

JAE JARRELL

I WILL ALWAYS CREATE
INTERVIEW BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Jae Jarrell was born in Cleveland in 1935. She grew up in the historic Glenville neighborhood, the same area of the city that she returned to in 2009 with her husband Wadsworth, after having lived in Chicago, Washington D.C., and New York. They settled into two sprawling apartments facing Rockefeller Park: studio spaces above and residence below. Every wall and surface bursts with art, life, family, and soul.

Jae has always been a maker and an entrepreneur. Her passion has carried through many pursuits, from art to fashion design, vintage dealing, and furniture restoration. In 1968, she was one of the founding members of AFRICOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), along with Wadsworth, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams. The collective formed in response to a lack of positive representation of African American people in media and the arts, and their goal was to develop a uniquely Black aesthetic that conveyed the pride and power of their communities.

How to Remain Human features three of Jae's garments from the early days of AFRICOBRA: *Urban Wall Suit* (1969) drew inspiration from the graffiti and concert posters that filled the streets of Chicago, where brick walls became message boards for the community; *Ebony Family* (1968) embodies Jae's deeply held belief that strong Black families are a source of power; and *Revolutionary Suit* (1968) takes the shape of a Jae's signature late 60's 2-piece suit: collarless jacket, three-quarter length bell sleeves, and an A-framed skirt--with the

addition of a colorful bandolier. Jae also made three new pieces for the exhibition, revisiting designs and ideas that still inspire her. *Maasai Collar Vest* (2015) recalls the ornate clothing and jewelry of the Maasai people, who live in parts of Kenya and northern Tanzania. *Shields and Candelabra Vest* (2015) uses the organic form of cactus plants, flipped on their sides, as frames for colorful African shields. *Jazz Scramble Jacket* (2015) brings together two of Jae's loves: jazz and blues music (a constant backdrop at home and studio) and the crossword board game Scrabble. The intersecting names of influential musicians speak to the importance of community in developing a scene, style, and history.

I sat down with Jae in May 2015 to talk about her extraordinary life and creative vision.



RB

Were there any influential figures for you growing up in Cleveland that set you on your path as an artist?

JJ

I am the granddaughter of a tailor, and though I never met him--he had passed by the time I was born--my mother always shared with me the wonderful workmanship that he taught all of his children. So I've always been mindful of fabrics, recognizing different fibers, weaves, classic dress. Mother would take me to

vintage shops, and when Mother wanted your attention, she whispered. She would bring a collar of a garment forward and say, "Just, look at that! Just, look at that workmanship! When you see these saddle stitches, you know that that is a special tactic, so watch for these things!" And so I always thought of making clothes in order to have something unique, and later I learned to sew very well and made it my business to always make my garments. And I also have a love for vintage, knowing that it has secrets of the past that I can unfold.

RB

When and how did "Jae" become the name you go by?

JJ

When I left the Art Institute of Chicago, I started a business in my apartment, designing for a number of models that worked for shows and needed to provide their own garments. So I built the idea that I wanted to have a shop. At one point I got a job at Motorola-- I was hired to help integrate the company. They wanted me to be the face of Motorola. I was hired as a receptionist, and I bounced between three reception rooms in three buildings on the same property in Chicago. There was one woman whose place I took when she went to lunch and on breaks. She was an older woman and was a bit concerned about losing her job. I wanted to befriend her and so I started chatting with her about clothes. I liked the way she dressed and she liked the way I did, and there was something about our spirits that was good. And she was somebody that I imparted my secret to, that I really wasn't going to be at Motorola for long. I wanted to be a designer and I wanted my own place. We decided to try to name this place. She loved having my secret so we played around each time I came and she toyed with it. I wasn't going to be Elaine, my first name, and I wasn't going to be Annette, my middle name, and I certainly wasn't going to be Johnson, my maiden name. At one point she came up with throwing the initials backwards, J-A-E, and that's when I chose "Jae." I always loved Hyde Park, and I envisioned having a store there. I found a one-room

shop with one display window right at the corner of a very lovely building at 52nd and Blackstone. And I named it "Jae of Hyde Park."

RB

You've always done things in your own way, on your own terms. As a Black fashion designer, did you feel that you had to forge your own path because it would be more difficult to get your clothing into other people's stores?

