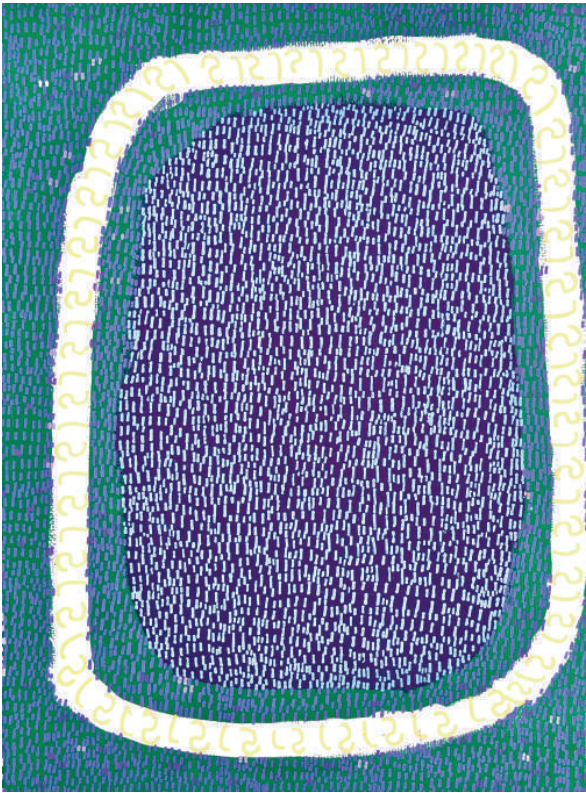


above and below: *The Shrimp is Having a Great Day Because it's with the Baby Shrimp and Leaves "88"* (detail), 2021, 48 x 48 in. / 122 x 122 cm

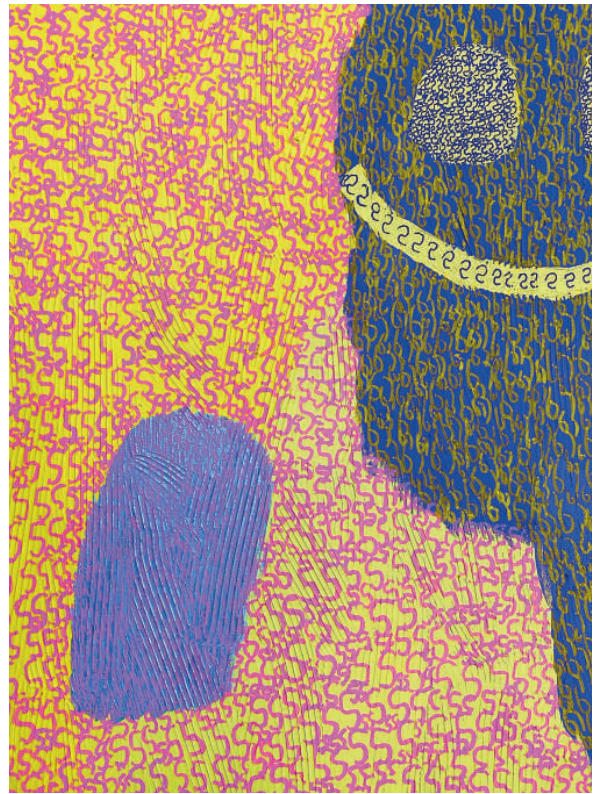


above and below: *The Sea Animals are Having a Good Day Because it's with the Bird "22"* (detail), 2020, 60 x 72 in. / 152.5 x 183 cm





The Sun is OK Today Because it's Cloudy, 2018, 8 x 10 in. / 20.5 x 25.5 cm



The Cat is Having a Good Day Because it's with the Seal and the Raccoon and the Leaf "55" (detail), 2020, 60 x 72 in. / 152.5 x 183 cm

The Camel is Having a Good Day Because it's with the Leaves and Water, 2020, 60 x 72 in. / 152.5 x 183 cm

