Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Jae Jarrell

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Transcript

Preface

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 11.5.3. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Speakers are indicated by their initials.

Interview

Jae Jarrell

AFRICOBRA interviews

Tape JJ

TV LAND

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: It's a good story. Let's start talking about it. Tell me about you, for a minute. Let's talk about you, for a second. Tell me about your work. What influenced your work. I know it's a big question, but if you go back to maybe the sixties, what you were doing at the time. Tell me about your work.

JJ: Right. I was always in fashion. And I had a shop, in the sixties. And did my debut in 1963. Opened a shop in '64. And did one-of-a-kind coats and suits for women. I would give custom fits. And it was in Hyde Park. And I became Jae of Hyde Park. The Jae, I should explain ... my name is Elaine Annette Johnson, at that time. And no one designs as Johnson, nor Elaine. Possibly Annette. But a dear friend of mine decided to reverse my initials, and the JAE stuck. And I opened a shop in Hyde Park, and the rest was history. It was some time during the period of 1964-65, when the shop was going well, and one day a friend came by and encouraged me to go to the Hyde Park Art Fair. And I think that was the first time that I met Wadsworth. And that was a fun experience. He had all his work out there to exhibit. And I thought that he was kind of attractive. And, from what he tells me, possibly he thought the same. However, we didn't see one another, after that, for a long period of time; until another friend introduced us. And so we began courting. And it was enjoyable, because he was an ardent worker in his art. And I was an ardent designer. And we used to have play dates with my carrying my portable sewing machine over to his studio, and cranking out my designs, and at least I was addressing my work and pleasure, as well. The beautiful ...

Q: Did he bring you to art, or were you already curious about art, at that time in your life?

JJ: Oh, no. I went to school at the Art Institute of Chicago. So that's where I got my training to become the designer. However, when I entered ... I transferred there in 1958. In the fall. And just ask Wadsworth, because he graduated in June of 1958. So we were yet to meet. But we had a common interest in art. And the designs that I did, at that time, were basically very classic-line suits and coats. Well tailored. Smartly made. And custom fitted. And I had, you know, pretty decent clientele. Later, when we approached AFRICOBRA, it was in the late sixties. And, by that time, I had honed my career enough to be able to, you know, share space with another artist. I think that was the beauty of the next period there, is because AFRICOBRA introduced us to a totally creating philosophy. And we were non-threatened because we each had honed a career that we felt strongly enough that you could share interests with artists. And that was very powerful. The beauty of it was to be able to hone the philosophy. And that was really, really fascinating to do. It was ... when you create something from the ground up, it is ... it's like birthing. And it's so brand new. And you amaze yourself when you contribute in the group sessions that one ... when you trouble-shoot the ideas and one person bounces off the other person, and you can see the idea and the ideal taking shape.

Q: Something you couldn't do in isolation?

JJ: No. I think it takes bantering, here and there, to even pull out the beautiful results.

Q: Maybe it will help you understand your own ideas.

JJ: Yes. You know, because then you have people with similar paths. And yet they share where they got stopped, and then you sort of chime in as to having a similar experience, and solving it in such a way. But it was beautiful to be together. It was very powerful to share your unfinished work. It's like going naked, you know, some place, into a bunch of people who are really ... you know, they've never seen you in that manner. And so to take your work that's partially done and allow others to, first of all, see it at that state, and second of all, say something about it ... and that was the beauty of working together. You, just by talking about the art and helping it develop, you did problem solving. We were there for hours, on a Sunday afternoon, together, and it was very, very, very spiritual. Lots of fun. Good wit. Good wine. And just good friends and brethren.

Q: It didn't start out like that. You had exposed yourself like that to anybody.

JJ: No.

Q: Why this group? Why these people?