JJ

I was always full of dreams. In my upbringing, it was always "yes you can!" The sky is the limit. I remember being very taken with my family's business. My Uncle Jimmy was a haberdasher and had this wonderful men's shop that I worked in. I often thought, "I'd like to have my own business." That was a mission that I thought I could pursue. High school was wonderful, it was interracial, about 30% Black students. And we just did everything together; we had parties and there were interracial relationships. So I didn't see any reason to have pause.

Then, somehow or another, you would hear trends in the news that might give you an indication that things could be other than wonderful. I just thought, you know, treat this with caution...but I didn't think it would affect me because there was so much "plus" in my life. I left Cleveland to go to college at Bowling Green State University, where they were forming a Black student union. And I thought, "Well, that's nice." There were only a handful of Blacks, maybe ten or fourteen on campus. At the same time my sister was dating a young attorney from Albany, Georgia who was going to school at Case Western Reserve University. He was completing his law degree and intended to go back to help his people. And I thought: "help them to what?" But at that time, a very active kind of revolutionary movement was forming in Albany to free their people, give them guidance, give them opportunities. By the same token, I was struck by the fact that colonized African nations were beginning to be decolonized. And of course, fashion sort of takes a note of

activities occurring in the news, things that would affect expression. So these concerns that I didn't have before were entering my life.

One of the things that struck me was how successful Uncle Jimmy was in his haberdashery. Turns out Uncle Jimmy looks like a white man. For all practical purposes, as far as his clients knew, he was a white man. So I'm seeing that my dear Uncle Jimmy, who had such a knack in business, also had certain opportunities based on an assumption that he was white. Later he formed a business relationship with several other merchants, realtors, a whole spectrum of Black business owners in the Cleveland community. They started a Negro Business League. And I thought, "Really?" Then it occurred to me that these were precautions, to protect and support one another. It was only then that I thought, "How do you protect yourself?" Because I'm always going to be going off to the big lights somewhere. I realized that you'd better have your head on straight, because you may need to cut your own way. And one way that I thought was very manageable was to have a business. You call your shots in business. You set the tone. And I'll tell you, frankly, I've done a number of businesses, and for the most part, I've had particularly white clientele. It was just interesting, those who were drawn to what I offered. I never really thought of activism until I was in AFRICOBRA.

RB

Can you talk about the process of making a garment? How does it start--as an idea, a mood? Is it inspired by a texture or color?

JJ

We were taught to design with an inspiration from the fabric, but I tend to think of the end product before I really address the fabric. If you want individuality, you have to use your own voice from beginning to end. So, I birth fabric sometimes. Fresh avenues of making garments that might not have been used before. In AFRICOBRA I chose to use felt and leather pelts. I ended up painting on leathers to express what I was do-

ing. I included figures, because AFRICOBRA was interested in speaking to the people, and you feel you're spoken to if you see your image. But I'm diverse in how I work, sometimes I design right on the tabletop as I'm working, and this gives me a degree of variety.

RB

Can you tell me the story of *Urban Wall Suit*? What was the inspiration?

JJ

I made *Urban Wall Suit* in 1969. One of the tenets of AFRICOBRA was to reinvent yourself, reinvent how you were, reinvent your whole manner so that you had a fresh voice. I was inventing my fabric. I had made a line of silk shirts at my Jae of Hyde Park shop, so I decided to use the scraps. I put them together in large and small patches of rectangular shapes and squares. I started to pay attention to the walls in our Chicago area, all of the markings on them. AFRICOBRA had made us missionaries to the community; we were doing art for the community. And I saw the walls as community message boards. I was struck by folks who tagged questions or propositions on the wall that someone else might answer. I thought, "Wow, this is hip." As I was putting together this fabric I thought, "Let me see if I can make bricks in it." I used velvet ribbon for my mortar, and began to paint and write graffiti as well as incorporating the posters with announcements that you would find. That's how I got to *Urban Wall Suit*. It was a voice of the community and a voice to the community.

RB

Can you tell me a little bit about the life of that piece? Did you often wear it, or was it made primarily for display or exhibitions?

