

In Shades, Portico Gallery

Eric Celarier, *East City Art*, November 2, 2021

Wayson R. Jones' exhibit *In Shades* documents the most recent chapters in his study of value. Lining the intimately narrow stretch of Portico Gallery, curator John Paradiso concentrates on the artist's continuing focus on dark and light, by installing figurative work on the inside wall and clusters of Jones' smaller nonrepresentational works on the opposite, window side wall.

Whether it is the way our vision works or the manner in which culture has shaped us, there is a vitality to black and white that allows for observation of compositional study that can be lost in the distractions that color can impose, local color in particular. Depending upon the context, limiting the palette can allow an artist to deal more directly with what lies within the picture, under the subject. Jones says that, "As someone who grew up on the 50s and 60s TV and movies, the stark contrast and tension between black and blinding white and the myriad gradations between, are a lasting source of inspiration in my work."^[1]

The word abstract derives from the Latin "to draw from," so art of this kind should still carry something of this world, whether it is depicting objects directly or pulling something from within the artist. To be at its best, it must be more than playing with shapes. It must tap into something personal that cannot be communicated in any other way so that the art needs to subjectively describe the world or the artist's feelings about the world. Whether it's Jones' luscious cake-icing textures that record the slightest movement of his hands or the layers of reworked surfaces that testify to the earnestness of his practice, we get a glimpse of the artist's innermost thoughts and feelings through his mark-making.

The most eloquent works in the show come from Jones' *Black Presidents* series. These works describe the artist's compassion for and disappointment with the Obama presidency. These images are not immediately recognizable, as they are heavily obscured, two-dimensional busts, made of layers of black and white streaks, followed by scraping and revision of the surface. These frenzied interchanges of brushwork and splatter occupy the space where one would expect a head. These excited tangles are often bounded by straight lines, which connote features, but often do compositional duty by separating the figure from the white background. It is these unexpected qualities, along with the constant reshaping of these images, that convey the complexity of Jones' work.

Jones says these images are "equal measure of empathy and critique,"^[2] but he has not given us the specifics; instead, we get an outline of his dissatisfaction. Jones continues, "I was really impacted by the racist backlash against Obama's election to office, and struck by the vehemence of what had been unleashed (and which led to the Trump ascendancy). Pieces like *Death Threat* are a direct response to this. *Too Big to Fail* and *Changing Mind* comment on his bailout of the banks after the mortgage meltdown, and what I felt was a belated acknowledgment of LGBT rights." While there is no one to one ratio of symbol to concept, the uneasiness is there for the viewer to infer.

Accompanying the figurative work are numerous, smaller, more formal works, such as *Mountain*. Made with extra-coarse pumice gel, like many of Jones' panels, these are essentially heavily textured reliefs. While many of these paintings stand alone, some, like *Mountain*, are displayed as a group. These collections of his panels encourage direct comparison among them that can lay bare some subtle differences that might go unnoticed otherwise.

Mountain is exhibited as a part of a set with six other panels. This also includes: *Reticulated*, *Snowfall*, *Tar Pit*, *Weather*, and *Tundra*. All these titles reflect nature and present a topological view. Jones says, "For pieces like *Mountain* and *Tundra*, I wanted them to look like I went out and carved them from boulders, like an abstract *trompe l'oeil*."

Another set of formal works like these stands out. On one of the longest expanses of the outer wall hang five diamond-shaped panels. These works show an array of surface treatments. Most evoke an aerial view, such as *Capstone Dune* and *Drifting Sands*. These topologies are not limited to the earth. *Black Moon*, with its pockmarked craters, evokes a lunar landscape.

Some of these relief-like works elicit metaphors, like *The Death of Slaves* that recalls not only agricultural fields, but also the forgotten people who tended them. Jones has also indicated that all the works in this group are intentionally hung to mimic Egyptian pyramids with a reflective pool in front of them. Of the pyramids he has said, "I'm interested in them as symbols of antiquity and technological accomplishments of African people. As structures, they carry so much history of an ancient way of life and a culture that is foundational to much that came afterward. I'm also interested in them from a formal perspective."

This affection for the past adds another layer of interest to Jones' work. He is imitating the "created" as well as the "natural," channeling the history of these forms while at the same time funneling them through his own subjectivity in order to produce something universally understood. While he does not demand that we see things singularly, like all of us, he has his own opinions.

