



The U.S. painter (at the back) next to Ahmed Gutiérrez, director of the Center for Experimental Visual Arts, in a sketching class.

# Ben Jones

## Painting, conscience, friendship

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(Granma International staff writer)

• WHEN U.S. painter Ben Jones exhibited his series on fans during the last Havana Biennial, through the quality of the colors and delicate strokes, the observer was able to experience the power of faces which, whether familiar or not, express internal happiness and tenacious resilience.

When the fan, which in Cuba immediately evokes a Hispanic reference, is placed in the hands of African-American women, it becomes a symbol of liberation and realization that goes much further than its practical significance.

This is how Jones presents the faces of cultural icons such as Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald, or political figures like Angela Davis, painting flames around the fan using explosive colors that express liberation: red and black, gold or green.

His personal interpretation of African-American resistance began with the influence of the Church and gospel music, this series of fans entitled **Sisters of Spirit** represents an imaginary line running through his extensive work, with the main objective of expressing and naturally sharing his political, spiritual, and formal concerns.

The artist recognizes various influences in his work, among them African traditions which he has experienced during his almost 40 visits to Cuba since the '70s, and the painting of Cuban and universal maestro Wilfredo Lam.

The island has requited Jones' love with various exhibitions, in the Havana and Santiago de Cuba Centers for Visual Art and Design, in the René Portocarrero Gallery in Havana and in the National Library Gallery during the Biennial. The collection belonging to the National Museum of Fine Arts is proud to possess one of his paintings.

Jones' extensive collection of Cuban friends is extraordinary, not just well-known cultural figures like Nancy Morejón, Josefina Méndez and Elena Burke, but also researchers like Tomás Fernández and documentary filmmaker Gloria Rolando. What's more, with every visit the his friendships increase.

The time he spends on and off the island at just invested in his exhibitions. For example, during the Biennial, he came to a in December accompanied by various colleagues, professors from New Jersey City University, as well as by U.S. artists and gallery owners, all with a keen interest in Cuban art, who as lovers of this art, know all about the high standard as reached and the international boom that it is experiencing.

Jones told **Granma International** that they arrived with a great deal of curiosity and by the time they left, they were in love with Cuba.

Given that 35% of the students at that center for higher education are Latinos, its president, Carlos Hernández, of Puerto Rican origin, is extremely interested in having more exchanges with Latin America, without excluding any country, explained Jones.

He went on to say that the majority of U.S. citizens wonder why their country has no relations with the island, when diplomatic ties have been renewed with China and even Viet Nam.

In reference to the large Cuban-American community in New Jersey, Jones said that he believes that a portion of them would like to see relations reinstated but are afraid to admit it publicly. But there is another group, the majority, and they least now must listen. During the Elián González case, they displayed their true reactionary colors, he explained, and U.S. citizens asked themselves how that group managed to violate and mock the country's laws. Now they must listen to those citizens, he added.

Ben Jones' sensitivity and sense of solidarity brought him last December to the Center for Experimental Visual Arts, in the capital. There he was received as a friend by director Ahmed Gutiérrez, who explained the school's characteristics (247 students from third grade through university level who participate in sculpture, painting, drawing and craft workshops).

Gutiérrez explained that children and youths go there after their regular classes, and with the training they receive many go on to study in the National School of Art or at the San Alejandro Academy. Ben Jones took note of the basic shortages (paint, brushes, paper, cardboard) and when he returned to his country, while preparing another exhibition (which will open soon in the Jady Gallery in New York), he did not stop helping the center.

When he came back to Havana this March, he arrived at the center with a gift from his university so that it could purchase some of these materials which are vital in producing art.

His interest in visiting a wide range of places brought him here to our weekly for a meeting with Gabriel Molina (who writes that he is proud to have had a long-running friendship with Ben), a conversation which led to new possibilities for exchanging books and information despite the strain of Ben's personal work.

Ben Jones (born in New Jersey, 1941), one of the most important African-Americans of his generation, is like his work: intense, warm and filled with solidarity.