JJ: We came together, willingly, to hone a philosophy. To make a difference. To develop a thought. I think we had to carve it, meeting after meeting, 'til we, at some point, thought that it was important to develop the principles, and something that we could refer to, others could refer to, when they're viewing and enjoying AFRICOBRA. And so the conversations were from whereas they met…It was politics, what's happening in Africa. I mean, you began to get so attached to some other activist group's plight that you followed it like you ... you know how you pick up the funny paper and you follow your regular comic strip, and you've just got to see whether Mary Worth is going to meet her maker or whatever. And you found yourself getting controversial papers, and reading up on the plight of brethren in African nations, and particularly if it was an activist group. It was like your own pipeline. It was like The Cleveland Press, at one point, but you no longer were reading the Press. It had a slant that you weren't ... it wasn't for you. (Overlap)

Q: So you felt like you weren't alone? You weren't just sitting on the sideline, passively watching what was going on.

JJ: No, no. We were internalizing, creating heroes. You know, I ...

Q: Internalizing what?

JJ: Internalizing their plight, how they were reacting, how they were rebutting the conditions. And likening it to our plight.

Q: Whose plight?

JJ: The black people's plight. It was nation time. And, you know, all the right-on-time slogans and shouts were ... became very crystal.

Q: You're talking about art. It wasn't about working art.

JJ: It was about making art, but it ... you first are working on your insides. You know, you have to have ... you have to clean up your insides, in order to express to others. You know. You've been ... you've been doing Michigan Avenue in your painting. You've been doing a frock that goes on Michigan Avenue. But, at some point, you're talking about making something that's going to reflect on 47th and South Park. And make a difference. And it's ...

Q: (Overlap; inaudible)

JJ: Yes. Because it's history that art ... artists speak to the people. They're ahead of the time. And so they give a direction. Even when they aren't preaching to people, you know, through their work, still you're speaking to people and you're speaking new ideas for aspirations, and so those are like dreams, and it's like an area you hope not trodden yet. You know? So that you're introducing something to the people. So, on that note, when you have a condition that needs to be addressed, and you're an artist, you internalize that in your work, perhaps. We, most decidedly, joined together, to address issues together, so that it could make a powerful statement, and make a difference.

Q: Sorry. I'm going to interrupt. Is this something you felt like you couldn't do on your own?

JJ: No. Not particularly that you couldn't. I know that for my debut show, at that time, there were African nations that were, you know, no longer colonized. And it influenced my interest in what themes that I used in my debut show, as a designer, before ever having a business, anything of that sort. Just introducing myself to society. And it seemed prudent that I use the freedom as an inspiration, and explore their culture and see what reflections I could bring, and bring that nation to us, so that you are recognizing your heritage. So it wasn't ... and that was deliberate, when I did that. It was particularly ... it might have been even a step toward a possibility to be an AFRICOBRA artist. Because I remember having been trained at the Institute, and feeling sometimes ... there was something that was funny. The instructor kept calling me by ... well, let me say this. The classroom had about 12 students in it, three of whom were black women. And she kept calling me by the name of ... you know, she called us by our last names, because we were going to be stars. When you're a designer, you act like a designer, you dress like a designer, and they call you Johnson. You know. And she kept calling me Hall. And I kept thinking, you know, there are only three of us in the class. Hello. You know. But I know that when I had the opportunity branch out and do a debut, that it was important that I celebrate my heritage, and that I thought it was important and it was effective, and it made me solid. It made me also know ... one of the reasons I went into business with my own shop, because I was going to circumvent getting turned down by some design house. You know? I just knew where I was going. There's a place for me, I know where it

is, it's Hyde Park. You know, it's ... it had an element of art and class and tolerance, and it was a good place to be. So that was my beginning. In fashion and in our ...

Q: So you were a natural fit (Inaudible)

