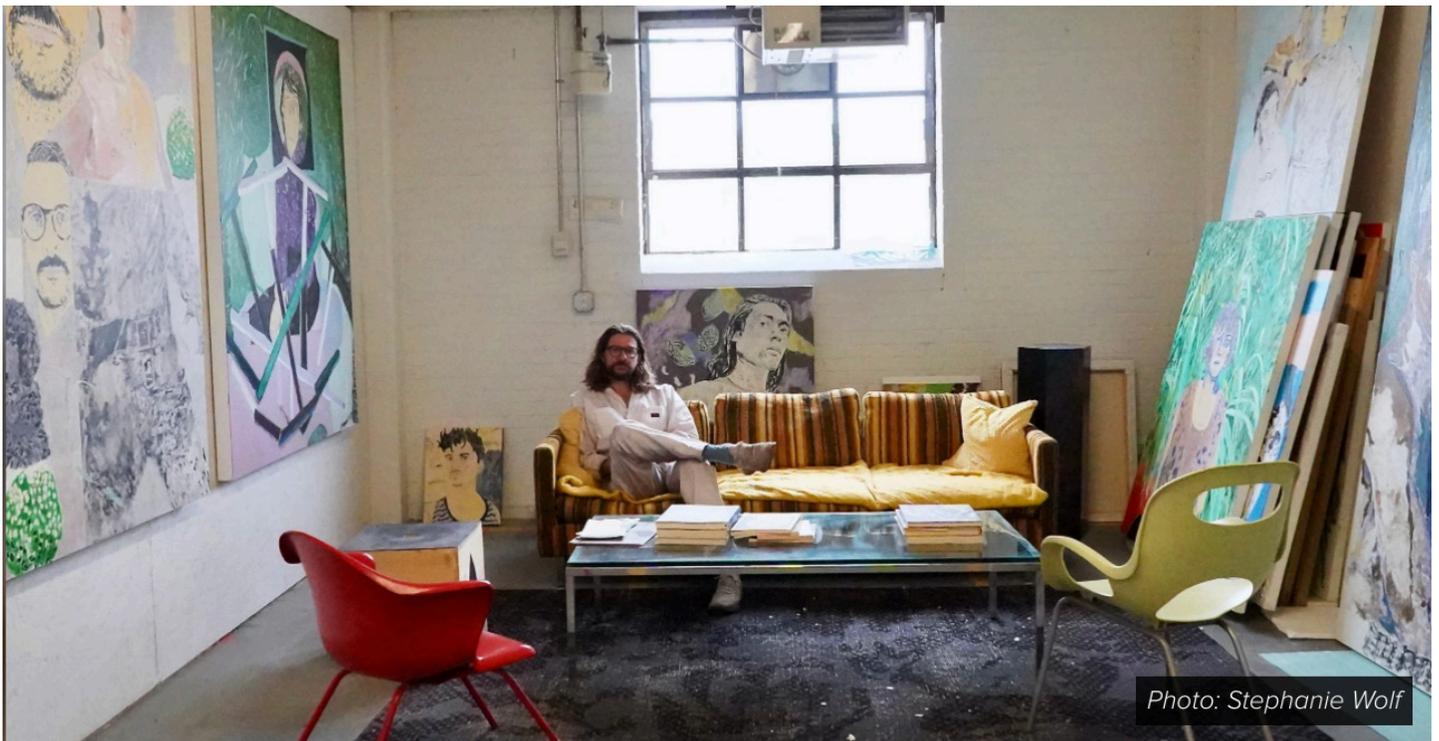


Artistic inspiration and national recognition coalesce for Louisville visual artist John Brooks

By Stephanie Wolf



Bodies and faces stare back from the walls of John Brooks' studio in the Portland neighborhood. They're sketched onto paper with energetic markings, largely in pastel tones.

Drawings like these make up his current show at a gallery in New York City's East Village.

"Which perhaps is a bit weird given that I think of myself as a painter," Brooks says.

His recent change of medium came as a surprise, following an exhibition of his paintings at Moremen Gallery in Louisville last summer. Brooks says that show was a breakthrough, "both in terms of process to make the work I want to make, but also in terms of ideas."

And it caught national attention.

The New Yorker ran a lengthy feature piece about that exhibition and Brooks' work.

After that, Brooks needed a change of pace following such an intense time immersed in his painting – Brooks says much of that work was created in a “bit of a crazy” nine-week period leading up to the Moremen exhibition.

Susan Moremen of Moremen Gallery encouraged him to try something different, like drawings. Brooks says he was initially reluctant.

“And then I thought, ‘Okay, maybe it is a good idea to have something just to sort of redirect some ideas,’” Brooks says. “I thought maybe I’d do five. And I’ve done at least 90.”