JJ

Originally it was for exhibition, but on occasions of import, I wore it. I do remember once wearing it in D.C., coming back from a grocery store with one of my children in a sling and one in a stroller and one walking, helping to push the stroller. But D.C. was like that to us.

It was our people, and everything was on time. And so, it wouldn't be unusual to have popped it on.

RB

What are some of your thoughts on the renewed interest in AFRICOBRA? How do you envision its enduring legacy and relevance to the contemporary moment?

JJ

My mother was always telling me that I was "bred." If you brought somebody home, she would ask, "Who are their people?" And she would remind me that the training that we received was with real intent, and was something to serve you always. When I was totally on my own living in New York City, I pulled out every guidance measure that she taught to manage myself as a young adult, socializing, experimenting, and whatever else. I kept these rules in mind, and it's a reference that we used to carve out AFRICOBRA. It was done in a very family-like way. The love we had for one another, the respect we built for one another, the trust we had. When would you put together as many as ten artists that bring their art partially done and ask each other for input? Outside of a classroom, you don't expect that to happen. This was true trust and true interest and love of developing a voice, signature voices. You know them when you see them. There's a value in that you never divorce family, and it's always a part of you if you really buy into it. So it's very comfortable to exercise some of those principles in anything you do, in living as well as creating.

RB

Your pursuits have most often related to functional things, beautiful answers to what people need or how they want to present themselves or imagine their place in the world. Could you talk a little bit about humanness and how it's guided your practice?

JJ

I just love being around people. And it's probably why I chose to be a merchant, because it's hands-on. I don't know what I'll do with the internet, be-

cause I like eye contact and handshakes and shared stories. I always think of functional things, but add pizzazz to them. That's where art comes in. But I am forever driven to make something that others might enjoy and that they might know me better by. I then grow from the joy they have.

RB

How do you want people to feel when they're wearing one of your garments?

JJ

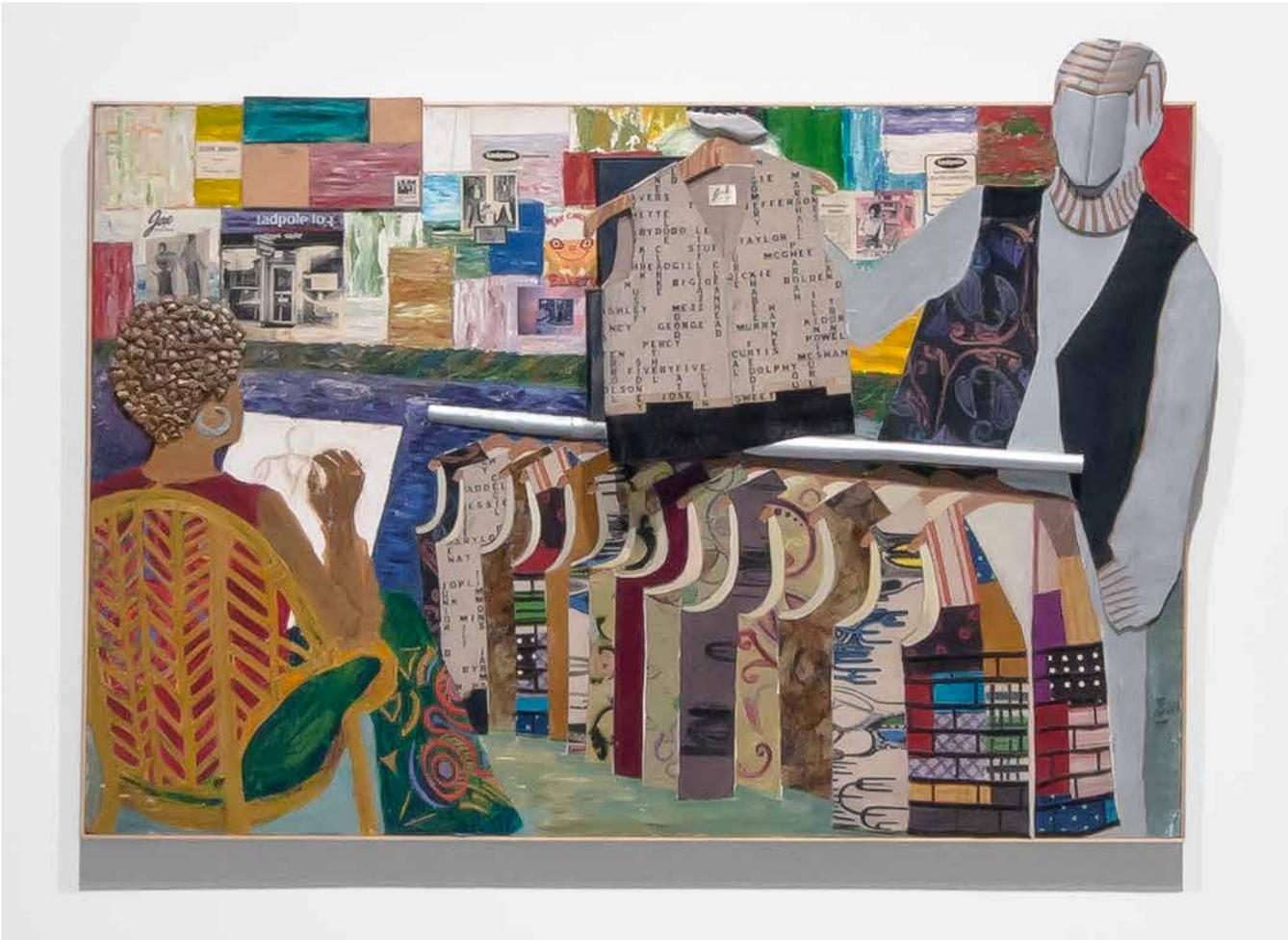
I think there's a term that I use when I'm interacting with clients. And it's an advice thing, but I always used the word "attitude." Clothes allow you to have attitude. You can really define your place in a crowd with the proper sense of self and projecting your personality. You're seen across the room. It's a feel-good kind of tactic. That's what I think I enjoy most about dressing people--I've seen glow as a result of knowing you have the right colors on, something that complements your physique. Something you like, and that you can see in other people's eyes that they like it too.

