

**Arts In conversation with John Gascot**  
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**John Gascot:** [00:00:00] John the activist, John the painter, John the leader, whatever. That word is always so weird to me because it's not something that I get. But I guess that is what I do in the community. [00:00:12][12.1]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:00:19] Hello and welcome to Arts In, the podcast produced by Created Pinellas. I'm Barbara St. Clair, your host today, and I am here with John Gascot. And John describes himself as a Latin pop artist. What is a Latin pop artist? [00:00:33][14.2]

**John Gascot:** [00:00:34] Well, after years of just developing my style and not fitting into one box or another, I just kind of came up with the term. I am from Puerto Rico. I have a Latin Caribbean upbringing. I also love styles that incorporate styles like cubism and folk into my work, and pop. I have a lot of global influences. I love Aboriginal work - just a lot of patterns from around the world.

So, you know, I couldn't say I was this artist or that artist, so I just made my own.

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:01:12] You're doing a lot of different things right now. What is the most exciting thing you're doing in the moment? [00:01:16][4.1]

**John Gascot:** [00:01:16] The one that I think I'm most excited about - and ironically, I get the least amount of time to work on - is I'm working on a series of self-portraits.

I've been wanting to explore something a little different. And at first I felt it was a little bit self-indulgent. And then everybody sort of kind of they're like, 'Oh, all the greats have done it, you know?' And it's just part of an artist's process sometimes.

I guess I got to a point in my life where I'm doing some internal work and I wanted to explore different facets of who I am. So there will be like the Artist, the King, the Queen, the Femme - you know, I don't have them all fleshed out just yet. That's part of the work. But I just wanted to sort of take a deeper look inside and look at the different components of myself

artistically, but also in just dealing with personal issues.  
[00:02:18][62.0]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:02:19] So I'm somewhat familiar with your work. A lot of them are portraits - they're facing forward, looking out at the person who's looking in at them - usually almost with the recognition that they're being looked at. I'm on your website right now and one of them is waving, to say 'Hello. I see you looking at me,' right? [00:02:37][17.3]

**John Gascot:** [00:02:37] Very. [00:02:37][0.0]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:02:38] Are your portraits going to be in that that same style or are you doing something a little different? [00:02:42][4.5]

**John Gascot:** [00:02:43] I think some will, but I don't think they all will. As a matter of fact, I am working on one now. I just started to sketch. One is covering the face that would normally be looking forward at you. And there are two profiles coming on the sides. So that's different for me. [00:03:02][19.4]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:03:03] Well, I love the way you said some of them will, but I don't think they all will. Almost as if there was some other influence on you about how you're going to portray yourself, than yourself. And you don't know it yet.  
[00:03:16][13.5]

**John Gascot:** [00:03:17] So I think I'm constantly influenced. I would feel like I would come to a point where I would feel the work was stale if I wasn't constantly influenced by something or other and constantly growing.

And I think that is why I do abstracts sometimes. Or like right now I'm doing a little bit of collage - because I get to a point where I feel like I've amassed this body of work and I've said what I want to say with it, and then I almost just use the other work to almost shake off my hands, or I almost think of it like a palate cleanser. And then I can sort of recharge and reset and get back to the Latin pop, which is my signature work.

And one of the things that about the work being instantly recognizable to me is that, that was the point when somebody first said that to me - was the point when I felt I was doing the right things.

Back in the days when you'd get the art magazines in the mail and, you know, I would look at the articles and see what was the in thing and tell myself, 'Well, maybe that's what I need to be doing to get recognized.' And it wasn't until probably within the past ten years where somebody said, 'Whenever I see a Gascot painting, no matter where I am, I know it's you.'

And at that point it just sort of clicked and I was like, 'No, you are doing what - you don't need to try to do this or that because it's the in thing or, you know, the popular thing.' And that's when I decided to just build my own sort of road.

I actually started writing stories, but I always drew a lot. I definitely wrote a lot. I knew that I wanted to be something in a creative field, and I feel like I genuinely could have been happy in any field as long as I wasn't sitting behind a desk doing repetitive work.

