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Unenslaved through Art: Rice Culture Paintings by Jonathan Green

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Fig. 1. Jonathan Green, *Rice Morning Tasks*, 2013. Acrylic on archival paper, 10 1/2 x 14 inches. ©Jonathan Green

The acrylic painting *Rice Morning Tasks* by Jonathan Green (b. 1955) depicts two women participating in one of the many stages of rice production (fig. 1). They stand in the foreground in clothes of red and purple, a bold contrast to the lush green surroundings and light blue and yellow dotted sky above. The woman on the left actively pounds a large pestle into a mortar that sits on the ground below. She wears a purple and red striped headwrap, its high volume following the curve of the foliage behind her. In total, her outfit consists of four—possibly five—different fabrics, a luxury not typical of clothing worn during hard labor. The thin-striped fabric of her headdress is perhaps the same diagonally striped fabric of the sash around her waist, although the stripes in the belt appear a bit thicker. The bulk of her dress is solid red, matching the silhouette of the woman that stands behind her. Flowing from the nape of her neck is a sheer piece of polka-dotted fabric, once again purple and red. It either hangs from her headwrap like the train of a veil or is attached to her shoulders like a cape. Either way, the lightweight, sheer quality of the fabric suggests that it is silk or chiffon, an expensive fabric that would not normally be used to make work clothes. The presence of this excess fabric—no matter what type of cloth—is not in keeping with

clothing usually associated with work. Contrasted with the strong motion of physical exertion, this piece of cloth is fully a marker of personal adornment.

Adding to this, the woman’s sleeves are distinct and covered by a fabric of red stars. Although the background is purple, not blue, her outfit could be read as an evocation of traditionally patriotic American imagery, especially seen in relation to the white and purple striped shirt worn by the other woman in the scene. The striped shirt is the only use of white in the whole scene, and the colors create a stark visual contrast that draws the eye to this figure who watches her companion. Together, the fabrics worn by the two women are reminiscent of the American flag. Yet, their bright colors and bold patterns are aligned more closely with African textiles, and they stand in front of a structure with a thatched roof, a construction type not common to the antebellum or contemporary United States. Furthermore, the deep purple that appears in the two women’s clothing is a visual reclamation of indigo, a product that, like rice, was cultivated in South Carolina and brought wealth to antebellum Charleston, generally without credit to the Africans and African Americans who tended the blue flowers and produced the dye.¹ The clothing and the building suggest a layering of geography, or at least of place-based identity. The blending of American antebellum signifiers, African cultural traditions, and rice production come together in this painting not as a scene of enslavement, but as a depiction of a world that is unenslaved.

In this essay, I examine artist Jonathan Green’s series, *Unenslaved: Rice Culture Painting* by Jonathan Green (2012–13), which he claims was undertaken to unenslave his ancestors and their history. I explore the ways in which the works challenge typical representations and conceptualizations of African American culture on and in the antebellum and contemporary Carolina Lowcountry landscape, particularly by comparing them to Charleston Renaissance artist Alice Ravenel Huger Smith’s (1876–1958) series of watercolors published in the book *Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*. The *Unenslaved* series depicts what Green imagines rice cultivation and culture might have looked if the African and African-descended people living and working on the landscape had not been kidnapped and enslaved, but instead lived in the coastal environment of their own volition. The paintings aim to preserve the history of rice in the Lowcountry and, in so doing, celebrate the dynamic existence of Gullah culture that is fundamentally inseparable from the grain itself. The twenty-seven paintings in this series—which Green notes was his first consciously political set of works²—are Green’s visual effort to redress history and slavery through an act of pictorial rejection.

Green is of the Gullah culture, and his Gullah upbringing is fundamental to his work as an artist and advocate within and for his community. Gullah people today are the descendants of enslaved Africans and African Americans, and the community is geographically concentrated on the coast and Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina.³ According to Green, “the Gullah people are known for preserving more of their African cultural and linguistic heritage and practices than any other African American community in the United States.”⁴ This continuity is in part because of the climatic and geographic similarities between the Lowcountry coast and the most common areas of slave trafficking in West Africa. Additionally, the rice economy depended upon the knowledge of those who were enslaved, creating a dual phenomenon of cultural persistence: white settlers and colonists encouraged some West African cultural practices—basket making, for example—because they contributed to the profitable cultivation of rice, while they discouraged others—

masquerades and harvest celebrations—because they deemed them to be unnecessary to the economics of rice production.⁵

Green was born in Gardens Corner, South Carolina, on the Lowcountry coast near the Sea Islands. He moved to Chicago in 1976, where he trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and graduated with a BFA in 1982. He stayed in Chicago for twelve years before moving to Naples, Florida, in 1986, and then, after twenty-five years, to Charleston, South Carolina, where he currently resides. Even while living away from South Carolina, he painted his coastal home; Green has spent his adult life primarily painting the colorful scenery and dynamic people of his homeland. His paintings show scenes of the familiar and unusual, realistic and imagined, specific and general, crafted in the bright colors that Green associates with the Lowcountry.