RB

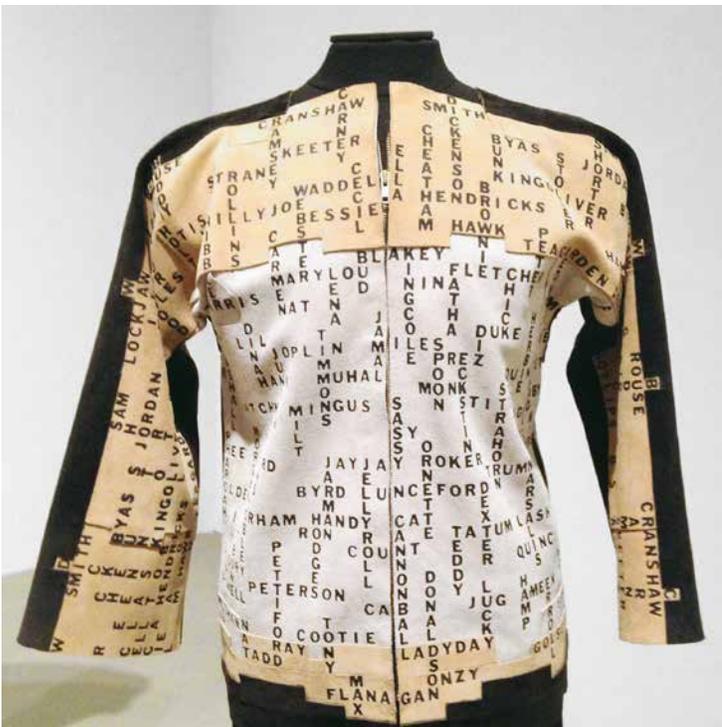
What are you excited about now in your practice? What's next, what's your vision pointing to?

JJ

I will always create; it's how I go about things. It's part of my tool kit. And I say "tool kit" without joking, 'cause I might bring a saw out in a minute! I love creating things. Presentation means a lot to me. I'm hoping to expand my interests in wood making. Some of my art is more structural. What's in the works is structure that I build alongside symbols that I borrow. I'm making some panels, now, that will express my interest in sculpture as well as painting, using the leather again, still interrelating materials. I think the sky is the limit on what I want to do or can do. It will always be a part of me and you will always know that it's my voice, but it's just moved in another place.