So I went to Fordham University for playwriting and acting. I won a couple of young playwrights competitions, even had a play read at Playwrights Horizons in New York. So I thought that's where I was going. My eyes were on off-Broadway, Broadway.

And then I was a makeup artist, beauty makeup artist for a number of years. I was happy doing that. And when we purchased our first home in northeast Pennsylvania, it was a very remote area. Mountains, literally a one stoplight town called Milford.

At that point, it wasn't much of a call for my makeup career, and I took some art classes just to meet people. And we ended up partnering with a friend and opening a gallery. And then while I gallery sat, I would paint. And then eventually my paintings got on the walls. And then eventually tourists, from New York mostly, would purchase them. And that's how I just started being an artist full time.

And I was very fortunate to have the support of my husband, who at times when maybe I wasn't selling so much, you know, I would suggest getting a different job or something. And he always was supportive and, you know, stick with this, stick with this. And because of that, I'm a full time artist. And I feel like sometimes I'm still writing, just visually, you know.

[00:06:34][197.1]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:06:40] You are a Creative Pinellas Emerging Artist from, I think, 2020 - COVID year. [00:06:45][5.2]

**John Gascot:** [00:06:46] Yes. [00:06:46][0.0]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:06:46] You did this really amazing installation. I did not know that you had a career as a playwright. And now that I do, there's a whole additional level of understanding I have about the installation you did and the storytelling. [00:07:00][13.4]

**John Gascot:** [00:07:01] Well, the installation was called *In Their Shoes*. It had a carnival feel. This is an idea that I've had for years and years. And during my mentorship with the grant period, I was going around doing soft sculptures, like life-size sculptures of the women that I paint.

And all of a sudden it hit me that I had this idea of doing an interactive sort of carnival statement, social statement installation - but I'd never had the opportunity to do it. And at that moment, I was like, 'Wait a minute, that's what grants are for, they're funding for me to do this presentation. And now's the time when I should be doing this work that I normally don't make the time to do.'

Because as a full time artist, I have to sell art. So sometimes you don't make the time to do something that's just for art's sake, something that might not be purchased, something that, you know, it's just to be experienced and then it's gone.

And so I took that opportunity and I focused on carnival cutouts. They're iconic, like they're usually a caveman or a cave lady or a king and a princess or whatever. And they're very cartoony and you stick your head through them. They have them at tourist traps as well, and you get your picture taken.

But what I chose to do was depict things that were going on, such as the George Floyd situation and Black Lives Matter, immigration. And I would depict these sort of stereotypical characters, and cut out their faces.

And the point was that that was supposed to symbolize putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, no matter what your opinion might be on any given situation. So then came the challenge, and then came the meetings that we had to have to protect the work so that people would not misuse the work. And at first, one of the concerns was, you know, should somebody get behind those and get pictures and the pictures get out there? It's true. Like on the Internet, things lose their context. And I could have very easily been like the next terrible person who created this kind of joke

thing. And I'd have a bad situation, which was not at all the intent.

The intent was to start conversations. That's usually the intent of most of my work is to start conversations. And so we came up with a way to protect the work, which was nobody could access the work. And I think it was you who said, just viewing the work, you already know what those pieces are supposed to be and you've already gotten the point and interacted with it. You don't have to have physical access.

I also wanted it to feel like a carnival that came through and just left all its litter behind. So we had discarded carnival tickets and deflating balloons, in different states of inflation - like they would be deflating throughout the exhibition. And I got a lot of great response. People felt that was really impactful and I was really happy with it. [00:10:13][192.5]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:10:14] I think that I want to point out that in the tableau, you had the three officers associated with George Floyd, including the officer who has his knee on George Floyd's neck, and George Floyd - and you could insert your face into any of those, as well as other people in the tableau representing police officers or immigration or activists.