Brooks runs Quappi Projects, a Louisville gallery, and has been a professional artist for about 17 years. But this moment in his career feels significant.

“I’ve never quite had a period like this where, both in terms of the opportunities that are presenting themselves for me professionally, but also, the ideas that I have for the work. Those two things happening at the same time is really fortunate and exciting.”



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“Nothing’s Gonna Touch You in These Golden Years,” one of Brooks’ 90-plus recent drawings, hangs on the walls of Brooks studio.



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Brooks’ drawing “The Sound of the Unlocking and the Lift Away,” featuring artist Lamont Hall, as displayed on the walls of Brooks’ Louisville studio on May 3, 2022.

A show of drawings

The New York exhibition at March Gallery, titled “I See This Echoing” and running through May 28, displays 10 of Brooks’ drawings, hung close to each other.

Many of the works are portraits. Some are nudes. Several subjects are friends or fellow artists. Brooks has also drawn people he’s met through Instagram – members of what he calls his, “global queer community.”

Some of Brooks’ landscape drawings are also featured in the show.

“The whole exhibition to me feels a little bit like a hug,” says Phillip March Jones, who owns March Gallery and founded Institute 193 in his hometown of Lexington, Ky. “I think the cumulative effect is this kind of embrace, both from nature and these individual portraits.”

Jones says there’s a tenderness to the collection, even in the pieces featuring people Brooks doesn’t

know in person.

“It’s consistently giving, and warm, and beautiful,” he says. “In this day and age, it’s very easy to sort of discount beauty in favor of concept, ideas, politics, etc. But I do think beauty matters in art and design.”

Artist Lamont Hall modeled for Brooks’ latest series, which is ongoing.

The two followed each other on Instagram, liking the other’s artwork. And like how many of these online connections evolve for Brooks, a direct message led to a virtual friendship.

They met in person for the first time last month at the opening for the exhibition at March Gallery.

“It was great,” Hall says. “Just felt natural, like we’ve already met before.”

Hall wanted to be a part of this series because it touches on many things he connects with in his own art: community, queer identity and LGBTQ representation.

The portrait shows Hall naked in front of a house plant. He’s only seen it on Instagram, which he says “is kind of funny” given how they’ve gotten to know each other.

“But I think that he captured the atmosphere and, like, my spirit,” Hall says.

Brooks says it’s been “surprising and rewarding” to find so much inspiration from social media, and at 44, he feels as if he has “a much deeper and richer community than I’ve ever had before.”

“Social media has many ills,” he says. “But it also can be an amazing tool for connection.”

He hopes his portraits show the subjects the way they want to be seen.

“And I’m interested in this sort of fuzzy boundary between vulnerability and confidence,” he says.



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Louisville visual artist John Brooks poses in his studio in the Portland neighborhood on May 3, 2022. He says, in December, he moved to a bigger studio in the same building because, “I just made so much work last year that I needed more space, and more clarity.”



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One wall of Brooks’ Portland studio is covered with images and materials, from a picture former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to pages from German magazines and pieces featuring Brooks’ paternal grandmother. The board can evoke different moods and feelings or help Brooks see “how colors react to other colors.”

Becoming an artist

Brooks grew up in Frankfort, Ky., where loneliness and longing were defining parts of his childhood.

His mother was a teacher and his father worked with the local Parks and Recreation department. Brooks loved the arts, and his parents encouraged that interest. But “it wasn’t their world.”

“It was the sort of background maybe to my life, but I didn’t know anyone who was an artist,” Brooks says. “It didn’t seem like a real career path.”

Brooks took the occasional art class. Much of his youth, however, was spent on the golf course. He pursued it competitively, and thought about a career in golf. But it never felt like the right fit.

“I have many wonderful memories,” he says of his time as a golfer. “And I have many friends from that world, but even though I was part of that world and fluent in that language and can very easily slip back into it, it was still never my world... partly because I was gay.”

He gave it up around 2005, when he moved to London for his partner’s work. Brooks was 27.

“I started doing what I wanted, which was going to museums and galleries,” he says. “All of a sudden, I realized, ‘Oh, this is what I wanted.’”

Brooks began taking classes and calling himself an artist. No one questioned it, which was refreshing.

“Not that I needed permission from anyone else,” he says. “But the fact that there wasn’t this extra barrier allowed me to pull something out that had been unable to be pulled out before.”

Brooks returned to Kentucky, relocating to Louisville in 2013. He finds it necessary to travel and experience other places.

“Not to escape. That sounds too harsh,” he says. “But I need stimulation and I need the stimulation of the unexpected.”

But his art has flourished in Louisville, and it’s helped him find community.

“The more I’ve gotten into my work, the less I feel inclined to adjust anything that I want to do based on how I feel it’s going to be perceived here” Brooks says.

He’s not interested in making work to “simply be provocative,” and he’s never made art to appease an audience.