Green’s time in Chicago proved formative in shaping his goals as an artist, activist, and collector. He describes leaving the South and gaining exposure to art in an urban setting that forced him to realize that there was a void in the art world: a shortage of depictions of people who are black. Green says of this, “When people go into museums and they see the images of the people that look like them, there’s a certain pride and respect and level of achievement that cannot be matched. I saw the deficit in people that looked like me not being on the walls, and that’s when my work became so serious about the place I’m from.”⁶ In an effort to redress the absence of representations of African American people, especially those from the Gullah culture, Green has dedicated his career to depicting the people and environment of the Lowcountry, regardless of where he resides.

His formal training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago immersed Green in a world of art that was inaccessible to him when he was growing up in South Carolina. While he was raised with strong mentors in a community focused on agriculture and religion, he knew that he needed role models for his art practice. Being very intentional about this process, he explains that “it was important to keep a balance of black and white artists, male and female artists, southern, Midwestern, as much of a balance as possible” within the group of people to whom he turned for inspiration.⁷ As a realist who is drawn to Impressionism, he looked to artists such as Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, and Mary Cassatt to help shape his style and artistic approach. Furthermore, recognizing his personal interest in art as activism, he also turned to artists of the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance—specifically Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) and Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000). In 1996, he published *Gullah Images: The Art of Jonathan Green*, a book showcasing ten years of his experiments with color, abstraction, geometry, and space.⁸ His works have been included in exhibitions and collections throughout the Southeast and as far as the American Embassy in Sierra Leone.

Green’s understanding of art as a point of entry into activism aligns him with broader trends in African American art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, Elizabeth Catlett—noted sculptor, printmaker, painter, and activist in both the United States and Mexico—created work that was often politically motivated, and she was an outspoken participant in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Liberation Movement both domestically and abroad.⁹ She created art in response to “the historically based necessity to render visible that which has not been the subject of art.”¹⁰ Her work simultaneously considered the past and the present, calling attention to stories and people long overlooked in history and visual art, a political position that Green shares. He paints to decentralize historical realities that have come to dominate the representations and narratives of African Americans in history

and visual art, and he pushes against a past enshrined in historical plantation art, specifically destabilizing nostalgic white-centric modes of representation and memory.

Green’s Unenslaved series has been discussed and exhibited alongside works by Smith. For example, the 2014 exhibition *Rice in the Lowcountry: The Art of Jonathan Green and Alice Ravenel Huger Smith*, presented at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina, displayed Green’s Unenslaved paintings alongside Smith’s watercolors from *A Carolina Rice Plantation in the Fifties* (1935), a series that she painted almost eighty years before Green’s.¹¹ Both artists use bright colors and atmospheric and impressionistic techniques to depict people, places, and rice on the South Carolina coast. However, the differences in their race, gender, and time period contributed to vastly different projects that present contrasting perspectives on the politics of rice in South Carolina.

Smith, a white woman born in the Reconstruction South, painted scenes that typify the tendency of white artists to depict the antebellum past nostalgically. Smith was a part of the larger Charleston Renaissance—a title applied to the city’s artistic, economic, and cultural revival in the early decades of the twentieth century. The movement’s leaders were primarily white, relatively wealthy, often longtime Charlestonians, and—at least concerning the visual arts—mostly women.¹² The artistic productions of the period embodied a middle- and upper-class white nostalgia for an imagined South that they believed was now missing. In contrast, Green, born three years before Smith died, paints an imagined past to celebrate the perseverance of African American people and Gullah culture in South Carolina.

Green does not concern himself with how he is defined as an artist. When asked about it, he told me “the vocabulary around what type of an artist [I am], or how one views an artist, that comes from other people. I don’t think I’ve ever called myself a ‘Gullah artist’ or a ‘Black artist’ or a ‘Negro artist’ or a ‘Southern artist.’ I just called myself an artist that painted reflections of my life and culture.”¹³ If anything, he explained, he would call himself a regionalist, which is more a label of the work he creates than of his identity as a creator. “The region,” he explained, “is the Lowcountry. It’s where I’m from. It’s my community. It’s my culture.”¹⁴ He is from a part of a South that is coastal, agricultural, matriarchal, religious, African, and American; his work reflects this multifaceted heritage.