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1. Jae Jarrell
Going to NYC, 1994
 Mixed media on canvas
 53 x 74 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

2. Jae Jarrell
Jazz Scramble Jacket, 2015
 Silkscreened cowhide splits
 25 x 21 1/2 inches
 Courtesy of the artist



Jae Jarrell
Maasai Collar Vest, 2015
Leather and suede with cowhide splits
19 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist

JAE JARRELL

JAE JARRELL AND THE FASHIONING OF
BLACK CULTURE
BY DAVID LUSENHOP

Artist and fashion designer Jae Jarrell made headlines in January 1971 when her *Revolutionary Suit* (1968), a salt-n-pepper tweed jacket and skirt ensemble with incorporated faux bandolier, inspired *Jet* magazine editors to run a cover article entitled “Black Revolt Sparks White Fashion Craze.”¹ The influential journal castigated the mainstream fashion world for “borrowing” the bandolier from the Black revolution, and for turning a symbol of righteous political resistance into a neutralized fashion accessory.² As evidence of this blatant cultural appropriation, the magazine juxtaposed Jae’s *Revolutionary Suit* with an illustration of New York socialite and art collector Ethel Scull, who posed in front of a Jasper Johns “flag” painting wearing a black turtleneck, lace-up boots, and a bullet-belt slung around her hips. Jae went on record in the article decrying this white consumerism. Her fashions had intensely political ends: “We were saying something when we used the belts. We’re involved in a real revolution.”³

As exemplified by this garment, Jae consistently seeks to merge the principles of fashion design with the liberatory politics and culturally-specific expressions of the 1960s and 70s Black Arts Movement, generally considered an extension of the Black Power movement.

In 1958, ten years before Jae’s groundbreaking work began appearing in art journals and museum exhibitions, she transferred from Bowling Green State University in Ohio to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) where she enrolled in the fashion design program. The SAIC was not her first exposure to clothing design; her grandfather was a tailor and her family in Cleveland all sewed. It was during her formative years in Chicago, however, that she began to understand fashion design as a potent cultural force, and

clothing as symbolic, public gesture. “Adorn to reflect” became Jae’s mantra from this period forward. Today, a renewed interest in the political and performative nature of art, and in the culturally metamorphic period of the 1960s and 70s, has brought new attention to Jae’s pioneering contributions. “[S]he anticipated the confluence of fashion and fine art this is so prevalent today,” writes Kellie Jones.⁴

At the SAIC, Jae was one of few African-American students. She recognized that her potential could be hindered by the mainstream fashion industry’s racist and exclusionary practices of the time. As she recalls: “one of the reasons I went into business with my own shop was because I was going to circumvent getting turned down by some design house.”⁵ Jae left the SAIC and honed her skills independently, though she later completed a BFA at Howard University, took graduate courses in textile design there, along with an advanced, professional course at Parsons School of Design in New York. She settled in the Hyde Park neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, an area she says “had an element of art and class and tolerance.”⁶ She opened a boutique called Jae of Hyde Park in 1964, where she offered one-of-a-kind coats and suits, and custom tailoring.

In 1965, several tragic events had a profound impact on the art and activism of Jae and her circle in Chicago. Malcolm X was murdered, Dr. Martin Luther King and peaceful protestors were met with violence in Alabama, and the Watts Rebellion erupted near downtown Los Angeles. Spurred by these troubling events, and others before them, African-American activists founded various social and political “Movements” in the months and years that followed. For many, the slow pace of social and political change during the preceding ten years of the Civil Rights movement signaled a need for more aggressive measures to ad-

dress racism, economic inequality, and white cultural hegemony.

In response to this political and social turmoil, in 1968 Jae co-founded the now renowned visual arts group AFRICOBRA, along with her husband Wadsworth Jarrell, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams.⁷ An acronym for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, the group's name boldly proclaims their intention to pivot away from critiques of white oppression, and instead use their work to address the Black community head-on. Barbara Jones-Hogu explained: "[O]ur visual statements were to be Black, positive, and direct."⁸ AFRICOBRA also rejected the idea of using mainstream art modes of the day like Minimalism and conceptual art, and disavowed much of the modern Western art history they had learned in art school. Instead, they began conceptualizing what a "Black aesthetic" might look and feel like.

