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## After more than a decade, Jeffrey Kent closes SubBasement Studios



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After 11 years working in SubBasement Artist Studios and sharing the space with other artists, Jeffrey Kent is moving out. (Jefferson Jackson Steele / November 21, 2014)

by Rebekah Kirkman  
City Paper

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In **paint-splattered, brown work boots**, clean black jeans, and a black Andy Warhol T-shirt (neatly tucked in), Jeffrey Kent hops down a couple of steps into the main area of the dimly lit gallery. "Watch your step, everywhere in here," he warns me.

After 11 years in this huge, high-ceilinged space below the basement of the fancy condominium The Atrium at Market Center, around the corner from Lexington Market, founder/artist Kent is set to close SubBasement Artist Studios near the end of this year when his lease runs out (no word yet of the owner's plans for the space). Kent's final exhibition will be up through Dec. 13 and there will be a reception with an artist talk and live music on Nov. 29 from 6 to 8 p.m.

SubBasement has provided huge studios for seven artists over the years, most recently Dre Britton, who also was part of a two-person exhibition, and has exhibited over 200 other artists. "To get good, you gotta do a lot of paintings, and you gotta have somewhere to do it," Kent says. "There's no doubt about that. And that's why I'm very fortunate that I've had really great studio spaces." Affordable space is one of the key reasons Kent has remained in his hometown.

In front of us hangs a brightly colored painting of a man wearing a hooded sweatshirt, with a red halo above him. The dense, high chroma of the red sweater almost consumes the whole figure, as it vibrates against the ultramarine-blue background. That same blue beads up over the figure—the effect of painting with acrylic on top of oil paint, one of the trademarks of Kent's style.

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"This particular exercise, I would call it, it came after when I moved here," he says. "It's the first series of paintings I did in this space."

He started the series, called "Fashion, Trends, and Stereotypes," after working on shaped canvases for which he used found wood for stretchers. "I decided that I would do fashion illustrations on canvas," he says. "But I wanted them to be more than just fashion illustrations on canvas. And so then what I decided to do was investigate stereotypes and fashion. And it's informed by how we, myself included, judge people based on what their outer appearance is, not knowing their inner peace or inner personality. We immediately judge people based on what they're wearing." It's impossible not to think about Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and the countless others whom cops and civilians alike have judged, brutalized, and killed based at least partly on appearance. "This is a series I did in 2004, and now that's so poignant in today's society, 10 years later." Kent speaks clearly and systematically when he describes his work—one step leads to another, as he builds layers of meaning and paint.

Kent's paintings tend to start with a technical impulse, an experiment with techniques and materials. "I've always wanted to paint words with precision. And be concise. And that's how this came about," he says, pointing to a small, simple, dark painting of the word "concise" rendered in block letters. Way across the gallery, hanging on the opposite wall, is an earlier work with a similar intent but a different process: the word "colored" (which is written backward), surrounded by an opaque orange, with the American flag mapped onto the text. This painting was done in response to Obama's presidential run in 2008 and the country's fear of a black president. These text paintings recall Ed Ruscha's experiments with language, text, and color, but with more of a focus toward society and political issues—in a manner reminiscent of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Closer to us, a large horizontal canvas is propped up on Styrofoam blocks. From a fiery orange glaze emerges the word "fearfull," which is, again, backward—but I hardly notice this pattern. After just a few minutes of looking at the writing in his paintings, I accept this logic, internalize it, and move on. Kent lights up when he recalls what led him to this style—a critique he got when he was in MICA's graduate painting program in 2008. "It's really specific, and it's really concise, and it [relates to] the whole meaning of going over the flag and defacing the flag," he recalls. "I painted the flag, and then I painted over the flag. So there's a flag under this one. And I exposed the word fearfull," with an extra L for emphasis. The word also sprang up during the '08 elections and he painted it, he says, because the Republicans "kept bringing up 9/11, [saying] 'you have to vote for us because we protected you during 9/11!'"

On the adjoining wall, smaller paintings hang salon-style. He calls them one-offs, because they're either not part of a series or they're orphans from series that have otherwise been sold. We talk about a few different collaborations he's done with friends and fellow artists, including the late Larry Scott (2005's "Best Visual Artist"). These collaborations usually start in his studio, on his surfaces first, and then the artists go back and forth. He mentions Dada as an inspiration, "with the use of things that aren't used for making art, and really challenging what is art—mixing beauty and rough and gritty together and coming out with something that [can be] appreciated."

Kent says he got serious about art in high school, wanting to pursue commercial arts, and then fashion design. He got discouraged about fashion when he realized how many employees it takes to put on a fashion line, but it led him into merchandising. And then, he says, "art really saved me from a life of destruction." In his 20s, he got into selling drugs. But then he got arrested, and he had a lot of free time on his hands because he lost his retail job. So he started making art, but continued selling drugs, and then eventually started using the drugs. "Then I wasn't sellin' drugs anymore. I was a user, can't do both." After a few years of addiction which "seemed like it was 10 years, but it was more like four or three," he went through a 12-step program, where he realized it was simply a matter of choice. "Idle time is the real killer. And that's where I realized how art saved me. My idle time is now spent stayin' busy!" he says, laughing. "Anybody who knows me knows that I'm a workaholic. My drug is like movin' around, doin' shit all day, until I can't."

We head in towards the back, where the studios are (along with the speakers, which blast the Funkadelic Pandora station throughout our conversation). This area is about as big as the gallery, and the general sense of organization gives way to some of Kent's works in progress, studio tenants' sculptures and wood scraps, empty cardboard boxes, and a full-sized basketball hoop in the middle of it all. He says "it's like three houses," and it all has to go. "I'm getting this [place] at a super deal, and I think artists should be able to have some kind of support system," he says. "'Cause it's tough being an artist, especially in a market where you're not in New York. If you're not a major artist, it's really tough."

We stumble upon shelves and storage containers full of old records, given to him by his great-aunts. "This is funny . . . 'Latin Fire' . . . 'Prayer' . . . 1964, holy shit, Civil Rights Movement era," he says, thumbing through the records. His great-aunts were early influences. One was a world traveler and missionary, and the other was a social worker, professor, and vice-president of academic affairs at Morgan State. They introduced him to art, taking him to museums, and he credits them for his desire to connect with people and share what he knows.

Though SubBasement is closing soon, Kent is still deciding what his next steps will be. He's thinking about focusing on his work, but he's also on the lookout for a new gallery space. "I think I'm gonna do both, matter of fact," he says. "I'm not gonna stop, that's the key." Currently, he's looking at places in Fells Point, Remington, and Westport, to name a few. "I just cherish my time," he says. "I'm glad I'm able to be a fuckin' artist. For that, I have no complaints."

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**Kent's final exhibition is up through Dec. 13. There will be a reception, artist talk, and live music on Saturday, Nov. 29 from 6-8 p.m.**

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