

INTERVIEW

Jas Knight

Terrain

22 February - 28 March 2024

Words by Katrina Nzegwu

Katrina Nzegwu: You sold your first painting at 7 and had your first one-man show at Greater Hartford Community College just aged 8. How did you know yourself to be an artist at such a young age?

Jas Knight: If I'm honest, I don't believe I actually had an idea of what "being an artist" meant. I knew that I really enjoyed drawing and painting and had a vague notion that that was how I wished to eventually make a living; but I had limited exposure to the history of how that could be a profession. My parents were rather encouraging, but I don't believe they knew what it meant to be an artist either.

KN: You've stated the importance of retaining authenticity in your work, and using a visual language that speaks plainly to people. Can you talk about this idea a bit more?

JK: Painting is inherently social. One can approach it antisocially, utilising it primarily for its euphoric benefits, but when you put the work in front of others you are communicating. The question then becomes how to say things to others in a way that preserves something of the sentiment the subject has for me. If the vehicle of communication is oil paint, how can I speak in a way that is intelligible to others? I begin with the assumption that there is a universal visual language which, if used properly, can be quite effective.

KN: How do you choose the master works you copy?

JK: I copy mainly to work out techniques and better acquaint myself with the medium. The copies are a field of experimentation: a place to test theories and enjoy the work of others. I choose paintings I feel are useful for study and appreciation.

KN: You've described your iteration of Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Bashi-Bazouk* as your favourite master copy. Can you speak a bit more about why you love this painting in particular?

JK: Geromé's *Bashi Bazouk* is a harmonious painting in every sense. The colour harmonies, subtle chromatic shifts in the skin of the subject, well ordered triangular composition, and high finish, are all things worthy of study in any painting that possesses them. The undulating tonality of the pink silken jacket the mercenary is wearing rises to pale orange heights and falls to folds of madder lake, a wonderful complement to the earthy verdant background. There are moments where the gun he is holding is nearly lost in the misty backdrop; its visual identity is preserved by the slightest distinguishing earth blue/violet, mixed in subtly and separating the metallic instrument from the hazy, dimly lit setting. The painting is a visual feast, a five-course meal.

KN: Why are several of the works titled 'Fugue', after the musical compositional technique?

JK: I like the freedom that music, particularly instrumental music, has to be a thing enjoyed purely within the realm of aesthetics. I believe visual art has become so burdened by the external pressure to be something beyond an aesthetic object, that the formal elements are often drowned out by

conversations I feel to be parochial and ancillary. Because my work does not rely on narratives shared by masses of people, I am free to build images which primarily rely on the power of colour, tonality, and line, a purely aesthetic occupation. The numbers are there out of utility – they distinguish one painting from another. No one ever asks what the meaning of Bach's Fugue No. 5 in D Major is.

KN: *Fugue 19* is an interesting – and almost standout – painting in the selection. It is quite a surreal still life. What is the story behind this still life selection?

JK: My purpose for titling the work as Fugues is to relieve the work of the burden to carry a specific message, outside of the message line, tonality, and colour communicates. To speak of the story behind the work would be to ask for the entrance into a room with no walls. I want people to experience the power of the colour, the lines, the composition. I want them to feel this in an unmediated way.

KN: What first drew you to travelling in the West African region – in particular Senegal?

JK: I had begun to read and study the cultures of the region. I also found that many of the models I was intuitively drawn to paint were from the area, so I began to get the idea that if I just went there, I would be quite inspired.

KN: You've spoken about your being inspired by David Brion Davis' writings on West Africa's Senegambia region. Are there any other writers or texts that profoundly influenced this body of work?

JK: Marc Gotlieb's *The Deaths of Henri Regnault* (2016) was influential. Many painters of the 19th century would travel in hope that the sun would invade their subsequent canvases with light and colour.

KN: How do you choose the specific scene or context of your genre paintings?

JK: I chose to paint scenes that I find interesting, but I often manipulate them compositionally.

KN: In your previous works there are more overt references to 21st century technologies, such as mobile phones and laptops. Were these purposeful or incidental subjects in the work?

JK: They were somewhat purposeful. I began to worry that they were bordering on the gimmicky, so they have been relegated to the role of the incidental at this point.

KN: Your earlier portraits also constitute constructed scenes, staged within your apartment in Williamsburg. To what extent did your depictions of Senegal's daily life and rhythms play with this line between fiction and fact?

JK: I do manipulate my compositions, but they are in some ways the vision of a documentarian. It is my goal to bring believable scenes to different audiences; scenes you are likely to see there.

KN: You previously cite studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) as a very formative time for your approach to painting. Could you tell us a bit about this experience and how it has influenced your work?

JK: Prior to attending PAFA I was entirely self-taught. I did have an artist mentor I sought out in high school, Mr. Michael Borders, who introduced me to oil paint. I really didn't know what I was doing with oils, so at PAFA I did a lot of painting and got familiar with the medium. There I met Patrick Connors, the linear perspective instructor, who remained a friend and reliable critic until his recent death. I also had access to the museum, which was part of the school. I was totally immersed. I had moved to Philadelphia after selling a painting and I had a few clothes, and my grey paint box I still use today. I would carry it during my long walk from the art museum area on Parrish St., to central downtown where the school was. I walked to save money and found I was too afraid to ride my bike in the crazy city. There in penury I grew to want, more than most things, to turn myself into the best painter I could be.

KN: You strive to maintain an authenticity in your paintings, so that they retain a universality. How do you maintain this accessibility – what particular aspect of your process pays allegiance to this notion?

JK: I am invested in making paintings that reflect my values, as truly as possible. Because we human beings are more alike than we are different, I believe this is the path toward universality. There is a paradoxical relationship between being true to oneself and to others. I have, as much as possible, resisted the urge to do anything in the work for the sake of trending. I determined early on, due to my commitments and the sheer unpredictability of making a living off of a speculative market, to never invest myself in paintings I would not be quite happy to populate my studio with if they didn't sell.

KN: Can you speak about how you arrived at the exhibition title *Terrain*?

JK: While in Dakar I spent some time in Terrain Ngor. Its meaning is French in ground; in English it can also be used in a more abstract and conceptual sense to encompass a field of knowledge or interest. I thought the broadness of the word gives enough room for the work to be viewed as it is, an aesthetic expanse as it were.