

Fay Jones: Painted Fictions

Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University

November 18, 2006 – January 20, 2007

Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *Fay Jones: Painted Fictions* and offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of Fay Jones.
- To explore the artist's characteristic style and her use of personal imagery and symbols.
- To explore the role of the viewer in understanding and interpreting a work of art.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of the artist's style
- Identify recurring imagery and symbols in the artist's work
- Discuss the relationship between the figurative (figures and objects) and the narrative (storytelling) elements in the individual works.
- Discuss their own interpretations of the artist's work and how they are influenced by their individual experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

John Olbrantz

The Maribeth Collins Director, Hallie Ford Museum of Art

Fay Jones is a highly regarded Seattle narrative and symbolist painter who deals with a variety of autobiographical issues in her work, from growing up in New England in the 1940s and early 50s to a host of other issues that she's been grappling with for most of her professional life.

Fay Jones: Painted Fictions includes work from the past 15 years from Portland and Seattle collections, including Microsoft Corporation in Redmond, the Tacoma Art Museum, Harsch Investment Properties in Portland, and the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, among others. Although Jones has shown in Portland since the late 1980s, the exhibition represents the first time that a broad survey of her work has been seen in Oregon.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1936, Fay Jones was educated at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she received her BFA in 1957. In 1960 she moved to Seattle with her husband, painter Robert Jones, who accepted a position on the art faculty at the University of Washington. Although she continued to paint in the 1960s and 1970s, her artistic career took off in the early 1980s as curators and collectors began to take a keen interest in figurative narration.

As a painter, Jones prefers to work with acrylic on paper and often overlays her work with collage elements. Although her works often appear simplified and almost childlike to the casual viewer, they are actually complex, geometrically organized compositions with highly sophisticated internal patterns of lines, angles, and planes. Indeed, her work betrays a love of pattern and an insistent flatness, punctuated with shots of brilliant color.

Over the years, Jones has developed an iconography of stereotypical characters and personal symbols culled from her imagination: fly-by-night sailors, monkeys, enigmatic Asian laborers, erupting volcanoes, lustful women, donkeys, women with wide skirts, and businessmen with fedoras. The product of a veritable jumble of remembered gestures, silhouettes, and incidents, her figures do not have a specific identity but appear frozen in action, absorbed in their own significance and the masquerade of the moment.

The style of her character's dress and accompanying accoutrements, moreover, is drawn from Jones' childhood and shows her lively relish for small town memories and love of 1940s and 50's fashion (she initially wanted to be a textile designer). The tension between her figures, however, has less to do with the past than it does with the flow and direction of contemporary relationships between men and women. A feminist, Jones clearly paints from a woman's perspective.

The art of Fay Jones depicts an American past that is both dream-like and familiar, an attempt to capture a half-remembered memory and give it contemporary relevancy and specificity. With her strong compositional arrangements, rich surfaces, brilliant colors, and provocative imagery, Fay Jones' work has emerged over the past 25 years as among the strongest in the region.

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Use the image *Out of Harm's Way* and suggested discussion and activities, to introduce students to the work of Fay Jones.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette



Out of Harm's Way

2003

Acrylic and sumi ink on paper

52 x 57 "

Collection of Jim & Judy Wagonfeld

Looking at the Work of Fay Jones

Fay Jones' paintings have been described as, "mysterious," "enigmatic," and "puzzle pictures." Her works are figurative, yet her use of flattened forms and surface patterns makes them more abstract than accurate representations of nature. There is a narrative quality to her scenes, yet she creates ambiguous relationships between figures and objects that defy any obvious storyline, indeed, they are often illogical. The artist delights in juxtaposing seemingly unconnected figures and objects in mysterious settings to create suggestive, but unknowable, associations. As John Olbrantz notes in the introduction, "many of the images she uses come from her own iconography of stereotypical characters and personal symbols culled from her imagination." Their meaning, however, is rather fluid: sometimes a single recurring image can take on different roles in different works, and sometimes, as art critic Sheila Farr says about Jones' imagery, "a dog is just a dog." Still other images remain mysterious, their meaning known only to the artist. Ultimately, their meaning, and our understanding of the individual pieces, is open for interpretation. The works invite us as viewers to set our imagination free. We are encouraged to bring our own experiences and imagination to find meaning in the artist's painted fictions.

Suggested Discussion

What do you see in *Out of Harm's Way*?

- Describe what you see in the painting. Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principals of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?

What do you think is happening in *Out of Harm's Way*?

