



## AFRICAN CULTURE

# A genuine tradition



Ben Jones and his Shango/Chango installation.

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(Granma International staff writer)

• IS THE African presence in the Cuban visual arts and popular music a tourist attraction or a sociocultural phenomenon?

Casa de las Americas' Center for Caribbean Studies is shaping a response to this question through seminars on African-American culture. The third and most recent edition has brought together people directly involved in the oral traditions, researchers, academics and artists who make use of African elements in their work.

Emilio Jorge Rodríguez, the center's director, informed Granma International that "the objective of these meetings is to open a dialogue among everyone involved, so as to gain a better understanding and interpretation of the religious complexities and their incidence within the arts."

There was a positive response to the 3rd Seminar (from August 14 to 25), given that it was attended by specialists from 15 Latin American and Caribbean countries, plus Spain and France. Forty speakers made presentations, including Cubans.

U.S. visual artist Ben Jones, who is also a Jersey City State College professor, informed the seminar that although he is a contemporary artist, African themes are always present in his work, like a return to his roots.

For Jones, current African culture is part

fashion and partly the need for a spirituality which is lacking in modern culture.

His latest exhibition, in the Jersey City museum, entitled Shango/Chango is an attempt at the fusion of religion, "which is only the structure," with current directions in U.S. painting, including figurative and abstract art.

The seminar program offered an appreciation of the exhibition It's Your Destiny by artists Carlos Estévez and Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal, mounted in the Latin American Gallery.

"The joint exhibition happened by chance," Estévez explained to Granma International, "but what we have in common are the sources of images we have made our own. For myself, I am as interested in primitive cultures as in modern ones, I have a gnostic objective which is close to human existence."

"In Rodríguez Olazábal's case, African influences arrive in his painting via his religious and family beliefs, and in Estévez' work they are appropriated from the African-Cuban cosmic vision," Ivonne Muñiz, a Center specialist, pointed out. She gave a paper on African-Cuban complexes in contemporary Cuban artists.

The analysis of African influences on the visual arts centered on the work of classic painters such as Wifredo Lam and the renowned ones like Manuel Mendive.

The speakers affirmed that in the case of the visual arts, the African presence is not there for tourist consumption, but is a serious attempt to take up traditions and roots, not only within Cuba, but in other Caribbean countries such as the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Martinique.

The Puerto Rican Juan Carlos Quintero, professor of Hispanic-American literature at the University of Río Piedras, is studying the Caribbean lyrics in New York salsa music of the '70s, "an intense period of quality and quantity, for example with bands like Ismael Rivera and his Senserimá, and the Larry Harlow band with Cari-Caridad."

Quintero added that studies into Santería codes within salsa music reveal their existence in important Cuban bands, such as Adalberto Álvarez, Charanga Habanera and Issac Delgado.