

## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## A Local Artist Who Sets His Own Trends

The Jersey City Museum Chronicles the Works, and Evolution, of Ben Jones



As one takes in the 45 works assembled in "Deliverance," a retrospective of the art of Ben Jones at the Jersey City Museum, a couple of things are immediately apparent.

The first is that Mr. Jones, 67, though not well known outside of New Jersey — he was born in Paterson and has lived in Jersey City for four decades — has chosen to spend the better part of his career making art according to imperatives that have nothing to do with artistic fashion. That takes dedication.

The second revelation is that he has produced many memorable, thought-provoking images that deserve to be a lot better known and appreciated.

The show, organized by Edward S. Spriggs, a former director at the Studio Museum in New York City, is arranged chronologically, beginning with a series of colorful, psychedelic female figure studies from the early 1970s, the images augmented with sequins, gold stars, dots and other stickers. Mr. Jones seems to have been less concerned in those years with the issues that would interest him later, and more intent on simply declaring his African-American heritage. African spiritualism and music, particularly soul music, had an impact on his thinking, as is obvious from the titles of several of the pictures, like "High Priestess of Soul" (1972).

"Black Face and Arm Unit" (1971), in the collection of the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton, is probably Mr. Jones's most significant work from the '70s. It is an installation consisting of 30 life-size plaster casts of faces and arms, each of them furiously decorated with intensely colorful dots and stripes arranged in patterns, although there are many areas in which the decoration is intentionally formless and even crude. Still, the immediate and intended reference is to body-painting traditions across Africa, where skin is often regarded as blank canvas.

Traditionally, body painting was used in African societies to denote social status or signify religious belief. While it is hard to discern any specific cultural markings on the painted plaster casts for "Black Face and Arm Unit," that is not really the point. Mr. Jones's decorative designs are abstract, gesturing to



RITA MARIE SALPIETRO

the religious legacy of body painting while at the same time being above or outside that world. The work was a catalyst for him to explore his African roots more deeply, as several later pieces on this theme reveal.

Religious ritual also serves as a context for "Shango Wall Installation" (1995/2008), a formidable site-specific work covering a wall on the landing outside the galleries. It shows a procession of painted, naked dancing African figures making offerings of flowers, fish, rice and birds to an altarlike image of a double-edged ax, a popular symbol for Shango, a powerful god in Yoruba mythology and in Afro-Cuban Santería. An amalgam of symbolic cultural and spiritual references surrounds the ax in the image.

In the exhibition catalog, Dennis Raverty, an assistant professor of art at New Jersey City University, does an excellent job of dissecting these references, and he notes the work's relationship to African-American culture. Look closely at the central altarlike image and you will notice portraits of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and other figures integrated into the design. Here, quietly, the spiritual begins to blend with the political.

Many of the artist's mixed-media collages on paper and wood from the late 1980s showing in the middle room of the exhibition also marry the spiritual and political. Take "Juxtapositions #9" (1989), one in a series of works bringing together various images on abutting

square panels. The double-edged ax, the symbol of Shango, is juxtaposed with the word "power" on a subsequent panel, referring to the black power political movement of the 1960s and '70s.

From this point onward, the artist begins to mellow, and the more literal, illustrative and political qualities of earlier works give way to a poetic and expressionistic streak. Geometric and abstract patterns begin creeping into the "Juxtapositions" series with increasing frequency, and by the early 1990s the

artist begins to experiment with purely abstract stain paintings using acrylic on paper. Some of them are quite beautiful.

And it is abstraction that dominates the artist's most recent series of paintings, never before exhibited, which fill the show's final room. Here we see Mr. Jones having fun — throwing, splattering, brushing and drizzling blood-red paint on canvas and paper in search of the transcendent quality of abstract art so single-mindedly pursued by the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s.

**HERITAGE** Ben Jones, who was born in Paterson and has lived in Jersey City for four decades, attends to a detail of his "Shango Wall Installation" (1995/2008), being exhibited at the Jersey City Museum. Among his works on display are "Spirit of Nina Simone" (2003), top left, and "Black Face and Arm Unit" (1971).