JJ: I really was. And I think one of the things that was really, really interesting about being AFRICOBRA reaching to different disciplines, to come together. Because that makes a voice. And I think it was really powerful because ... I remember talking to Gerald Williams, and we had a discussion with regard to my existence in AFRICOBRA. And he was saying that it must have been really tough for Jae, because, you know, she's not a painter. And, you know, she's not a printmaker. And the others did this two-dimensional thing, and then I did this other thing. Well, frankly, I found that it was particularly engaging to do our projects, because from the ... the thing that blew my mind in going into design, at the Institute, was that the first assignment to design a garment was to go out and find an attractive, Art Deco building. And one would think that what's the inspiration. And it blew my mind. And I thought, oh, yeah. You know, when I got out there on Michigan Avenue and saw my Art Deco building, I just thought, be-yoo ... I could see the tiers in the garment; I could see reflections of the lines of the building, and working very well in the garment and very smartly. And so to go into AFRICOBRA with a commitment and an assignment, as we did in the beginning, to do a black family, do whatever, I thought I like this. I can go here. This is totally fresh from what I've been doing. These will be statements. And there will be frontality to the community. And I'll be speaking to urban talents. Urban people. And I found this a beautiful challenge. So you may have ... I noticed, in the background of ... at the arts center, my black family was hanging on the wall. That was an applique piece that ... it is how I expressed black family. When we came together, we tried to see what we had in common, besides ideas and hopes and dreams. So we each brought pieces of ... that we regarded were exemplary of our work. And tried to draw up the similarity of our challenges. Just talked about what was similar in some; what was it inspirational; and how alike we possibly were. And that was a sort of interesting, you know, first step; because I think we sat and talked for several Sundays. And ...

Q: Did you talk about art or did you talk about politics (Overlap)

JJ: We talked about what if ... the what-ifs. If we could start. I don't know whether we were really at a school of thought, at the very beginning, that very terminology, but we most decidedly knew the purpose to get together was to hone a philosophy and put ... and to take a leadership position in ... for our people. A visual leadership position.

Q: (Overlap) Can you tell me what-ifs. I mean, they don't have to be accurate, per se.

JJ: Oh, yeah. You know, what if we could get a multiple of artists and create a school of thought? Well, the whole idea of a school of thought was so that it may influence other ... other disciplines. Things like ... a sort of Bauhaus kind of thing. But ...

Q: Or if we can change the world? Did that come up?

JJ: (Overlap) What if we could change not the world, because it was about our people. It was about our community and urban plights, and so to give some freshness and some healthy ... healthy direction. It was after tossing around a lot of principles, we arrived at a point where we knew the positivity we were reaching for was something that we all agreed needed to be done and could be achieved. And so, you know, that might have been one of the what-ifs.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: I've got a couple of themes that I want to touch on. Earlier, when you were describing what you did, prior to AFRICOBRA, in terms of your approach to fashion ... you were talking about custom fitting, line, form. And I was thinking about something I was going to ask you. So that's a big leap from that to (Inaudible)

JJ: (Laughs) Ah. Well, it was a marvelous palette of ... no, canvas to express revolution. I believed in the well-tailored suit, and I know the basic classic fabrics quite well, all my life, because my grandfather was a tailor, and we all sewed and we all sewed well. And we all tailored well. And coming from this wonderful, cold climate, it means that you have lots of suits and coats in your life. So I gained a great respect for that and the knowledge of that. So I took that to my career, but then I took that to AFRICOBRA, as well. So the first few pieces in AFRICOBRA One were suits. And I thought it was kind of tongue-in-cheek to do a perfectly sedate but bouncy tweed, salt-and-pepper tweed, with a bullet belt on it. Because it meant that I've got your attention, but I've got something to tell you to do. You know. So I really had, at that point, joined the revolution. One other piece that I did was a suit that was patchwork silk that mocks walls. Urban walls. And has graffiti on it. And all the statements of the 'hood. It was important, because the language was who I was speaking to and I was saying, you know, I understand your newsletter on the wall. You know. And I join you. So it's a ... it's a good place where you can post your attitudes and plights. And I thought, why not on a perfectly good silk suit, made to look

like a wall. And ...

Q: (Inaudible)

JJ: It was fun.

Q: But you weren't holding any punches.

