

In the Shango spirit

Ben Jones has summoned up the Yoruba god Shango to inspire his latest exhibition

Profile

● Artist

Born 52 years ago into a family of 15 children in New Jersey, Ben Jones started sketching portraits of family members.

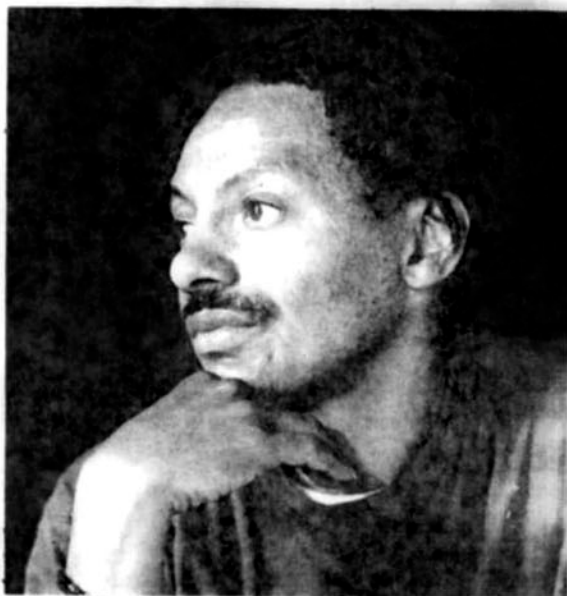
Spurred on by the encouragement he got from teachers, circumstances took him even further into the art world. The original plan was to be a foreign language interpreter, but he didn't get into the school he had chosen. Fall back decision? Art school. It was, he says laughing, the best one he ever made. He went on to two Master's degrees in fine art, and

"Many years ago I used to be a dancer. In the 1960s I was with an outfit called The Chuck Davies Dance Company of New York. A lot of our movements and rhythm was based upon Yoruba traditions of movement."

His current exhibition in the UK is entitled *In The Spirit*, a celebration of Black men in positive spiritual spheres. In the artist's own words, the work "focuses upon Black males who need to empower themselves in positive ways. Shango, the Yoruba deity of thunder and lightning, is a constant theme in the series. I use him as a unifying element. He serves as a metaphor of strength and power and symbolises Black people rejuvenating and rebuilding themselves.

"Some people assume that the representation of Shango is phallic - but that's a visual interpretation. He's very sensual, strong, endowed with a lot of the qualities that young men today are in need of."

Do male deities exclude



BEN JONES: Celebrating the Black male.

Black women? Ben doesn't think so. "There are women who take Shango to be their orisha, so it doesn't mean that only men assert that kind of power to represent them. I'm not excluding Black women from my art. In the past I've done series that have empathised with and celebrated Black women. This particular series homes in on Black men, who in relation to mainstream society are not portrayed as equals to White men politically, economically, mentally, psychologically and spiritually. It's vital that Black men empower themselves on an individual and collective basis."

Art is tangible and real; does he believe that there are demarcations of Black and White art?

"I'm a Black artist, and I don't have any problems with that. The world is so dominated by Eurocentric culture that we should be striving to achieve equilibrium. I don't see the sense in pushing myself as a general artist. African culture still isn't as recognised as European culture. I'm in London because I'm eager to examine Black culture here and to see if there is anything that I can extrapolate in terms of my art, because I want to internationalise it."

● *In The Spirit* can be seen at the 198 Gallery, 194-198 Railton Rd, Herne Hill, London SE24, June 9-July 9. Phone 071-978-8309.

Yemi Maye



IN THE SPIRIT: A detail from Jones's London exhibition.

Manisa K Musa

today, Jones is a celebrated painter, sculptor, print maker, installation artist and lecturer. Now he has become finely tuned into Africa.

"I always use Africa as a base in my work," he says. "As Black people, we need to be connected to our roots. I'm a contemporary artist, so I always like to paint things in the context of today, especially in terms of political, social and