Green paints in series—an approach used by both Catlett and Smith—and he has completed “about fifty or sixty series” throughout his career. “It’s important for me,” he explained, “that each series is different to me but is connected.”¹⁵ His Unenslaved series is a continuation of his lifelong project of painting, preserving, and celebrating Gullah culture. The series takes on a specific and distinct conceptual project. The mission of these paintings is carried out through depictions of rice production, under the recognition that rice production existed before and after the period of enslavement in North American history. Rice is part of a rich culture that Green acknowledges as important in its own right, unenslaved from the tendency to only consider its history as it pertains to forced bondage or white wealth. In this series, objects of labor—tools, aprons, agricultural structures, items that could be associated with enslavement—are exaggerated, embellished, and otherwise embraced. They are reclaimed, not as aspects of slavery but as elements of a community and culture that surrounds rice.

Women dominate the scenes of the Unenslaved series: nineteen of the twenty-seven paintings exclusively depict women, while images showing only men, men and women, or scenes devoid of people characterize the remaining eight works in the series. The vivid

paintings primarily show these women working on and traversing within a vibrant landscape of reds, blues, greens, and yellows. In addition to the emphasis on female figures, other visual themes run throughout the series: nineteen of the scenes include trees, and eight explicitly depict water, though others allude to a marshy horizon. The paintings depict various parts of the rice cultivation process: transporting rice on barges, winnowing, separating grains with a mortar and pestle, and the frequently depicted rice knocker, a stick-like tool used to flail or hull rice to separate the grains.¹⁶ All of these actions occur within lush landscapes abundant with trees, blue water, open fields, and bold skies.



Fig. 2. Jonathan Green, *African Tree Markings*, 2013. Acrylic on archival paper, 11 x 14 inches. ©Jonathan Green

African Tree Markings (fig. 2) is one of only two paintings from this series that does not include any people. The scene is dominated by a tree with a trunk that occupies the middle third of the image, and branches and foliage that consume the top half. A second tree sits in the shadow of the first, similar in shape and size. The background includes a horizon line where the green grass meets water, and again where water meets the sky. Visible below a curved tree branch, a barge filled with rice floats down the water, hinting at the agricultural product that is central to the larger *Unenslaved* series. The significance of the image does not come from the natural landscape or the cultivated crop; its importance lies in the embellishments found on the bottoms of the trees.

The two trees are each accented with what appears to be a painted band on their trunks. The decoration on both trees features a white background and red diamond pattern that makes a ring around their base. This relatively simple feature is the visual focal point for the piece, emphasizing the diasporic history embraced in the series. Explaining the inclusion of diamonds in this painting and throughout the series (the diamond motif appears in seventeen of the twenty-seven works), Green says: “The diamond is one of the most visual elements of design in West African culture. I wanted to use it as a way of creating a pattern that would be identifiable of West African culture in the landscape of South Carolina and on the houses.”¹⁷ The South Carolina landscape is an extension of the West African landscape, serving as a connection with the people and their culture.

The rice on the barge floating in the background of *African Tree Markings* is painted in a warm brown color, and the barge itself is a thin strip of red sitting on the water. The rice

barge—a feature that takes up only a small section of the composition—is given visual importance through its coloration, sharing the red hue of the diamonds in the foreground. Pairing these two aspects of the scene, Green further links the rice production of South Carolina to the African landscape. Through the diamond pattern, the landscape and the rice are unenslaved. This is not a landscape of enslaved labor, but is instead a landscape of cultural preservation and communal expression; the rice is not an antebellum cash crop but a valued staple in the local cuisine.

Green depicts a world where visual links to Africa and the Caribbean are unenslaved from the historic narrative that so often binds their contemporary representations and meanings. In these paintings, the bountiful rice, embellished diamonds, and thriving landscape, for example, are celebrated and claimed not as part of the process of enslavement, but as elements in the vibrant and rich culture of African Americans in the Lowcountry. They are cultural products of people, not of their social status. Distinguished from nineteenth-century romanticized plantation art that depicted grand, white houses elevated above well-manicured agricultural fields, and contemporary art, such as the work of Kara Walker, that emphasizes the traumas of the antebellum past, Green’s paintings are not pastoral or violent.¹⁸ They do not glamorize a wealthy, white past, nor do they focus on the horrors of enslavement. Instead, they depict a world that never was.