JJ: No, I'm like that. (Laughs) I really am kind of ... I'm kind of a raw ... I mean raw, truthful, or raw where ... but I think it's because I'm ready for change. You know, I'm ... I have the desire for newness and freshness. And, as a result, I get blatant, because I want to be blatantly truthful about something. And I really was mad. You know, I really needed to vent, and it was a great place to ... you know, to vent, which is in my work. And to others. But you have to be gutsy when you're in design. It's paths not trodden. You know. So you have to awaken if you're in the revolution. And we chose to ... it was ... we chose to, Wadsworth and I both talked about the requests to demonstrate, march, and we said ... and we had young Wadsworth, and we weren't about to demonstrate and we weren't about to march. But the point is you speak through your work. And we all can do something. And we speak through our ... you know, through our medium. Now, the other thing that we sat down and really decided where our place was is if we are going to make a better community, and if this whole purpose of this collaboration is to enlighten the community and to strengthen our values and speak to our people, all too many fist-shaking speakers, with a crowd around them, were either divorced, separated, or two-timing. You know? With a bunch of kids at home. So we said, okay, I understand this revolution, I know what the plight is, I know, and I respect those who do certain things, but the best thing that we can do for this revolution, and the best thing we can do for our community, is to be good parents, be good mates, be solid people, and take care of business at home. And if we do that, then the fruits of our labor ... those three, right over there ... will make you most proud and make the communities most proud. And it may be that you have to wait 30 years down the line, you know, before you see it. But we have a solid, solid, committed family. And that's what we gave when ... rather than carry a sign. Stay home, do your homework, do your work, and speak through your art. So that was our commitment. Uhm. And I would do it all over, the same.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: The idea of how do you reconcile what you just said ... and I understand the purpose (Inaudible) may not be the best question ... but with the bullet belt. I mean, when you say revolution, to me it's a powerful word. And you're not holding back. You're not holding back any punches. I know what you mean. I know philosophy. I know what you mean. And I know it's right. I know it's there and it's still there. But I just want to try, as an average Joe, to reconcile what you just said with what I'm looking at in the picture over your shoulder. I mean, just to understand that, the motivation behind that. You said it already, but I'm just wondering if you can elaborate or elucidate.

JJ: Well, somebody needed some shooting. It just wasn't right, and I don't mind telling you. And that's the reason I did the belt. The bullet belt suit.

Q: Yeah.

JJ: Because the way I felt is somebody needs to get taken out.

Q: (Inaudible) I was curious.

JJ: It would wake you up, if it was on a woman's suit, as opposed to a brother.

Q: You mentioned that. Was there any discussion, in AFRICOBRA ... because there was you, and Barbara, and some other women, and there were some men, and very strong personalities ... did you feel like you were speaking more to women with your clothing, or did you think it was (Inaudible) universal truths in it?

JJ: No. I never. No. I don't. No, it's not that ... that, to me, is speaking to my people. Speaking to young people. Speaking to young men. You know, I ... young women, whatever. But I never have been speaking to a sex. It has been ... I feel strong about what I do, and I feel strong about what I can offer. And I trust that. And I enjoy that. I've enjoyed male friends and female friends, as well. And people who I have admired. But I was speaking ... it was like wake-up time. And that was a wake-up, obviously, because I still get somebody calling up, doing a doctorate, wanting to know about the bullet belt suit. Somebody calling up. I mean, it's just amazing how often ... I mean, I was at my store ... I'm in a totally different field, and a few years back ... in vintage men's wear and collectibles, and antiques and art for gentlemen. And the phone rings and it's somebody about the bullet belt suit, and could they come and interview. You know. So it spoke to a lot of people.

Q: What ...

JJ: And that's what's important. You want to be heard.

Q: Loud and clear. Yeah. So (Inaudible) the early days. (Inaudible) AFRICOBRA.

JJ: I left AFRICOBRA in 1970 ... ooh ... '73 or '4.

Q: Okay. But you still feel ... I get the impression you still feel like (Inaudible)

JJ: Oh, once you're in AFRICOBRA, you're always in AFRICOBRA. It's just ... it's a brotherhood, a sisterhood. It's a bond. And it's, I mean, an inner feeling. What we did is we took principles that we felt, shared them, took on one another's suggestions, and internalized them. And so whether you are actively working with them, you have so committed yourself that these are principles you would have embraced, anyhow. You're positive, and you know there are certain things you need to express. But it was wonderful to do them together, and to see how powerful it was when we all expressed them. But it's like an organization where you're there for life. And so, you know, it's not hard to principally work that way, still.

