

BASIL KING, Artist



Dick T - ©Basil King, 1996
Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 in

Summary:

Born in the UK in 1935, King immigrated to the USA at age twelve. King began studies at Black Mountain College in 1951. After college studies and time in San Francisco, New York City, and Montana, where he worked under Peter Voulkos, he ultimately settled in New York City's Lower East Side--and then Brooklyn. In 1985, following his first return trip to the UK, he began to write seriously and has since published both chapbooks and full length collections of poetry. His early work painting abstract expressionist works grew into a new approach to art employing fluid forms that combine abstraction, surrealism, and figuration. Now in his 80th decade, he lives in Brooklyn and paints and writes daily.

Basil Herschel Cohen was born in London, England in 1935. In 1947 his family immigrated to Detroit, Michigan and changed their surname to "King." There he attended Cass Technical High School where he was introduced to Josef Albers' color theory. At age sixteen, he entered Black Mountain College which he attended, with gaps for traveling, from 1951 to 1956. He studied painting with Esteban Vicente and Joseph Fiore, ceramics with Peter Voulkos, and writing with Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley.

Through King's contacts at the college, he met and was in conversation with Willem deKooning, Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, Michael Goldberg, Paul Blackburn, Jack Spicer, and many other painters and poets in New York and San Francisco in the late 1950s and early 60s. In New York he was a frequent visitor to the studios of the older generation of abstract expressionist painters, especially Franz Kline and Philip Guston. He often attended meetings of the downtown artists hangout, The Club. Kline ultimately arranged for King to spend a weekend at Springs with Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. All these relationships were variously influential on his subsequent development.

Following Black Mountain, King lived for two years in San Francisco, where he met and married Martha Davis. The two moved to New York in 1959. In the early 1960s, King worked as a studio assistant for Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko. His art from 1959-1968 was defined by his efforts to master his first love--abstract expressionism. Exhibitions in group shows at Dorsky, American Gallery, A.M. Sachs Gallery, Jansen Graphics Gallery, Zabriskie, and Great Jones Street Gallery increased his sense that he needed to move in other directions.

During the early 60s, Frank O'Hara visited King's studio frequently, where they had continuing discussions about his transition away from abstract expressionism. In 1965, King had a breakthrough with a painting titled "Venus," since lost, but many "Algate" paintings in the early 70s exemplify this phase of his work. He received important encouragement from O'Hara and from the critic G.R. Swenson. Swenson persuaded King to form a small group that exhibited together at the NYU Loeb Student Center. The show, called "Origins and Cycles," attracted little attention. Following the deaths of O'Hara in 1966 and Swenson in 1969, King moved to Park Slope, Brooklyn, with Martha and their two daughters.

Pursuing his interest in poetry and cross-disciplinary works--he had already contributed art to accompany poetry books and small press journals--Importantly, *Yugen*, published by the then LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka)--King founded *Mulch* magazine in 1971 with two young writer friends. In the period 1970-75, King received studio visits from Irving Sandler, Jim Rosenquist, David McKee, Joan Mondale with her art advisor Mary Anne Tighe. In 1970, King had two lengthy interviews with the historian Martin Duberman for his book *Black Mountain, An Exploration in Community (1972)*; during these interviews, King shared confidential stories and then explicitly asked Duberman not to name him in his upcoming book. This incident has rippled through the decades. As recently as 2015, King learned from a fellow BMC student that King was not considered for the major Black Mountain College show "*Leap Before You Look*" at the Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston, because he is not documented in the Duberman book.

During the 1980-90s, King published three small books of poetry, two in the UK. His art included series grounded in imagery from playing cards, the European nature figure The Green Man, and American baseball. His baseball works were exhibited in Cooperstown and in an internationally touring exhibit, "*Diamonds Are Forever*" (1996); a major work was purchased by Tom Seaver. Studio visitors included Dorothea Rockburne, Esteban Vicente, Meredith Monk, Ping Chong, Russell Banks, Bob Holman, Ron Padgett, Fielding Dawson, Ralph Lemon (with whom his daughter Hetty was dancing), Raymond Foye, and Vincent Katz.

In 2002, King was included in "*Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*" at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sophia, Madrid, curated by Vincent Katz. His painting series expanded to include "Cities," "Europa," "Family Photos," "Mirage I and II" and "Basil's Arc" a series of homages to painters he most admires from Jackson Pollock ("First Love") to Rembrandt. He also completed "The Towers" a series in mixed media on paper following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. King made a number of European visits between 1986 and 2013, visits that included poetry readings and screenings of his art in Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, and the U.K., most recently at Kent, Sussex, and Brooks Oxford universities.

In the 2000s, King radically changed his painting medium by incorporating molding paste, chalks, inks, and charcoal along with oils. He created "*Rimbaud's Seaside*," a 12' x 15' ephemeral mural on paper at The Bowery Poetry Club (2006) celebrated with a reading of Rimbaud translations and homages by a dozen poets. A solo show of his "*Green Man*" paintings was held at Poets House in 2010. His published books included *Warp Spasm* (2001), *mirage: a poem in 22 sections* (2003), *77 Beasts: Basil King's Beastiary* (2007), and *Learning to Draw: A History* (2011).

In 2011, a group of poets formed The Friends of Basil King to bring attention to his work. They commissioned Nicole Peyrafitte and Miles Joris-Peyrafitte to create a short documentary. The result, "*Basil King: MIRAGE*", is a 22-minute film showing King at work in his studio as well as a number of his paintings and works on paper. The narration is a reading by King from his autobiographical *mirage: a poem in 22 sections*. The Friends then organized a daylong symposium on King's visual art and poetry at Anthology Film Archives in 2012, culminating in the premiere of the film. A book of 13 critical responses to King's work, stemming from this event, was published by Talisman House in February 2020.

In the fall of 2016, he had a solo show "*Basil King, Between Painting + Writing*" at Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center, Asheville, NC, followed by "*Basil King: Birds*" at St. Andrews University, Laurinburg, NC, and a solo show, "*Basil King: Bird Scripts*," at the John Molloy Gallery, New York City, in February 2017. More books also followed: *The Spoken Word/The Painted Hand* (2014), *History Now* (2017), and *Disparate Beasts: Basil King's Beastiary, part two* (2020). A special limited edition artist's book, displaying 12 of King's recent paintings, each facing one of his poems, was issued by Granary Books in March 2022. *There Are No Ghosts: There are Portraits*, Pinsapo Press and Lost & Found, The CUNY Poetics Documents Initiative (2022) and *In Delacroix's Garden*, a collaboration by Basil King and Yuko Otomo highlighting their several separate experiences in the apartment, studio, and garden of the great Eugene Delacroix in Paris; Spuyten Duyvil (2022).

In the fall of 2024, King was interviewed by British podcaster Bob Chaundy with a 60 minute interview on his bi-weekly [Considering Art](#) series, and in the fall of 2025, King was interviewed by Marie Warsh and Steve Zehentner for The Lower East Side Biography Project.

[Basil King website](#)
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