And for me, it spoke very definitively to complicity - to making a choice, to accepting that the horror of that tragedy. And I'm very moved that lately when I hear people talking about George Floyd, they talk about the murder of George Floyd - it's become a shared acceptance, an awareness from a lot of people that that's what was experienced, that George Floyd was murdered in front of many people who were present and then in the whole world through a video. At the time that you installed the installation, I think it had not come through the court system and there was almost still a debate about responsibility, and all of those things were still open for discussion. And your artwork kind of pointed that they were not open for discussion. [00:11:30][76.2]

**John Gascot:** [00:11:31] And part of why I chose the Carnival theme, too, is that these tragedies and situations immediately become a spectacle in the media.

You know, my work is always about representation and inclusivity and everybody being seen. And I just really believe that there's an importance. And I will always speak out on those issues, not only on behalf of things that affect me personally, but that

affect others, because I truly believe that none of these things don't affect us all as a whole.

A lot of people who are privileged to sit in safety in their homes feel like, 'These things don't touch me, so why should I bother to do or speak about these things?' And if you know about something that's wrong and you don't speak on it, you're part of the problem. We become complacent in what we have, what rights we have. And before our very eyes, like we're seeing now, that they can just be taken away at any given moment.

That's part of what my concept is for this other project, the Diversity Game. I'm developing this game, this lifesize board game, which is sort of like a like a Chutes and Ladders, and I'm still developing it. We've put out a couple of versions so far. We did one for kids during Pride, which was a lot simpler, more about teaching them about the colors of the rainbow flag.

But my main concept for it is for it to almost be a tool that can be used as community diversity training or corporate or whatever at the workplace, where you create your own game piece. So that's where you get to be artful and create.

But when you play the game and you roll the dice, maybe you land on a spot that says something to the likes of, you know, you hired a bilingual minority. Now you have a whole new customer base, move forward whatever amount of spots. Or you sent home a student for wearing dreadlocks, come back a certain amount of spots.

And the point of it is, once it's fully developed, is for it to just ultimately show that diversity and inclusion matters. And it does affect everybody and it makes communities stronger. But when you discriminate or don't include everybody, it's like you create cracks in the dam. [00:14:00][148.6]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:14:01] And that is from the NEA grant. So just in case somebody might not know, Creative Pinellas did apply to the NEA for a grant and received a \$500,000 grant to sub-grant to artists and arts organizations who had ideas - for artists, ideas that would take them out into the community, engage with the community around art, and making art accessible. And then for arts organizations, for operations. And you applied and you received the grant for the game? [00:14:30][29.0]

**John Gascot:** [00:14:30] Yes, I did. I was very happy to do that. [00:14:32][2.0]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:14:32] There's other things you do around the issues of diversity and democracy. I'm looking at your mural where it has that same idea of a person inserting themselves into the artwork. And this is to encourage voting. [00:14:47][14.5]

**John Gascot:** [00:14:48] Yes, this was for the last election and I was commissioned by the League of Women Voters of the St. Pete area to create a mural. It's called Diversity and Democracy.

Initially, it was mainly supposed to be aimed at the LGBTQ+ community, but I wanted really all of the community to see themselves in it. Because that's part of my whole thing, that everybody should be able to see themselves in art. Because I strongly believe when a little kid of color, or girl, goes into a museum, they should be able to find themselves.

And we're seeing that in a better way now. But, you know, art is not just Rubens, these long haired ladies frolicking in the woods. And that's sort of like the image of art that I first encountered.

So I wanted to have like a cast of characters in this mural, but obviously I can't paint everybody or it would be a neverending mural. So I created a spot where you could insert yourself and be a part of the mural. And it has like a cartoon speech bubble that says, 'I vote.' And over it we put 'We Are St. Pete.' And that was a lot of fun.

I brought in James Hartzell, who's a fellow artist, to help me with the lettering, because he does a lot of that. And I believe that whenever you're creating something, if there's a component that's not your strong suit, it's not cheating to bring in somebody who's specialty that is, as long as you compensate them, of course. And I know lettering is not my thing. So I wanted this to be the best mural I could, so I brought in his assistance with that. And his name is right alongside mine on the mural.  
[00:16:27][99.2]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:16:28] You know, that's one thing I love about Pinellas County artists, the collaborative aspect and the recognition and the lifting each other up. And I guess it's this idea that there is enough for everybody. [00:16:38][10.6]

**John Gascot:** [00:16:40] Absolutely. And the big debate, whenever we bring in an international artist or something to create something in St. Pete, comes the whole debate of why wasn't it a local? And I always stand on the side that first of all, as far

as tourism goes, which we are an art tourist destination, you have to have a mix.