During formal AFRICOBRA meetings, often held at the Jarrell's home and studio on East 61st Street in Chicago, the members began exploring ways to concretize a "Black aesthetic," a self-defined set of image making practices and philosophical protocols that drew from lived experiences, African prototypes, and African-American vernacular culture, especially the sights and sounds of their own South Side community. The principles of AFRICOBRA's "Black aesthetic" were outlined by Jeff Donaldson, as spokesman for the group, in a lengthy, manifesto-like essay entitled "10 in Search of a Nation," first published in *Black World* magazine in October 1970. Each AFRICOBRA artist was intended to incorporate the concept of "Expressive Awesomeness," to include "Free Symmetry," to make "organic" art, to convey "Shine," to include lettering, and to adopt a palette of "Cool-ade" colors, among other prescribed image-making modes the group defined in detail.⁹ By adhering to this set of aesthetic principles, each member's artwork was conceived of as part of a larger collaborative project.

Guided by the tenets of AFRICOBRA, Jae produced several fashion garments in the period leading up to the group's national debut at the Studio Museum in Harlem in the summer of 1970. *Ebony Family* (1968) and *Urban Wall Suit* (1969) were among the

seminal designs by Jae featured in the New York exhibition. In the guise of apparel, these artworks invite a subjective reading of the forms, colors, and lines as part of the overall aesthetic experience, yet they are forcefully political and demonstrative. As Jones-Hogu reflects, "it was not fantasy or art for art's sake, it was specific and functional."¹⁰

What could be more "specific and functional" than garments designed specifically for a revolution? As Jae recently explained, "The rectangular format of my *Ebony Family* dress is a dashiki imitating a poster."¹¹ By taking the form of a traditional West African men's garment that became de rigueur in African-American communities during the 1960s and 1970s, Jae connects her design practice to African, rather than European, fashion traditions. Employing lettering (in the form of scattered Es and Fs) subscribes to AFRICOBRA's practice of reinforcing images through language, but referencing in an oblique way that is comprehensible without being literal like many of the political and protest posters of the period.

The reductive nature of Jae's figural design in *Ebony Family* underscores AFRICOBRA's interest in forging links between African prototypes and African-American art traditions. This is especially reflected in the faces of her rendered Black family. Their forms recall the stylized geometry of Lwalwa and Dan masks made by artists in regions of Angola and Congo in West Africa. The geometric veltreen shapes and thick, rectangular lines of complimentary colors imbue this work with a rhythmic visual buoyancy. These are AFRICOBRA's famous "Cool-ade" colors: "bright, vivid, singing cool-ade colors of orange, strawberry, cherry, lemon, lime and grape. Pure vivid colors of the sun and nature. Colors that shine on Black people, colors which stand out against the greenery of rural areas."¹²

While *Ebony Family* is infused with an inherited spirit of Africa, the work also speaks directly to that cultural moment in America when Jae and others in the Black Arts Movement celebrated the unique artistic contributions of the African-American artistic avant-garde. By embodying the AFRICOBRA principle of Free Symmetry, defined as "the use of syncopated rhyth-

mic repetition which constantly changes in color, texture, shapes, form, pattern, movement, feature, etc.," *Ebony Family* conjures the dazzling 1960s paper collages of Romare Bearden, himself an artist-turned-activist in the Civil Rights era.¹³ Jae's colorful, staccato composition also echoes the free-form, improvisational music of African-American Jazz masters like Eric Dolphy, Roscoe Mitchell, and John Coltrane, whose music filled the studios of the AFRICOBRA artists.