Q: And still have all that same purpose.

JJ: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. My moving on from AFRICOBRA was a choice I made, once I went back to Howard, to go to school. And really finished my bachelor's. And I did it in textile design, and then started my master's. And fashion is something that is too often seasonal. You know, not seasonal as much as trendy. Particularly if it's not high fashion. But even that is trendy. It can be trendy, you know, because it appeals to the personalities or the desires of people. And you've got to watch that because, you know, the cart starts leading the horse. You know, whatever they want, you do. You know. And ... but you can't ... you can break them up with the bullet belt. But you can't shake a fist, you know, into the next decade, and be fresh. You've got to know what time it is for yourself, and take an ... in my case, I have had evolved to ... let's say, from AFRICOBRA One, doing trendy things ... not trendy things, but attention-getting things, like this piece, and the tweed suit, as well as the urban wall ... the one I call Urban Walls. And then the next year ... okay, there was a principle we had about doing something really arbitrary to light and line. And try to unlearn the Western principles that we learned in formal school settings. And we had ... there's something that is very inspirational in fashion design that was sort of ... I needed to be able to create more. You're inspired by your fabric. You know, your design oftentimes is ... the first thing you do is you get your fabric swatches and whatever. But we're not talking about relying on what's in the stores, because that's already got a ... it's tracked. It's already ... so many will have that, and so it's not fresh from the start. That is the reason I cut up pieces and make my fabric, so that it's not something that exists on a bolt. I chop it up and redesign it, so that I create the fabric itself. Later, start painting on leathers, and suedes, and things of that sort, as canvas. But when I got through AFRICOBRA One, we moved to AFRICOBRA Two, and our effort to do something really revolutionary with like the materials we worked with. I think Wadsworth started putting some wax on canvas, you know, whereas he normally would not have that under his oil paintings, whatever. In my case, in a garment, there were certain rules that we're followed. It always had an opening to get in, and a way to get out. You know. And a way to keep it on you. You know. So you had buttons, zippers, and all this stuff, which was rudimentary. And you sort of said, well, you can't be revolutionary and do the ... you know, follow these rules. And you've got to do something that's really fresh. So I had the opportunity, for AFRICOBRA Two, when Wadsworth and I moved from Chicago to the East, and our stuff was in storage ... so my sewing machine was in storage, and I had to get ready for AFRICOBRA Two. And I took fabrics that were not of the ordinary. I took burlap and painted on it, and made my garments. And in order not to follow the usual rules of plackets and openings that were common, I left ... I would have something, there would be a toggle at the ... that would close it. And then I said, well, okay, how do you these ... why would you do seams? Normal seams. So, with burlap garments, I was braiding the seams together. You know? And just it was a lesson in arbitrary use of anything ordinary. And it was kind of weird, too, because I had a felt dress that there's a slide that you'll be able to see, that I painted. And I was knee-deep in be-angry-about-political-prisoners. So that whole format, this big, long skirt and this cape-like top that went with it was purple, and in shocking pinks and oranges, in the AFRICOBRA palette. It was blasting about freeing political prisoners. And Angela Davis was on it. And the Panthers were on it. And I was happy. I was pregnant with Rosalind, while I was painting that. And I really felt powerful. It felt great. Then I painted on the burlap garment, and that statement was speaking to sisters, to reflect a heritage. And that was an important thing to do. But then, when I got back in school again, and really took history of African cultures, I saw that to be very, very important in my work, from that point on. And I didn't really wish to do a group thing, that it seemed like I had played it out, garment-wise. After AFRICOBRA Three, that was a ... I believe this piece, this coat ... was a result of having studied African cultures and robes and things of that sort. And I began to put appliques and hand-painting, and ... and everything. And, at some point, it just ... it just ... I just didn't want to put statements any longer in my work. I wanted it to speak, but speak of its heritage, and celebrate bringing cultures together. So though, principally, you would think that would be a good entity in AFRICOBRA, the fact that I'm doing garments, it just ... I wanted to go other places.

