

Artist Undergoes A Transformation

JERSEY CITY

AN EXHIBITION at the Jersey City Museum through June 30 could be titled "The Transformation of Ben Jones."

Mr. Jones, a 39-year-old artist who teaches at Jersey City State College, has been known until now as a champion of African culture struggling against impersonalizing influences of Western technology. Until he began what he calls his "cloud series," he had built his reputation on figurative work in mixed media that reflect travel and research in Africa, Europe, South America and the Caribbean.

"I needed to express African themes," Mr. Jones said, "until I felt rooted in my own identity. But now I want my work to be for everyone. Once we realize that we are not only one world, but part of an expanding universe, we begin to express the joy of creation and a love for all people."

The "cloud series," 15 silkscreen prints with photographic stenciled elements, is the culmination of Mr. Jones's spiritual growth. In them, luminous spheres in rainbow colors float against vibrant blue skies with white clouds. Stars, crescents and hoops thread like ribbons of color through the design.

In his earlier years, Mr. Jones, who lives in Jersey City, set out in search of the arts, crafts and architecture of African culture the world over. Wherever he went, he recorded symbols and images and painted villagers.

The artist began his odyssey along the coast of West Africa, at the museums of Senegal, Mali, Niger and the Ivory Coast. He went to Africa six times, traveling farther each time from the cultural centers to remote villages. Paintings from this period show women washing clothes in a river, mothers with children and men engaged in ritual dancing.

Mr. Jones eventually carried his search to Paris, where early modernist art was deeply influenced by African themes, and followed the French idea to the Caribbean Islands of Martinique and Guadalupe.

"Some of the best research material on African art is found in Paris," Mr. Jones said, "particularly at the Musée de L'Homme at the Sorbonne."

He went to Haiti because it is "the most African of all the Caribbean Islands," and found that African religions there had blended with Christianity to create new cultural forms. As his horizons expanded, Mr. Jones traveled to Puerto Rico and Cuba to study the arts on those islands.

black population there than in the United States," Mr. Jones said, but also because a mixture of Europeans, Indians, Asians and Africans produced an absorbing blend of people and cultures that extended his vision still further.

Mr. Jones also became a dancer and costume designer with the Chuck Davis Dance Company in Manhattan. In addition, he became a ballet buff and traveled to Russia to see the Bolshoi and to other countries in Europe, as well as throughout the United States.

The result of so compulsive and prolonged a research is a contemporary interpretation of the Afro-American mood with international overtones. An example of that is Mr. Jones's 24-part plaster sculpture, which will be shown at The Studio Museum in Harlem through Nov. 1. It consists of 12 masks and 12 arms covered with tattoo-like ancient designs.

The work is part of a 45-artist exhibition entitled "Ritual and Myth: A Survey of African America."

Previously exhibited multimedia works by Mr. Jones are "Remade in the U.S.A." and "Deliver the Funks." The first — a black man superimposed with symbols of Western technology targeted at his heart — is a combination of paint and collage. The second, also paint and collage, but more playful, shows a black man leaning against a graffiti-covered wall representing the "cultural funk" of his own preoccupations.

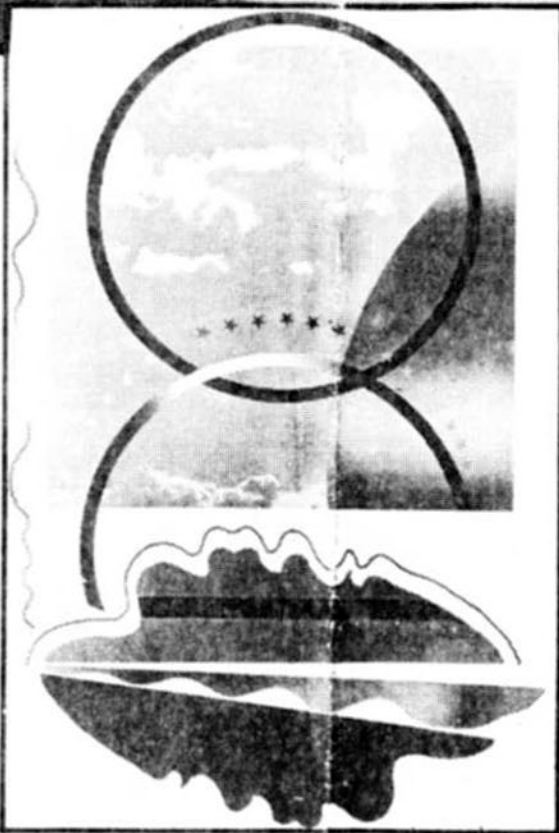
A more recent work, "Quiet Fire," is a silkscreen print of a woman's emerging self-awareness: Four figures following one another in a movement to the foreground.

Mr. Jones is now working on something totally different, a series of expressionistic paintings of androgynous erotic figures in bold colors. The artist says they reflect the emotional, as opposed to the spiritual, side of his personality. As he put it:

"I have always attempted to express themes of love, harmony, peace and individuality within a humanist framework."

Mr. Jones was born in Paterson and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in art at Paterson State College. He holds a master's degree from New York University and is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree in painting and graphics at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

The Jersey City Museum is in the city's Public Library, 472 Jersey Avenue. It is open from 11:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday and to 8 P.M. on Wednesdays.



Ben Jones working on a painting, and a recent work, 'Cloud Series 11 — Stars', silkscreen print