- Does this scene appear realistic? Dreamlike? Both? Explain.
- Is there one figure (or figures) that is the focus of the work? What makes it stand out? Size? Color? Facial expression (or lack of facial expression)? Gesture?
- What is the mood of the work? How has the artist created it? (color, gestures, facial expressions, etc.)
- Who are the man and the woman embracing inside the transparent architectural structure? What clues has the artist given us?
- Who are the man and the woman in the upper corners? What is their relationship to each other? Do they appear to have a relationship with the embracing couple in the center? Do the two couples share the same physical space? Emotional space? Do they appear to be part of the same “story?”
- Why do you think the artist chose to use the images of the donkey and the monkey in *Out of Harm's Way*? Do they relate to the other figures in the painting? What meaning, if any, does their presence add to the work? Explain. The donkey and the monkey are images that Fay Jones uses frequently in her work. While the meaning of the monkey, like many of the personal symbols that recur in her paintings, remains elusive to viewers, the art critic Sheila Farr has noted that the artist often associates the donkey with domesticity and domestic work. What, if anything does this add to your own interpretation of the work? Did your initial interpretation change at all with this information? Is it important to know the artist's meaning or intent in painting a picture, or do you think it should be left up to the viewer? Explain
- What do you think is the meaning of the title, *Out of Harm's Way*?

Suggested Activities

- Jones's painted fictions have been described as "stage sets," with her figures using gestures like "actors or mimes." With *Out of Harm's Way* as inspiration for a scene in a play, create a setting description and a short dialogue between two or more of the figures.
- Create a cinquain (pronounced sincane: a five-line stanza) inspired by *Out of Harm's Way* (this can be also used as a gallery activity at the Museum).

Structure your cinquain as follows:

Line 1: A noun (you may want to use the actual title of the artwork).

Line 2: Two adjectives which describe your noun.

Line 3: Three verbs which describe the noun.

Line 4: A short phrase about the noun.

Line 5: Repeat noun in Line 1.

AT THE MUSEUM

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider the same discussion strategies they used with *Out of Harm's Way*:
 - Describe what you see here.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principals of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Where does your eye go first? Why?
 - How does your eye move around the painting – is it led by color? By shape? By pattern? By size?
 - Describe the color – has the artist used it realistically or more expressively (for example: a red face for anger or passion, a green face for envy). Does it create a certain mood?
 - Are the forms and figures flat or modeled? Do they appear realistic? How does the artist's use of line, shape and color contribute to this effect?
 - Where do the forms and figures exist in space (foreground, background, on different planes, etc.)?

- What do you think is happening in the work?
 - Is the work realistic or dreamlike? Or both? Explain.
 - Is there one figure (or figures) that is the focus of the work? What makes it stand out? Size? Color? Facial expression (or lack of facial expression)? Gesture?
 - What is the mood of the work? How has the artist created it?
 - Does there appear to be a relationship between the figures in the work? Explain.
 - Do they seem to be interacting? Sharing the same space?
 - Why do you think she put these figures together? Do they seem to inhabit the same “story?”
 - What objects has she included?
 - What do you think they may mean to the artist? Have you seen them in other works in the exhibition? Does the way she has used them in other works contribute to your understanding of the objects?
 - Does the setting or other figures and objects give you a clue as to their meaning?
 - What do *you* think the objects could mean? What are your own associations with the object or figure? Are they personal? Cultural or historical? Do your own associations influence your interpretation of the object(s)? Of the meaning of the work as a whole? Explain.
 - Does the title influence your interpretation of the work? Explain

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Books

Farr, Sheila, *Fay Jones*. Grover/Thurston Gallery and Laura Russo Gallery in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2000.

Hackett, Regina and Sondra Shulman, *Fay Jones: A 20 Year Retrospective*. Boise Art Museum, distributed by the University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1996.

Websites

www.microsoft.com/mscorp/artcollection/exhibitions/fjones

Works by Fay Jones in Microsoft's art collection. Includes essays and artist statements.

www.artdish.com/blog/2005_11_01_archive.asp

Includes a critique of *Bird House Blues*, which is featured in the exhibition.

COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS

The suggested discussions and activities included in this packet can be used to support the following Common Curriculum Goals developed by the Oregon Department of Education. For specific benchmarks for your grade level check with your school district or the Oregon Public Education Network (O.P.E.N.)

www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=53

The Arts

Aesthetics and Criticism

- Use knowledge of technical, organizational and aesthetic elements to describe and analyze one's own art and the art of others.
- Respond to works of art, giving reasons for preferences.

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

- Identify both common and unique characteristics found in work of art from various time periods and cultures.
- Explain how a work of art reflects the artist's personal experience in a society or culture.

Language Arts

Writing

- Use a variety of written forms (e.g. journals, essays, short stories, poems, research papers) to express ideas and multiple media to create projects, presentations and publications.

Speaking and Listening

- Communicate knowledge of the topic, including relevant examples, facts, anecdotes and details.
- Demonstrate effective listening strategies.