Q: But where you were going was influenced by your experience in AFRICOBRA.

JJ: Everything. I mean, like I said, you're ... I've been ... you know, you honed me. Okay? I'm good. You know? So I can move on. And that it was a good place to be in, and I just thought it was time to move on.

(Background/Off-Mike)

JJ: After ... after the bullet belt suit was shown, in the Studio Museum in Harlem, at AFRICOBRA One, it was about a month later, I believe, in The New York Times social column ... or social paper or whatever ... right across the ... underneath the headlines of that section were several female matrons, white female matrons. Sort of Junior League-ish looking. But they all had bullet belts on. And what they had done was go ... from what they said, go to ... there was some South American place or just some place over the border, and got some actual bullet belts for ... and they went around the waist. But that ... all of a sudden, it was a little trend. And that's what it was ... the reason why they were showing that is it was somewhat a fashion statement, they ... the paper was saying. And that these young, notable matrons ... and, right away, they looked exactly like the type that I would think were supporters of the museum, and no doubt saw the show ... because I got New York press, you know, and it was mentioned. And so it was not unusual for them to take it out of context and don this. And they were saying a la bandito kind of ... you know, they were naturally playing with somebody else's culture too, you. So I questioned that, and Black World and Jet, I believe, did a story on my questioning. All you need to do is look at the roster of the museum to see whether they're patrons or whether they were there, because that was a crowded opening. It was celebrated by many. And I had done a lot of the press. So it was ... made sure that they were here from ... photographers were here from France, from England ... I mean, they came to that show. And so then the review was done in both of those magazines. And it went off, in left field, in some trivia that didn't even address my concerns. You know, my concerns were that they're making a trend out of something that was really a statement. And a little more important than the way that they've interpreted it. But, unfortunately, a noted black person who was a writer was on the cover of ... I believe it was Black World ... in her bullet belt (laughing) suit. So I said whatever. You know? Some get it and some don't. It's okay, you know. So you can say that we started a trend. By the time they saw the number of bullet belts that were in that show, my impression is that they just simply tried to nullify the power of it by trivializing it and making it a trend.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: Is there anything you feel like you want to say (Inaudible) about that we haven't really touched on? I mean, we could do this for hours. (Inaudible) I could listen to you all day. But (Inaudible) I just want to make sure we didn't miss anything that you think is relevant, in terms of telling the story (Inaudible)

JJ: Telling the story?

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: I just wonder if there's anything, in terms of the art, that you feel like touching on that's important.

JJ: Well, you know, I think, in the beginning was an extremely magical time. And, you know, I think it promoted the ... AFRICOBRA One, Two, and Three that I really embraced. But it has gone on and grown and taken on new people. And, from time to time, even some that have not continued with it. But it ... the thing that's so beautiful is that it seems to draw new people who wish to be active and carry on the tradition. There's not been another group that has really functioned this long. And that has to be something that should be celebrated. It should be celebrated more in this country, because I believe that we made a sound, strong contribution here. And I think they won't go away. And that's kind of interesting. They still come. And it was really wonderful that there are occasions, from time to time, when old members are present, not necessarily for a meeting or anything of that sort, and yet it's really a marvelous experience, because it's like seeing an old relative. And that's beautiful. I think that one of the nicest things that I've enjoyed is to work with Wadsworth, this number of years, with our focus on a lot of these principles, and yet developing new work and going into new directions. This is ... I remember, they used to say, sometimes, when we would come to a meeting and we would have honed some ideas, and come to the meeting and share these things. And they'd say, you've been talking. You know. And, you know, we laughed. Of course, we've been talking. You know? But we really care about ... you know, we cared about what we were developing, and we were excited about it. And we internalized it well. And I think what's really rare is that we've always been able to work under the same roof, you know. And that's something you do with your best friend, you know, and I think that's what's really cool is that we motivate one another, and we will ... we will always embrace those good days that we had with AFRICOBRA. And we still have lifelong friends and brethren. And that's valuable. So I think we've done something, in developing this, that is really, really untouched. I mean, you can look at it today, and the work still speaks to people, and people really respect what we've done. And so I think that it's a valuable contribution, and I'm proud of it.

