

CRISTIN TIERNEY

The New York Times



Julian Gaines Has a Question: ‘How Do I Paint Oregon Black?’

A love for Nike led him away from his home in Chicagoland to a grand artist’s studio on a weed farm outside Portland.

April 4, 2022
Sandra E. Garcia

In a cavernous studio on a weed farm in Forest Grove, Ore., about halfway between Portland and the Tillamook State Forest, Julian Gaines, an artist born and raised in Chicagoland, is creating a body of work devoted to Black American life.

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He starts his workday at 9 a.m. and goes until the work tells him he's done, creating images of the civil rights movement's heroes and martyrs, including James Baldwin and Malcolm X, in a state where Black people make up roughly 2 percent of the population, according to the United States Census Bureau.

"I can't complain about an environment that I'm in but not actually try to change it," said Mr. Gaines, 30, who left Illinois in 2016. "I get out here and I see that Oregon is culturally inept. It is identical to a blank canvas. I think, 'How do I leave my lasting mark here? How do I plant my Pan-African flag? How do I paint Oregon Black?'"

On a recent afternoon, his studio was filled with the sounds of a fellow Chicagoan, Curtis Mayfield. An American flag occupied part of a 30-foot wall. Mr. Gaines lifted the flag to reveal two stark paintings that appeared to depict lynchings. They were part of a recent series, "Under the Flag." On the other side of the room, there was a canvas, 14 feet wide, called "Better Timing." It showed the face of Emmett Till, the Black boy from Chicago who was lynched at 14 while visiting Mississippi in one of the most brutal hate crimes of the last century.



Artist at work: Julian Gaines in his Oregon studio.
Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

Mr. Gaines got widespread attention in 2020, when his series "KAREN(S)" was featured on the cover of New York magazine. It was Pop Art with a political edge — a bold image of a white woman holding a phone to her ear, her expression stern, a tear running down her

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cheek. It evoked a string of incidents involving women who had called the police on Black bystanders: a bird-watcher, a man entering his apartment building, an 8-year-old selling water.

“KAREN(S)” owed something to an experience Mr. Gaines went through himself, after a neighbor damaged his car two years ago, he said. When he asked the neighbor, a white woman, to provide her insurance information, she threatened to call the police and report him for elder abuse, he said. As she approached him, ranting and pressing a finger to his chest, he recorded her with his phone. Once the police arrived, Mr. Gaines was able to show them the images on his screen. The neighbor ended up admitting to the police that she had caused the damage to the car, and the officers left soon afterward.

“If I did not have that video, who knows what could have happened?” Mr. Gaines said.



Nike released a limited-edition sneaker designed by Mr. Gaines in 2018.
Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

After the incident, the woman sent Mr. Gaines a note of apology: “I am sorry for my actions and unneighborly behavior,” she wrote. The note hangs in his studio.

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Mr. Gaines has a key supporter in the art collector James Whitner, the chief executive of the Whitaker Group, the company behind the fashion labels A Ma Maniere, Social Status and APB. Works by Mr. Gaines, including “KAREN(S),” appear in Mr. Whitner’s North Carolina home, along with paintings and sculptures by KAWS, Nina Chanel Abney and Jammie Holmes.

“He’s speaking to the Black experience, and he’s not blinded by institution,” Mr. Whitner said in an interview. “Some people don’t necessarily get Julian, but I get Julian because for years people didn’t get me.”

Last summer Mr. Gaines had his first solo show, “Painting the Blueprint,” at the Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects gallery in Lower Manhattan. In September, “Benji,” his monochromatic rendering of Ben Wilson, a top basketball prospect who was killed in his Chicago neighborhood at 17 in 1984, sold for more than \$20,000 at a Phillips charity auction.

Mr. Gaines was born on the Southeast Side of Chicago and raised in a building owned by his great-grandmother, Gladys Pelt. His mother, Pamela Robinson, still lives there. An image of the building is tattooed on Mr. Gaines’s right wrist.

He was born into a city and a world where Michael Jordan, whose Nike Air Jordans had become a streetwear staple, was everywhere. As a boy, Mr. Gaines loved Nikes, but he got only one pair a year — usually Nike Air Force 1s. He started expressing himself artistically at age 13, when he painted his Nikes to camouflage the wear and tear. In high school he kept at it, decorating classmates’ sneakers and T-shirts, sometimes for a fee.