In contrast to Green’s images of rice, Smith’s images present a world of rice where the agricultural landscape is visually brighter, grander, and more important than the gestural figures who populate the scenes as stand-ins for peaceful labor. In keeping with the trends of the time, in Smith’s romanticized scenes, black people work cordially in fields; life is ordered and hierarchical; and the landscape is enveloped with a warm and comforting glow. Silent on the traumas of slavery, her watercolors promote a history of seemingly harmless white dominance, masking the violence of the past and concealing the racial stratification of Smith’s present society.

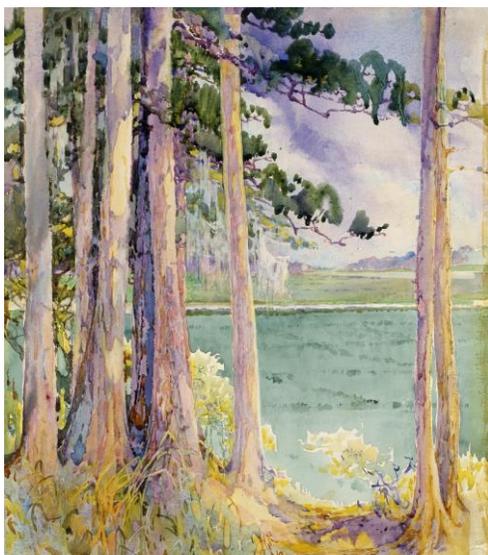


Fig. 3. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, “The Harvest Flow,” ca. 1935, from *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, watercolor, 22 x 17 3/8 inches. Courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association

Unlike Green’s *African Tree Markings*, Smith’s *The Harvest Flow* does not include any visual links to African culture or African American culture (fig. 3). In her work, layers of soft color create a hazy scene where tall, thin trees stand in front of a green marsh. Labor is faintly evoked through the suggested grid that demarcates the marsh, but the scene is primarily lacking in obvious references to people, work, or rice. Unlike in Green’s work, in which the trees appear heavy and the land solid, the features of Smith’s image are airy and soft, attractive but generally lacking in visual or conceptual weight. Although Green and Smith’s works have been displayed together, they perform contrasting efforts of memory-formation. While Green regards Smith’s work with great respect, he too notes the difference in their intentions, stating “I’m looking back beyond where she’s looking back. She’s looking back to slavery culture, antebellum culture. I’m looking back to Africa, and bringing Africa forward.”¹⁹ Therefore, while Smith’s scenes celebrate a past that she thought was real—an idyllic time of

complicit enslaved labor and white prosperity, Green paints a past that he knows is not real with the hopes of changing perceptions of the past that was.

A similar tree to the ones in *African Tree Markings* is visible in the background of *Morning Winnowing* (fig. 4). It sits behind three white poles that abstractly interrupt the left-most portion of the middle ground. Although the reason for these poles is not immediately obvious in this painting alone, read in relation to the larger series, it is clear that these are the legs of a mill house. But the structure does not cast a shadow over the field below. The mill house is not depicted as part of a plantation landscape. Instead, it is a part of a vibrant environment that is embraced by and embraces those who cultivate rice.



Figs. 4, 5. Left: Jonathan Green, *Morning Winnowing*, 2013. Acrylic on archival paper, 10 1/2 x 14 inches. ©Jonathan Green; right: Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, “Ready for Harvest” ca. 1935, from *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, watercolor, 17 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association

In front of the tree and the suggestion of a mill house is a woman who dominates the scene. She is dressed in a red and white striped dress with full sleeves and a collar, over which she wears a yellow apron with red polka dots. The flowing fabric of the apron extends beyond the edge of the canvas, making it unclear if the woman is sitting or standing. She wears a headscarf that is wrapped in layers around her head, the red fabric set off against the blue and yellow sky behind her. Her face, fully framed by the scarf, matches the bright morning sky behind her. She is focused on her task. With downcast eyes and a slight smile on her face, she sifts rice with a concentrated rhythm, watching the individual grains rise and fall. Her hands and the winnowing basket are painted with the same colors and textures, her body and the tool itself functioning as a harmonized part of the process.

While Green’s view of the woman and the rice shows them as interconnected, Smith’s watercolor *Ready for Harvest* (fig. 5) presents an unidentifiable female figure looking out over a massive field of yellow rice. The golden grains dominate the scene, both as the brightest color and as spanning the center half of the composition. The woman in the foreground is isolated both from and by the rice: a thin water canal separates her from the expansive yellow fields, and the fields in return distance her from barely discernable figures who appear on the horizon at the far end of the rice. The woman in Smith’s painting lacks any distinguishing characteristics and appears dwarfed by the rice fields behind her, the crop itself morphed into a gridded mass.