[JAE AND WADSWORTH TALK US THROUGH WORK DISPLAYED IN THEIR HOME]

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: So let's start maybe with this first poster. What is it? What does it represent? A little bit of the history of it.

JJ: This is our Ten In Search of a Nation, which was the name of our AFRICOBRA One show.

(Background/Off-Mike)

JJ: And a piece of work from each of the artists was put in this poster, as well as a family portrait of all of us. I was ...

Q: Who is in that? Can you point out the people?

JJ: Right.

(Background/Off-Mike)

JJ: Well, Barbara Jones, and Carolyn Lawrence, and I'm Jae Jarrell. Nelson Stevens. And Omar Lama. Gerald Williams. And Sherman Beck. Jeff Donaldson. Napoleon Henderson. And Wadsworth Jarrell. And this was our mascot.

Q: (Inaudible)

JJ: Mask.

(Overlapping Voices)

JJ: ... and somebody put sunglasses on him, we thought it was funny then, and so we went on ...

Q: This was?

WJ: Jeff owned this piece. He had a lot of African sculpture. So he loaned it to us to use. He was there and we used it on the poster.

Q: Cool. Can you talk about painting this second one? This cobra.

WJ: This is called AfriCOBRA Farafindugu which is a Malinka word which means black. And this only stuck with AFRICOBRA for a couple of shows. I don't know when we sort of dropped it. But the members in here is Wadsworth Jarrell, Helen Haynes, Jeff Donaldson, Gerald Williams, Nelson Stevens, Rosa Auld, Michael Harris, Wendy Wilson, Frank Smith, Akili Ron Anderson, Edgar Cowan, Napoleon Henderson, Michael and James Phillips. Michael designed this whole poster. He's a graphic artist.

JJ: And note also that our mask is still in sunglasses. It's a new one, but ...

WJ: Yeah. (Overlap)

JJ: ... see how that ... how that fits in.

Q: How about this next print?

WJ: This is Jeff Donaldson's poster called Victory in the Valley of Eshu. It was printed by Stovall.

JJ: Lou Stovall, in Washington, D.C. It ... actually, he had a painting of this, and he made a print. You can't tell the print from the painting. He made a color separation, and they made a print of this.

Q: How about this next one?

WJ: This is AFRICOBRA One. This is Gerald Williams. And it's called King Alfred. And ...

JJ: (Laughs)

WJ: You know, he's using the coolade colors and things. He had a painting of this, and this ... these was all made from paintings, in the beginning. So he color-separated the painting, on mylar, and they made a poster. They made a silkscreen print from it.

Q: Do you know who that guy was that printed the poster?

JJ: No, he was telling me when he was here, a couple of weeks ago ... there was a guy handing out posters on

the street, this thing all about King Alfred here. And that image is made up, but there was a guy handing out posters, so he made this image of it.

Q: And this is Jae? (Inaudible)

JJ: This painting is a collage that expresses all the businesses that I've had, starting with my debut show, Fashion Safari, where I, you know, used the African influence. Nigerian, mostly. And then Jae of Hyde Park is the shop that I had in Chicago. The next shop was called Tadpole Togs. I made all the garments, and there were children's garments in Tadpole Togs. And this model here in the window is my son, Wadsworth, that Wadsworth Senior took a picture of him, blew it up to life-size, and mounted it and cut it out, and those ... he was our mannequin in the window.

Q: Can you talk to us about the way you did the hair of the lady?

JJ: Yes. These are peach seeds, and I ... that's my 'fro. (Laughs) So I ... and I ...

Q: Is hair an important thing in our art, when you consider your fashion as well?

JJ: Yeah. I think I changed, from time to time. In this particular time, this was how I was coiffed. And that tight, that sort of tight curliness, I liked. And the ideal thing to me, sketching and imagining going to New York City, some time, to take my wares. And these are jackets that I have either silkscreened, hand-painted, block-printed, patchworked. This is a particular favorite of mine, because Wadsworth and I like playing Scrabble, and we both like jazz. So I did a Scrabble pattern of the jazz musicians that we love and embrace, and some of the blues musicians, and silkscreened it on suede.