The Penguin, 2020, papier mâché, 6 x 8 x 4 in. / 15 x 20.5 x 10 cm, photo: Yuko Taylor





The Fish and the Elephant Thinking about Spring, 2013, acrylic paint and silver leaf on canvas, 20 x 16 in. / 51 x 40.5 cm

Every number has an associated colour and, more importantly, each relates to an emotion.

by a university located two hours from our hometown of Raleigh, and while there he found a considerable degree of independence. After finishing the programme in 2014, he returned home but, now in his early twenties, he had begun struggling to find his bearings in a world that did not mesh with his perceptions. Our parents were looking for ways for King to live as independently as possible. Our mother, herself an artist, encouraged him to venture into the world of visual art. For a while, he dabbled with making pencil sketches but, after picking up a brush and acrylic paint, he suddenly found his creative footing.

Almost immediately, King began emphasising certain parts of his works by juxtaposing contrasting and analogous colours. "What colour do you want to paint the background?" Mom would ask him. "Purple," King would reply, decisively. "What do you want to do next?" she would say, and he would quickly respond that he wanted to paint a cow and he wanted it to be yellow. "Is it done?" she would ask, and King would say, "No, I will put numbers on it." At first, he attempted to add numbers to his work using a brush, but this did not feel accurate enough. He wanted something more precise. Eventually,

he discovered that acrylic paint markers were just right for carefully adding digits across his work.

King is a synesthete, meaning that he makes associations between numbers, emotions and colours. Vibrant hues and digits appear to leap forth from his paintings and invoke a feeling of joy. He usually paints characters and animals among trees but, rather than describing specific scenes, his work represents the images and feelings in his mind. His larger pieces often have more than a thousand numbers dancing across their surfaces. Each number has an associated colour and, more importantly, each relates to an emotion. While King's paintings tend to depict cheerful creatures with bright colours, the nuances in the tones and numbers reflect subtle changes in his mood. When he is feeling anxious, it impacts his work, with some paintings becoming densely covered with tiny numerals that suggest an almost obsessive agitation. Bigger digits with lots of space around them reflect a more relaxed, carefree state of mind. In large paintings that take many days to complete, fluctuations in his mood can be seen in the differences in the way each colour region on the canvas



The Bird Feels Good about the Water and Trees, 2014, 40 x 30 in. / 101.5 x 76 cm

is filled with repetitions of its associated number. Recently, when naming a painting, he has begun to sometimes include a number that he associates with the work and its colour, for example *The Lyon is Having a Great Day Because the Sun is Shining* "22".

King's process begins with a pencil sketch, taking just seconds, to compose his characters. Next, he applies paint in several layers of two or more colours and then – meditating upon sounds, sights and the sensation of the brush sweeping across the canvas – he uses more paint to fill in the backgrounds, building up colour to achieve a deep richness. He then adds the characters based on his preliminary line drawings. Finally, with the paint markers that give him the control he needs, he meticulously positions numbers over the background and figures. As he works, the painting gradually takes on an almost mosaic quality. The vibrant numerals create a sense of depth and are often so dense it is hard to tell if it is them or the brush strokes that have made the colours.

Today, King lives on his own in a flat adorned with stuffed animals and his own colourful artwork. He divides his time between training for the swim team for Special

Olympics (for people with disabilities), performing as a member of Raleigh's Japanese Taiko drum ensemble, and making art. He is routine-oriented and his artwork is a big part of that routine – as well as a vital part of his self-expression – and every weekday he conscientiously devotes time to painting. He finds joy in completing habitual daily tasks, watching favourite Disney movies or cooking a familiar dish for himself.

When painting, King knows when his work is done with reassuring decisiveness. However, it is not unusual for him to pack up his brushes and markers for the day only to make an impromptu dash back to his canvas to make a small change before returning to his routine. With the very final strokes, his messages are ready to leave his hands and colour the world around him with his very personal and uplifting inner universe. As a form of expression, his art must be authentically King.

Malik Nobumasa Godwin is a writer and restores clocks as The Horologist in Raleigh, North Carolina.