In contrast, the woman in *Morning Winnowing* is fully formed and fully individualized. The neutral, blended tones of the basket and the woman’s hands offer respite from the bold colors and patterns of the canvas, ultimately framing the scene’s focal point: the rice. The rice is in motion, as the grains are carefully tossed upward and fall back toward the basket below. She is not overwhelmed by the landscape or merely a prop for labor; instead, she coexists with her surroundings and peacefully carries out her culturally important work.

The South itself is unenslaved in Green’s works, no longer limited to set geographic parameters but expanded to incorporate references to places (Africa, the Caribbean, the Lowcountry) and times (colonial, antebellum, and contemporary) that together contribute to the culture of the region. Filling a gap in Southern representations, Green uses “art to help [people] understand history, because most people learn and understand easily through visual imagery.” As he explains, “It is so important to have the image of a people not defined by Europeans. To be defined by someone from their own culture, that’s only fair.”²⁰ In Green’s effort to “be fair,” the paintings in the Unenslaved series layer together aspects of expressive culture to imagine a history and culture that is both within and beyond the South it represents; the paintings depict a South, an America, an Africa, a history, a culture, and a crop, all of which are unenslaved through art.

Notes

¹ For more on indigo, see Andrea Feeser, *Red, White, and Black Make Blue: Indigo in the Fabric of Colonial South Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

² Jonathan Green, conversation with the author, February 6, 2019.

³ For more on Gullah culture and history, see Patricia Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), particularly 7 and 133; Enid Schildkrout and Dale Rosengarten, “African Origins: Ancestors and Analogues,” in *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*, exh. cat., ed. Dale Rosengarten, Theodore Rosengarten, and Enid Schildkrout (New York: Museum for African Art, 2008); and Emory S. Campbell, “A Sense of Self and Place: Unmasking My Gullah Heritage,” in *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee*, ed. Philip Morgan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

⁴ Jonathan Green, “From the Artist,” in *Seeking: Poetry and Prose Inspired by the Art of Jonathan Green*, ed. Kwane Dawes and Marjory Wentworth (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2013), xv.

⁵ Schildkrout and Rosengarten, “African Origins,” 22.

⁶ Jonathan Green, conversation with the author, October 7, 2017.

⁷ Green, conversation with the author, October 7, 2017.

⁸ Jonathan Green, ed., *Gullah Images: The Art of Jonathan Green* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

⁹ Lisa Farrington, *African American Art: A Visual and Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 180–84.

¹⁰ Melanie Anne Herzog, “Imagining History, Memory, and the Raced and Gendered Body: The Legacy of Elizabeth Catlett,” in *The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making Their World*, ed. Robert Cozzolino (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2012), 51.

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- ¹¹ “Green_ResumeMASTER-2016,” Richard Weedman to the author, January 30, 2017; Adam Parker, “‘Unenslaved’ Artist Jonathan Green’s New Rice Culture Series at Avery Looks at African-Americans in a New Light,” *Post and Courier*, August 24, 2013; and Adam Parker, “The Quandary of Alice Smith Series by Famed Watercolorist Soothes the Eye, Raises Questions,” *Post and Courier*, June 14, 2013.
- ¹² Stephanie E. Yuhl argues that the concept of a Charleston Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s is a form of retroactive memory construction. She writes that the application of this phrase was not a product of the time itself, but that “it is largely the recent creation of individuals seeking an attractive yet concise way to characterize the cultural stirring in the years between the world wars.” Stephanie E. Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 16. For more on the Charleston Renaissance, see James M. Hutchisson and Harlan Green, eds., *Renaissance in Charleston: Art and Life in the Carolina Low Country, 1900–1940* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2003).
- ¹³ Jonathan Green, conversation with the author, February 4, 2020.
- ¹⁴ Green, conversation with the author, February 4, 2020.
- ¹⁵ Green, conversation with the author, October 7, 2017.
- ¹⁶ On rice, see Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), specifically 78–98 and 108–41.
- ¹⁷ Green, conversation with the author, October 7, 2017.
- ¹⁸ John Michael Vlach, *The Planter’s Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3–47 (specifically, see the discussion on the circa 1820 painting *Rose Hill*, 9); John Michael Vlach, “Documentary Images and Devotional Acts: Plantation Painting as Propaganda,” in Rosengarten et al., *Grass Roots*, 215; Vivien Green Fryd, “Kara Walker’s *About the title*: The Ghostly Presence of Transgenerational Trauma as a ‘Connective Tissue’ Between the Past and Present,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 2 no. 1 (Summer 2016), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1537>; and Green, conversation with the author, February 6, 2019.
- ¹⁹ Green, conversation with the author, October 7, 2017.
- ²⁰ Green, conversation with the author, October 7, 2017.