Few artworks of the 1960s and 70s joyfully "represent" as well as *Urban Wall Suit* (1969), a natty two-piece woman's suit. The garment declares its origins loudly and proudly. Constructed of printed and dyed silk with applied velvet lines suggesting a brick wall, and covered in painted graffiti and imitations of tattered broadsides, *Urban Wall Suit* crystallizes the vibrant culture of the South Side Chicago community that Jae lived in and loved. The faux tattered posters, rendered in acrylic paint, reference contemporary politics (Vote Democrat), and advertise local gigs by Blues and Jazz greats (Muddy Waters, Duke Ellington). Graffiti on the bodice honors Chicago colloquialisms of the day like "E Thang," "Miss Attitude," and "Black Prince." Jae reflected on *Urban Wall Suit* recently: "It was important, because the language was who I was speaking to, and I was saying, I understand your newsletter on the wall. And I join you. Why not [graffiti] on a perfectly good silk suit made to look like a wall."¹⁴

By creating her art in the form of a wearable garment, Jae extended the work outside of the museum environment, where it is perceived as a precious art object. Curator Kellie Jones explains: "The traditional canvas is understood here through its constituent parts, pigment and cloth, and its confluence with other uses, as quilt, as clothing."¹⁵ No mere aesthetic object, *Urban Wall Suit* asserts its specific function through visual references to the street. This wearable urban billboard becomes at once personal shelter, public political act, and cultural observance. Jae recalled wearing the *Urban Wall Suit* during a visit with friends in Boston: "When our visit was over, I could hear in their voices, and see in their eyes, respect--Real respect...and pride."¹⁶

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1. "Jae" is the name under which Jarrell has produced art since the early 1960s. It is an acronym for Johnson Annette Elaine, the reverse order of her birth name.
2. I have capitalized the B in Black out of respect for the long tradition of doing so when referring to people of the African Diaspora. This form of the word was commonly used by African-American media outlets, beginning in the 1960s.
3. Jae Jarrell quoted in "Black Revolt Sparks White Fashion Craze," *Jet*, vol. 39, no. 18, January 28, 1971: 42-45.
4. Kellie Jones, "Civil/Rights/Act," *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones, eds. (New York: Brooklyn Museum and Monacelli Press, 2014), 46.
5. Unpublished TV Land/Hudson Street Productions interview transcript, 2010, Additional recorded and transcribed materials are held as "Interviews with AfriCOBRA Founders" by the Archives of American Art. For more information see www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews-africobra-founders-15925
6. Ibid.
7. The group was originally named COBRA, an acronym for Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists, but changed to AFRICOBRA in late 1969. Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell prefer that the name of the group be spelled with all capital letters, as it was on the poster produced for the first AFRICOBRA exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1970. Other group members and scholars have used AfriCOBRA, AFRI-COBRA, and Afri-COBRA in printed material that references the group.
8. Barbara Jones-Hogu, "The History, Philosophy and Aesthetics of AfriCOBRA," *AfriCOBRA III* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1973), unpaginated.
9. Jeff Donaldson, "10 in Search of a Nation," *Black World*, vol. 19, no. 12, October 1970: 80-89.
10. Jones-Hogu, unpaginated.
11. Jae Jarrell, artist's page, *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, 117.
12. Jones-Hogu, unpaginated.
13. Ibid.
14. TV Land/Hudson Street Productions interview transcript, 9.
15. Jones, 46.
16. Jarrell, 117.

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1. Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell, outside of Jae Jarrell Vintage Menswear & Collectibles, 466 Greenwich St., New York City, 2005

2. Jae Jarrell in *Urban Wall Suit*, posed with Wadsworth Jr. (3 yrs), and Jennifer (3 mos) Revere Beach, Massachusetts, 1971



Jae Jarrell

Ebony Family, c. 1968

Velvet dress with velvet collage

38 1/2 x 38 x 10 inches

Collection of the Brooklyn Museum Gift of R.M. Atwater, Anna Wolfrom Dove, Alice Fiebiger, Joseph Fiebiger, Belle Campbell Harriss, and Emma L. Hyde, by exchange. Designated Purchase Fund, Mary Smith Dorward Fund, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, and Carll H. de Silver Fund, 2012.80.16



Jae Jarrell

Urban Wall Suit, c. 1969

Sewn and painted cotton and silk, two-piece suit

37 1/2 x 27 1/2 x 10 inches

Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, Gift of R.M. Atwater, Anna Wolfrom Dove, Alice Fiebiger, Joseph Fiebiger, Belle Campbell Harriss, and Emma L. Hyde, by exchange. Designated Purchase Fund, Mary Smith Dorward Fund, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, and Carll H. de Silver Fund, 2012.80.16.