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English III

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### The Codependence of Art and Subjectivity

In “Art Is a Different Kind of Cosmic Order,” Brian Greene, a theoretical Physicist at Columbia University, asserts that art reflects the truths and patterns of subjective experience. In other words, art is not able to be understood and fully comprehensible by the mechanics of math and science. He begins the article with an anecdote, a reflection on his early love and devotion towards mathematics. He then goes on to explain how math is rooted in pattern, being a “universal language” (Green, “Art is a Different Kind”). He furthers his claim within the article by stating that, unlike mathematics and science, which are under a basis of universal patterns which govern the very way our earth physically works, art is riddled with patterns which reflect the human race as a whole. This includes our emotional capacities, experiences, and other subjective factors.

Lois Jones, an African American artist (1905-1998), vouches this idea through her approach to art, being heavily influenced by environmental factors and culture she lived around and experienced during her life. She saw art as a way to represent your identity, to represent the things that make you human and real. This corroborates Greene’s idea of art as a reflection of experiences and emotions, a representation of human subjectivity.



Fig. 1. Jones, Lois. *Moon Masque*. C. 1971 Smithsonian American Art Museum  
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/moon-masque-76334>

Lois Jones' *Moon Masque*, 1971, portrays a deep wish for the younger generation of black people—that they might be able to reconnect with African traditions and keep in touch with their roots to let African culture live on. In *Moon Masque*, we see a multitude of different colors, shapes, and patterns, all different aspects of traditional African textiles. In the middle section of the painting, there are two silhouettes of side profiles of African people, the one on the left is a woman, and the one on the right is a man. They are separated by the Moon Masque, hence the title of the artwork, and the mask is in tears. The mask becomes the focal point of the piece, contrasting from the rest of the painting because of its white tone against the bright, bold colors of the rest of the painting. There are also lines which circle the mask and act as a frame or target around the mask, further developing the mask as the piece's focal point. In addition, instead of the mask being painted, it is a paper mache mask which has been placed onto the canvas. This detail makes the mask appear more realistic and traditional because it is like a real, physical Moon Masque. The busy colors and patterns of the background show variety, which brings attention to the complex traditions and cultures of Africa. The Moon Masque symbolizes culture

and long standing-tradition, and its weeping eyes symbolize a sadness which is expressed upon the figures to its left and right. The weeping symbol of African tradition, coupled with the look of indifference on the silhouettes' faces sends a message of sadness for the younger generation of African people during the time the painting was created. It represents the attitude in which many young Africans held at that time toward their culture, and how their appreciation diminished as the years went on. Through this piece, Jones conveys the idea that older generations of Africans wished for the younger generations to have more pride and respect for their heritage.

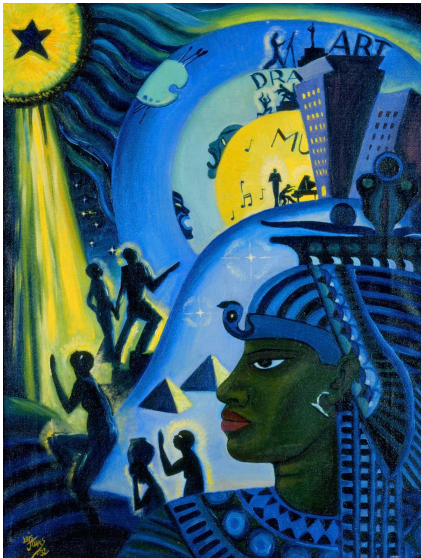


Fig. 2. Jones, Lois. *The Ascent of Ethiopia*. C. 1932. Milwaukee Art Museum  
<https://blog.mam.org/2020/07/13/lois-mailou-jones-and-the-ascent-of-ethiopia/>

In Lois Jones' *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, 1932, Jones establishes a bond between the past and present lives of people with African descent, fostering a culture of respect and appreciation of new and old traditions. Jones utilizes contrast in this piece through her color choice, the colors being on opposite sides of the color wheel. The viewer's eyes are immediately drawn to the center, where we see a bright yellow sun peeking out from a building perched at the top of a blue hill. Several dark blue silhouettes are scattered around and in front of the sun; musicians,

artists, paint palettes, and the words “Art”, “Dra[ma]”, and “Mu[sic]”. These symbols are all meant to represent the flourishing of modern day black culture, specifically the jazz movement and other flourishing art movements like the Harlem Renaissance. We see that these aspects of black culture are flourishing because of their placement around the sun, making them bright, and making them parts of the piece’s focal point. From here, your eyes drift to the large Egyptian Pharaoh, taking up the bottom right quarter of the painting. He is here to represent the past, contrasting the aspects of modernity at the top of the painting which represent the present. Movement continues to bring the viewer’s eyes towards the silhouettes of Egyptians to his left, making the trek up the hill towards the representation of present day black culture. This portrays an idea of ancient Egyptians being entranced and intrigued by modern African traditions– drifting towards the flourishing scene–which reveals Jones’ appreciation for the shifting and flexibility of culture.



Fig.3. Jones, Lois. *Les Fétiches*. C. 1938. *GLAM Center for Collaborative Teaching and Learning*.  
<https://glamportal.auctr.edu/exhibits/show/loismalioujonesfindingyourheri/lesfetiches>

In *Les Fétiches*, Jones portrays the complexity of different African cultures and traditions whilst simultaneously projecting her appreciation for them. The painting includes five separate tribal masks, each from different African tribes. These tribal masks contrast the black

background because of their brighter colors, which elevates them from the background and makes them the center of attention for the viewer. In this case, Jones uses contrast to reflect her love and appreciation for African culture. The careful overlapping of each mask creates movement throughout the piece, and your eyes drift from mask to mask. This sense of movement ensures that you take in and appropriately appreciate each mask. The mask in the middle is made into the main, 'focal point mask' because of the fact that the colors making it up are the brightest of the whole piece. The colors include light and dark yellow, and some white, contrasting the background and the rest of the masks as well. The bright, curved lines that are placed around this mask add another sense of movement to the piece, making it seem as if the mask is moving and shaking. Jones utilizes these techniques in order to symbolize the importance of dance within African tribes, and the prevalence that it has throughout African culture. Jones also uses variety within this piece, to illustrate the complexities of different African tribes. The masks find little to no common ground between each other, each mask being so distinctive and unique. This sense of variety communicates the fact that no one African tribe is the same as another, creating a beautiful diversity. Jones' composition throughout this painting unveils a sense of pride of her African culture and heritage that she holds.

Jones's approach towards art and what it represents is firmly corroborated through Brian Greene's "Art is a Different Kind of Cosmic Order", because of her relationship with her heritage and culture, and how she portrays that in her art. Greene firmly believes that art is a reflection of the truths present in the human mind, a reflection of social and emotional factors driving humans to do the things they do. One vital aspect of human existence is culture and diversity, how no one human is the same and has the same exact background as another. Lois Jones' art exemplifies the culture of her life, lives around her, and lives before her, of aspects that make her human, just like Greene has thought of art to be art's purpose.

Works Cited

Greene, Brian. "Art is a Different Kind of Cosmic Order" *The New York Times*, 20 May 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/opinion/art-physics-brian-greene.html>.

Accessed 15 September 2023

Note about artworks: I gave all source information about each piece with each figure caption, I do not need to provide this information on the Works Cited page.