

# Ben Jones and Amiri Baraka together in exhibit at NJCU

By John Petrick  
Journal staff writer

For Ben Jones, creating art is an inward, deliberate, soul-searching process of spirituality that explodes on canvas after months, sometimes years, of back-breaking labor.

For Amiri Baraka, art is the other way around — an impulsive act, sometimes scribbled on a small piece of spiral notepaper, often done on a plane, bus or while sitting in the yard. In many cases, even he doesn't know what it means.

Put it all together in one room, and the result: "Brothers," an exhibition of the two artists' work currently being featured in New Jersey City University's Lemmerman Gallery.

There may not be much unity in the themes that pervade "Brothers," except for the unity of the two "brothers" themselves. Jones and Baraka have been close friends since the 1970s, as both were artists interested in politics and found themselves at many of the same gatherings in Newark.

As Baraka arrives in the gallery to greet Jones for a recent interview, the two are clearly about as close to brothers as two people can be, without being actual blood relations. And yet, their appearances are as different as their art. Jones appears very much the Bohemian with

## "Brothers"

Works by artist Ben Jones and writer and poet Amiri Baraka. Lemmerman Gallery, New Jersey City University, 2039 Kennedy Blvd., Jersey City. (201) 200-3246.

Hours: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Through Feb. 15.

his dark-colored clothes and braided hair, while Baraka — who is on his way to teach a class at Columbia University — looks more like the writer in his tweed jacket and tie.

That might be because Baraka, 67, really is more of the writer. The Newark native is a noted poet and playwright, first and foremost, who has always dabbled in drawing on the side. His numerous literary prizes and honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the Rockefeller Foundation Award for Drama.

"The real reason I became a writer was because when I came back from service (Air Force 1954 to 1957), I realized it would just be too expensive to be a painter," he says with a grin. The materials and open studio space required to do what Jones does aren't necessary for a writ-

er, who can create anywhere, he notes.

The son of working class parents, his mother always made sure he was taking piano lessons, drum lessons, anything to steer him in the direction of artistic expression.

"Ben and I go back a long way and I've always known his work," says Baraka. "He invited me to do this show, and I jumped."

Jones chimes in. "I think he's just trying to upstage me," he says, and the two burst out laughing.

Hanging on one side of the gallery are pieces by Baraka, most very small, abstract drawings of faces in colored pencil, marker or paint. "I'll do these things anywhere — planes, buses, sitting in the backyard. They're spontaneous. Drawing, for me, is as sudden as writing a poem...It's beyond my will. That's the great thing about art, for me. You don't have to go in a straight line...In some cases, I don't even know who these people are," he says of the faces that punctuate the gallery wall.

One piece was simply inspired by a small, square piece of net-like material he had found lying around the house. The netting is placed over another of his trademark, abstract faces looking sullen, almost ominous. The effect is almost that of a person trapped in a cage or behind bars.



**POLITICAL ACTIVIST** and writer Amiri Baraka and Ben Jones, artist and professor, have joined for an exhibit at the Lemmerman Gallery.

Photo by Mansa K. Mussa

On the other side of the room are the lighter, larger, more ethereal watercolor paintings by Jones. Shimmering golds create abstract images of spirituality. If the viewer looks very closely and reads between the paintings' blurred lines, they will see the same hidden image — that of a human figure with arms extended outward.

"My work is always dealing with spiritual things. I wanted it to be light, and delicate, to get that sense of spirit into the work. I tried to keep a softness to it."

Spirituality may be a theme Jones has been exploring since the 1960s. But in the perilous times that have emerged since Sept. 11, spirituality seems to be on the minds of many Americans shaken by the death and destruction that reminded them of their own mortality.

Jones says there could never be a more important time to be an artist. "We need to speak out. We need to be the other voice," he says. "My whole thing about this is, I understand why you see all the flags and banners that say 'God Bless America.' But America is not the only country in the world," he says.

"We have to live with other countries, whether we like them or not. It should be, 'God Bless the World.' America is not the world. You have to hear the voices you don't want to hear, not just the ones that you do want to hear."

Also featured in the exhibit are several fans created by Jones bearing the images of famous African-Americans, especially women who were pioneers in their musical fields.

Jones used fans, he says, because ever since he can remem-

ber, hand-held fans have been a tradition in the Black church.

His decision to create them came when he discovered his nieces and nephews didn't even know who people like Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington and Billie Holiday even were. "I said to myself, 'Isn't this sad.' History was being lost," he says.

Jones, an art teacher at NJCU, has had his work featured all over the world. Among the galleries where he has been exhibited are the Teja Kada Gallery in Tokyo, the Gallery of the City in Paris, the 198 Gallery in London and Galleria in Madrid.

"Brothers," which features 16 works by Jones and 10 by Baraka, opened on Jan. 22, and a formal opening reception is scheduled for Monday. It runs through Feb. 15. For more information, call (201) 200-3246 or visit their Web site at [argallery@njcu.edu](http://argallery@njcu.edu).