(Background/Off-Mike)

JJ: This is another shop that we had, a toy and hobby shop. And we used to make children's toys, and these are toys that we made. And there was an article in the paper about that. So. We have done much ... oh, I forgot. There's a bakery that we had, also. I make really good cheesecake, and so (Laughs) I decided to have a bakery called Say Cheese.

Q: And this is Barbara?

WJ: Yeah.

JJ: (Overlap) Yes.

WJ: This is Barbara Jones' Land Where My Father Died. It's a silkscreen. I don't really know how many colors on it, but it's interesting, she's using the paper itself as a color. Blue paper is used as a color, in several places on it. And this is a symbol of the American flag.

(Background/Off-Mike)

JJ: This is Carolyn Lawrence's work here. And Unify Your Family. Is that it?

WJ: Yeah.

JJ: Family?

WJ: Uphold Your Men.

JJ: Well, anyway, she's telling us to unify, I guess, as well. You know.

WJ: Right.

Q: (Inaudible)

WJ: This is made from a tapestry he did, and it's a silkscreen print of a tapestry he did. And it's been reduced considerably, because the tapestry was very large.

JJ: It was ... it was really fun when Napoleon used to make his looms and weave. It was amazing work that he did. You know, he's done a lot of work, you know. But it's interesting to see him do his skill ... you know, his art, and it's great.

Q: This one is a poster from (Inaudible)

WJ: This is a poster from a show that Nelson Stevens had, called Primal For... Force. This is, you know, just a

poster from it.

Q: And how about this piece?

JJ: This is Frank Smith. And he has ... he always using sewing together of his canvas. So ... so much patchwork in there. And then paints it. And it gives another level to it, I think. Yeah.

Q: It's very abstract.

JJ: Yeah. And he's ... I love this free piece. It is ... you know, that it's just ... it's wonderful to go through floor to ceiling, too, that we had the space for this.

Q: Some members of AFRICOBRA we've been talking to refer about spiritualism. Do you agree with that ingredient in some of your pieces?

JJ: Yeah. (Overlap) Yeah. For sure. That's an honest remark that many AFRICOBRA people embrace.

WJ: And we exchange work, also. This is how I got this piece. I exchanged a painting for this piece. And this is Sherman Beck. He was only in AFRICOBRA One. This is not titled. And this is the piece he had in the first AFRICOBRA show. And he was ... after the show, he no longer came back to meetings. He sort of dropped out.

JJ: But it was wonderful to reunite with him, you know, when we go to Chicago. Because he's really a fine brother. You know. He's good people. And ... and a terrific artist. He's doing a lot of work.

Q: (Inaudible)

JJ: Michael Harris. And I'm ... you know, I'm not totally familiar with this ...

(Overlapping Voices)

WJ: That's a lithograph he made at ... I found out, mistaken ... at Brandywine workshop in Philadelphia. And he's got ... a lot of the things he does relates to his family. I think this is a portrait of his mother when she was young. And he does a lot of things about family. And he's got ... he's studied Yoruba culture, so he's got a lot of Yoruba words in here that you might know the meaning, but he knows the meaning of them. And ...

Q: (Inaudible)

JJ: James Stiller. And we value ... I mean, we really treasure this piece. It was really quite (Overlap)

WJ: We also exchange pieces. I gave him a piece for his wedding, and he felt obligated, I guess, to give me this piece.

Q: Beautiful palette.

WJ: Yeah.

JJ: Yeah.

WJ: Yeah. He was one of ... I mentioned before, he had a big impact on AFRICOBRA.

Q: And this last?

WJ: That's Omar Lama, who was ...

JJ: In AFRICOBRA One.

Q: He was in AFRICOBRA One, also. And he was making prints before he got in AFRICOBRA. You know, reproduction of his work. So this possibly could be the original. I don't know. Maybe this is a reproduction of it.

(Background/Off-Mike)

(END OF TAPE)