

# 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

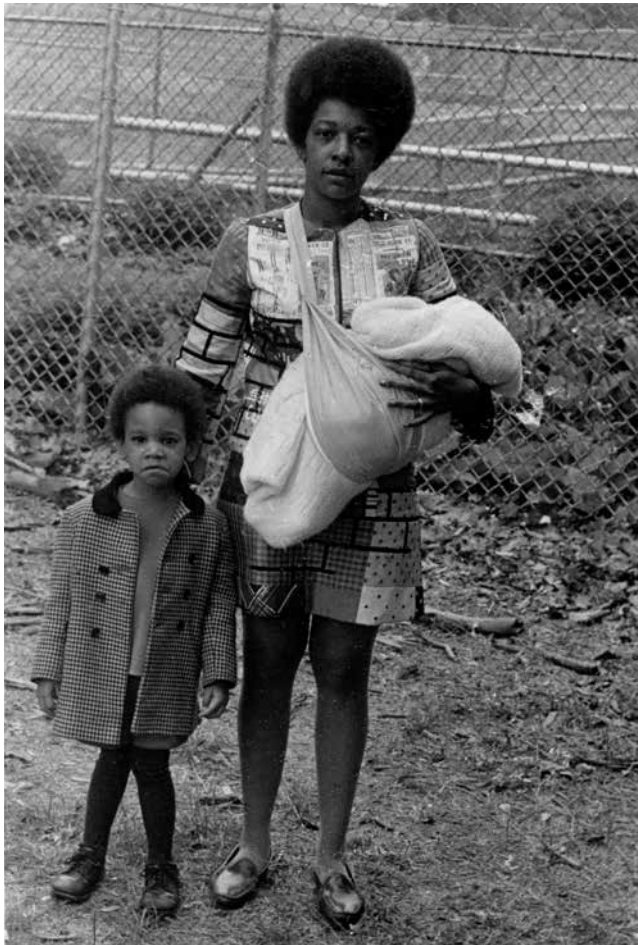


Jae Jarrell  
*Maasai Collar Vest, 2015*  
Leather and suede with cowhide splits  
19 x 22 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

1.



2.



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.