Mr. Gaines’s neckwear includes a palette pendant.
Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

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He was also deeply involved in the Trinity United Church of Christ, where a young politician, Barack Obama, was a frequent presence. Mr. Obama's rise to the presidency helped Mr. Gaines view history as something other than an abstraction.

"My church family was really the first people to let me know that I could be a great artist," he said. "I remember being in the room when Barack Obama was in the early stages of his campaign. Just being there and seeing those things really set a foundation for my work."

In 2010, he accepted a partial scholarship to play football at Northern Michigan University. He thought he had a shot at making it to National Football League, and he saw himself following the path of Ernie Barnes, a pro football player and artist who was often fined during his career for sketching when he should have been at practice. Mr. Barnes went on to make more than \$100,000 a year from his art, after his retirement from the N.F.L. His painting "The Sugar Shack" appeared as the cover of the 1976 Marvin Gaye album "I Want You" and as the image shown during the credits sequence of the 1970s CBS sitcom "Good Times."

Injuries put an end to Mr. Gaines's dream of going pro. So he focused on his art. "I got to see what it means to be a real student and not an athlete," he said. "In college your time is monopolized if you're an athlete. I'm really grateful for that injury."



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The clothes are stained with paint after another day
in the studio.

Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

An older classmate offered to buy one of his paintings for \$300. His pastor and family members had purchased his artwork before, but this was the first time someone without a clear rooting interest in his success had become a patron.

After graduation, he moved back to his great-grandmother's place and used the garden apartment as a place to make art. "I wanted to paint myself out of there," he said in his studio, before taking a drag on a joint.

In 2016, before the legalization of marijuana in Illinois, he was arrested during a traffic stop after a police officer said he smelled of marijuana. During the brief time he was in custody, he decided to leave his home state. "I can't be as creative as I want to be living in an area where my freedom was taken from me because of the way I smell," he said.

Nike, which has its headquarters in Beaverton, Ore., loomed large in his thoughts. He moved to Portland in 2017 and made regular visits to the Beaverton complex, walking seven miles there and back and taking meetings in the cafeteria with whoever would see him. In his studio he keeps a sneaker box filled with 80 visitors' badges from those days.

"You're supposed to return those badges," he said. "Most people didn't know who I was. I knew three people that worked at Nike, and they were not in any position to give me a job."

While trying to join the company in some way, he was building a reputation as a sneaker artist by selling his embellished versions of Nike Air Force 1s to his Instagram followers. Nike hired him as a freelance designer to create a collection especially for people in creative fields.

"What I brought to Nike, and they were so gracious to believe in, were shoes for creating in," Mr. Gaines said. "This is a shoe that embodies me, where I can feel comfortable and stand in the shoe all day."

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Mr. Gaines's recent work on display in his studio, including KAREN(S).
Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

He worked with two Nike models, the 1982 Nike Sky Force $\frac{3}{4}$ and 1985 Nike Air Vortex, and called the collection Game Worn. Nike released it, in a limited edition at a store in Chicago, in 2018. Since then, LeBron James and Russell Westbrook have been spotted wearing his creations. As part of the sneaker release, Mr. Gaines led a weeklong workshop, backed by Nike, that included art classes at Chicago's South Shore Cultural Center.

"I wanted to do something for the kids in my community," Mr. Gaines said. "A lot of times children in Chicago live so far from where people are doing these events that they can't pay \$50 or risk their lives taking public transportation to get to the North Side."

Now he is focused on his art as he prepares for a solo show scheduled for August at the Russo Lee Gallery in Portland.

"He's doing it in his own way," said Gardy St. Fleur, a curator who advises National Basketball Association players on their art collections. "It's raw and it's real."

Mr. Whitner, the art collector, thinks there may be something missing in Mr. Gaines's work — and that once he figures it out, his paintings may become even more interesting.

"I don't think Julian has allowed himself to be vulnerable," Mr. Whitner said. "I don't even think Julian has reconciled his feelings about coming from Chicago. And I'm curious to see how that shows up in his work once he does start to really reconcile those feelings."

A correction was made on

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April 4, 2022:

An earlier version of this article misstated Julian Gaines's age. He is 30, not 31. The article also described incorrectly the farm where Mr. Gaines's studio is located. It is a weed farm, not a wind farm. Also, an earlier version of a picture caption with this article incorrectly described a pendant worn by Mr. Gaines. The pendant was in the shape of a palette, not an easel. And because of an editing error, the article misstated the year that Nike released a limited-edition sneaker by Mr. Gaines. It was 2018, not 2017.