But most importantly, I feel like, well, if you're going to say that only locals should create here, then you're also saying that we shouldn't be able to create elsewhere. I feel if we want international or national opportunities, we also have to offer them.

My last place of residence was the D.C. area, but I was in Springfield, Virginia, which is 15 minutes outside. And it's suburban. It's not really a mural scene. So especially the scale of the amount of murals moving here really took me aback. It was almost like a challenge to myself that I wanted to do a mural.

The first one I did, it's commercial, but I did the mural on the roof of Punky's in St. Pete. And for my very first mural, not only was it off the ground, it was on metal, it was slanted and it was corrugated.

And Derek Donnelly was so awesome. He came out. He taught me how to work a scissor lift. Then I just said, I'm just going to attack this. I'm going to make it work. And it came out great. It's still there.

I thought of myself as like the 'new old guy' in the mural scene because so many of them are younger than I am. And my biggest one that I did is the Pilot Bank one, which is a three story building, and Derek assisted me with that one. It was my design.

I just, it's so physically draining, like I never knew. Like you have to hydrate correctly, you have to eat. I almost passed out once because of the heat. You know, you're up there on lifts and ladders and I'm like, you know, if I fall from here, I'm not bouncing back the way some of these other guys are.

So to be honest, while I love doing the big murals, I would be perfectly happy to be the little mural guy of St. Pete. Like I love a good ten by ten. I don't do as many as other people because people have to want my style.

Every now and then people will see - like I'll do like a live model drawing session - and people will be like, 'Oh my God, you did that?' Well, yeah, I can do that. I just, that's not how I want to express what I have to say.



I manage the Studios at 5663, and that's 5663 Park Boulevard in Pinellas Park. I was the first artist ever in that building.

The city had done something called a Better Block event, where they had these storage containers where artists and merchants could turn them into little shops or galleries for the weekend. And they had sort of a festival. They were testing the waters of using 'creativity to revitalize,' scenario. And I had met the head of the CRA. She let me know that this suite of offices was going to be turned into art studios, subsidized by the city.  
[00:20:18][218.8]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:20:19] And that's the city of Pinellas Park, right? [00:20:21][2.0]

**John Gascot:** [00:20:21] City of Pinellas Park, correct. As part of the Community Redevelopment Agency to revitalize that area with artists. So they had subsidized the studios, which are probably the lowest rate going there, about a dollar per square foot.

So I immediately said yes because I was looking for a studio. So through time, you know, being the first one there, I just ended up taking on a lot of responsibilities and stuff. And so I'm manager and curator for the building, and so I bring the artists' concerns to the city. I curate the art that we show. I plan events. I'm the liaison between the artists and the city.

And then Derek Donnelley, who lives a couple of doors down in the live-work unit, has the studio and gallery and this, upstairs. He's also a leader in that community. So we're very much a collective. There's also Vince Pompei, who creates sculptures out of found objects. He's famous for his clocks that are made out of silverware. He was another one who was one of the people who started things happening at the Arts Village.

We have a really great thing going because, what brings people to Pinellas Park? Well, they don't have the beach. They don't have downtown. So the arts is very valuable.

Last year, I organized the first ever Pride Festival in the city of Pinellas Park, and this year we had the second one. And part of what I told City Council, who's very, very supportive of us, was the face of your city is changing and different people are coming here now. [00:21:56][94.9]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:21:56] You have thousands of people coming to the Pride Fest - and you had a lot of art associated with it. [00:22:02][5.8]

**John Gascot:** [00:22:02] So it's Pride at the Village. They at first were like, 'Well, do you want to go to England Brothers Park? It's bigger, it's this - .' And I'm like, 'No. I don't want all these artists to have to pack up, set up a tent to then try to convince people to come back to see their studios on a whole other day. I want people to be here in the Village celebrating diversity.'

