

## Allen Jones: The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole

Drawing is at the heart of Allen Jones' art. Behind every painting and sculpture is a sketchbook of trial poses and possible arrangements, an armature of pencil drawings upon which his invigorating images are built. These are developed intuitively as Jones responds to the promptings of the unconscious. His work may look all surface, but it has hidden depths and is based upon much thought as well as observation. Jones makes art which 'shapes up to history'; which relates intelligently to the art that has gone before (a number of his works directly reference masters of the past such as Picasso, Matisse, Klee and Miro); but which also says something relevant about the myths and intrigues of contemporary identity. He has created a robust visual language in which to communicate his commentary, a language which draws equally on different modes of representation, the specific livery of clothes, mail-order catalogues, abstraction, and the idioms of cartoons, trade papers and fetish magazines. Coupled with a decidedly emblematic treatment of the female form (which diversifies through stylisation and flattening to three-dimensional moulding), Jones has arrived at a very potent statement indeed.

In fact, he may be said to operate in three distinct languages: the primary one of painting, and then two different orders of sculpture. Of his sculptural idiolects, one is principally descriptive, as witnessed by the delicious stainless steel and cast resin figure here, *A Model Model*. The other is formally more radical and poetic, and is all about suggested form and planar visualisation. This type of work is splendidly represented in this exhibition by *Small Sprawl* and *A Bigger Sprawl*. Jones' sculptures enter your personal space triumphantly or more insidiously. In the poetic work, the artist is interested in a reduction of form while still keeping the sculpture legible. What he really likes are the dislocations and abbreviations that are not possible in a drawing or painting. 'The disjunctions make the descriptive elements have a vitality', he comments.

In recent years Jones has returned to the theme of the totemic portrait, first explored in the 1960s (*Third Man* of 1965 is a fine example), in which a painted wooden body is surmounted by a perspex head. In his latest interpretations, Jones subverts the indisputably phallic verticality of these images by making them portraits of women. *Red Queen* and *Blue Queen* follow a similar pattern as before, though the colour has been simplified, as have the forms and drawing of the heads. These floating perspex shapes have a radical simplification which is both elegant and expressive. In a series of related sculptures, Jones liberates the head from the body entirely: one in clear perspex, another painted red, another blue. The colour is declarative, symbolic, emblematic. Jones is not attempting to be descriptive here, but nor is he simply being decorative: always colour has a special significance for him. Red is not just anger or aggression, it is also health, strength and youth, love and carnal passion, while in China it has been called the luckiest of all colours. Blue symbolises infinity, eternity, truth - the least material of colours, but it can also connote melancholy.

Jones is a painter and sculptor of the figure, and is expert in how people are seen and presented. His stance is more affectionate than ironic; celebratory. And it is a celebration of art and life as much as style and sexuality. Thus it is not the cool term 'sexuality' which really suits his work, but the warmth of eroticism. He humanises faces in the crowd and elucidates their dreams. This is dangerous territory, as Freud discovered, and here Jones confronts the idea of art as provocation. What people get up to between the sheets is clearly their concern, but our curiosity about others is unquenchable. Jones offers us a range of insights and innuendos, and is not afraid of narrative in his paintings and sculptures, though for many this kind of storytelling is against all Modernist principles. He has acquired much knowledge about the human condition, our aims and aspirations, our frailties and failings. His work is about human relationships, their complications and complexities, their joys and sorrows. His images engage with the flawed nature of man, with a generosity of spirit that frequently raises the emotional temperature of these apparently serene images.

In his work it's showtime in the arenas of the world, the catwalks are open for business, the theatres, cabarets and dance-halls are promoting their wares. What's on the playbill tonight? Art is also performance - not just the private studio act of paint application, but the notion of the painting as a stage for the acting out of fantasies. The performer for Jones is a kind of self-portrait: the artist as musician, tightrope walker or magician. He is concerned with audience-watching as much as stage-watching.

Jones has long been associated with emphatic luminous colour, which is the chief characteristic of his technique after linearity. But he has also to be considered as an artist deeply involved with texture. His habitual thin paint is now frequently varied with passages of impasto, while the merest drawn outline (perhaps in brown or the sanguine the Old Masters were so fond of) is juxtaposed with a more fully modelled figure. Jones is drawn to the dynamism generated by this kind of meeting of opposites. He has always been interested in fusing together what others might think incompatible, and thus making something new. Since the 1960s he has been offering us new unions of the abstract and figurative, the symbolic and the descriptive. Also of the sexes.

Passion is the great transformer - in both senses. Not only does it power these encounters, it also changes life for the better. Through the eyes of love we are all the heroes and heroines of our own dramas, buoyed up on the wings of imagination and wish-fulfilment. Two become one in a new unity or the remaking of an old one. The merging of male and female is the basis for the creative act in nature, as it is in the artistic life. Plato (in *The Symposium*) spoke about soul mates in a similar way. 'According to Greek mythology, humans were originally created with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces. Fearing their power, Zeus split them into two separate parts, condemning them to spend their lives in search of their other halves.' And again: 'Love is simply the desire and pursuit of the whole.'

Now look at *Getting Out of Oneself*. The title refers to that joyous state of intoxication in which the self is forgotten and one is free from inhibition. Here Jones imagines this state as a man emerging from a woman just as she emerges from him. The divided self, or a recognition that we are all composed of feminine and masculine, in different ratios and quantities? Jones has long been obsessed with the collaboration of male and female in the individual psyche, and many of his figures have been joined in the act of becoming one.

In a world where sexuality is felt to be increasingly fluid, Allen Jones is master of ceremonies in pursuit of an ideal of beauty. He is drawn to well-shaped bodies, svelte or streamlined, as perfect as a dream. His work is graceful and witty, economical of means, direct. The artist should go beyond daily life, and deepen the game, not merely reflect it. Art is a construct and it should flaunt and honour its artificiality. Jones is an immensely skilled artist, adept at manipulating the formal aspects of painting and sculpture, tough in his attitude to construction (if a work is well-made, it will carry its meaning and its emotional charge properly), but always ready to experiment with new materials, whether acrylic sheet or stainless steel. He has quarried his subject matter from the varied strata of human nightlife and has matched his style to it. He employs a post-Cubist vocabulary and says: 'Cubism changed our perception of pictorial space and extended our vocabulary of painting itself. Since the advent of Cubism the viewer is required to be an active participant, underlining the act of painting as an event.' Participating in an Allen Jones scenario might have its disconcerting moments, but the joyous energy in the work, the pulse of existence, is undeniable.

Andrew Lambirth  
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