There is something fundamental about black and white media, making it especially appropriate for describing foundational truths. These truths may exist much like the famous parable of the elephant and the blind men, in which, several blind men are introduced to an elephant for the first time. One feels the tail and says it is like a snake, another feels the ear and says it is like a fan, and the last feels the leg and says it is like a tree. Life, like the elephant, has many facets and entertains different perspectives from where we stand. Unfortunately, all these perspectives cannot guarantee we are seeing the whole picture or that the whole picture represents all its parts. All we can do is carry on, in a sense, like Jones; erasing, painting over, and redefining understandings in our attempts to get it right. In this way, Jones is relating his experience through indefinite symbols which, in turn, give us a jumping off point for our own meditation on the world we live in.

[1] Artist quote taken from exhibition postcard.

[2] The quotes which follow are from a series of questions emailed to the artist.

<https://www.eastcityart.com/reviews/east-city-art-reviews-wayson-r-jones-in-shades/>

Light Liminal & Wayson R. Jones

Mark Jenkins, *Washington Post*, March 15, 2019

Regrouped with new members every two years, Sparkplug is the District of Columbia Arts Center's visual-arts collective. "Light Liminal" introduces the latest lineup, whose 10 members work in almost

that many media. Much of the art is in shades of gray, which makes for an ironic contrast with the adjacent show by Wayson R. Jones, a painter who has just moved from black-and-white to sensuous color.

The illumination in “Light Liminal” can be electric, as in Steve Wanna’s LED-outfitted circles of synthetic wax, molded into sculptural coils. It might be captured at an exact moment, as in Alexandra Silverthorne’s chiaroscuro photo of an old house at night. Or it could be implied by the juxtaposition of hard black lines and soft gray washes in Azadeh Sahraeian’s drawings.

Several of these artists work with fabric. Sarah J. Hull aligns rows of silk and cotton to resemble a minimalist drawing, and Madeline A. Stratton arranges lengths of dyed chiffon in a sort of stripe painting. Shana Kohnstamm gives more organic forms to pieces of hand-dyed wool, wired together to suggest fantastic flora and fauna. Her pieces don’t belong on the gray scale.

Jones’s “Lush: Reinvention” is in DCAC’s Nano Gallery, designed for small-scale pieces. The Maryland artist is showing a half-dozen abstractions, each six-inch square. They’re studies in contrast, opposing such pairs as red and black or blue and yellow. Made of paint and pumice gel, the pictures are thickly layered, so that the complementary hues may ride on top, lurk around the edges or peek from below. The hot colors are immediately alluring, but the paintings also reward close, lingering inspection.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/in-the-galleries-hanging-garments-symbolize-violence-against-indigenous-women/2019/03/15/b691cac2-4428-11e9-aaf8-4512a6fe3439_story.html

Methods

Mark Jenkins, *Washington Post*, October 15, 2017

The show at Brentwood Arts Exchange is titled “Methods,” but it could have been dubbed “Materials.” Found objects and rough-edged assemblage are central to the four artists’ styles. Roxana Alger Geffen makes vivid combine-paintings that sometimes defy the shape of the rectangular canvases. Chanel Compton assembles bits of white paper that are both affixed and colored with wine. Rodrigo Carazas juxtaposes building materials with such found objects as a policeman’s cap.

The most minimalist of the troupe is Wayson R. Jones, whose mostly black pieces emphasize texture over color. Mixing feathers with pigment and powdered graphite, the artist makes dark voids varied by their thickly thatched surfaces. Like the other “Methods” actors, Jones makes art that’s raw and unexpected.

Seeing Through the Lens of Black America

Angela Carroll, *Bmore Art*, June 29, 2016

“Wayson Jones’ Black President Series is a collection of five acrylic, gesso and powdered graphite canvases. Jones created the works as a ‘reaction to the extremity of backlash of President Barack Obama’s election.’ The [works] are figural, distorted, meta-abstractions that activate white, black and

gray values in subtly disturbing ways. The hypnagogic forms that emerge from densely layered palette knife strokes explode and contort on the canvas.

The series' blatant black, white and gray palette elicits the polarized and schizophrenic theater of American politics. Like a rorschach ink blot, the impressions are defined by the psyche of the viewer. Where one patron saw a screaming face, another saw clusters of frenzied orbital atoms. Like life imitating art imitating batshit crazy political rhetoric, the Black President series visualizes the angst and cacophony of our times."

Confronting Race, Violence Through Art at Galerie Myrtis

Tim Smith, *Baltimore Sun*, June 23, 2016

"Wayson R. Jones' 'Black President' (2012), an abstract portrait on canvas incorporating powdered graphite, acrylic medium and gesso...seems to bristle with conflict, internal and external."

Spins on 'The Starry Night,' From Critical to Cheeky

Mark Jenkins, *Washington Post*, May 20, 2016

"One of the starkest and most striking contributions is Wayson R. Jones's near-abstract 'Giant Angry Stars,' rendered in grainy black-and-white."