We're trying to do a very unique - more quaint, if you will - community Pride event, and art based. So there's still that element of makers and creatives at the heart of it. [00:22:36][34.0]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:22:45] You actually have an organization called Diversity Arts. [00:22:49][3.2]

**John Gascot:** [00:22:49] It's a nonprofit. It's open to everybody. But our main focus is underserved youth, and that would be LGBTQ+ youth, communities of color, girls, low income.

But again, we're open to everybody because I believe there's a big importance of maybe children of privilege creating alongside children of not so much privilege, and learning that there's not difference between them when they work side by side.

We do three workshops for youth almost monthly. We have professional artists lead them - different themes and mediums every time, so that they're exposed to different points of view.

We have adult socials as well, like make and takes. So we do like an LGBTQ social, allies are welcome, where it's almost like an alternative to going to a bar as a social activity. You know, you go to an art studio and you can meet new people, you can mingle, network, and you make something and you take it home.

We hold clothing and food drives, usually one of each a year. We operate out of the studios and we love doing what we're doing in the community. [00:24:01][71.2]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:24:02] What made you want to also do a nonprofit organization? [00:24:05][3.3]

**John Gascot:** [00:24:06] In 2016, post-election? My husband and I happened to receive anonymous hate mail from a neighbor.

They wanted us to be quiet, so I'm the opposite. I let every news organization know, and through that we received a lot of online community support. And I wanted to have a moment to just sort of be able to shake these people's hands and say, 'Thank you. You got our back, we got your back.' And when we had a meet and greet at the house, my initial reaction was, I'm painting the house Rainbow. [00:24:43][37.2]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:24:45] Wow. [00:24:45][0.0]

**John Gascot:** [00:24:45] Just because of this neighbor. And then my husband talked me down to the garage door. And so these neighbors wanted to help paint it.

And then I decided, well, maybe we'll create an art piece that can be auctioned and donated. And then eventually I just said, no, you know what? What I want to do is work with youth to hopefully equip them with the freedom of self-expression and confidence and who they are, no matter who they are, to be able to handle a situation like this when and if it happens to them later in life. Or earlier in life, because kids are coming out earlier in life now and they face school bullying and everything.

So I was able to deal with this because I had the self-confidence in who I am. So I want to instill that in other people earlier on. And that's how we decided. At first I started doing the workshops and everything was out of pocket and eventually I was like, well, maybe I should start a nonprofit so I can take donations to fund the programing because there's only so much you can do by yourself. I don't want to teach all the workshops myself because that's limiting to the kids. And I also don't want to ask other artists to do it for free.

So that's how I decided to turn it into a nonprofit, so that we could raise funds to do that. [00:26:00][74.8]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:26:00] At the very beginning of the conversation, we were talking about your different self-portraits, and there's all these different facets of who you are, multiple portraits of you - and all these different aspects of what you do and how you approach life in the world. [00:26:15][14.5]

**John Gascot:** [00:26:15] And that's that's kind of what I have going around in my head. So, John, the activist, John the painter, John, the, you know, the leader or whatever. That word is always so weird to me because it's not something that I get, But I accept it very proudly. It just always sounds weird, but I guess that is what I do in the community. [00:26:38][22.8]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:26:39] John Gascot, thank you so much for taking time to talk with me. This has been a delightful conversation. Can't wait to see what you do next. Thank you very much. [00:26:48][9.1]

**John Gascot:** [00:26:49] Thank you. [00:26:49][0.4]

**Barbara St. Clair:** [00:26:50] This is Barbara St. Clair and you've been listening to Arts In, also known as AI, the Creative Pinellas podcast. Sponsored in part by the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, Visit St Petersburg-Clearwater and the State of Florida Department of Cultural Affairs. Arts In is produced by Sheila Cowley. You can find more conversations with visual, literary and performing artists, and in-depth arts journalism at [CreativePinellas.org](http://CreativePinellas.org). Thank you for listening. [00:26:50][0.0]