



Courtesy of Ben Jones
Pay Close Attention (2020) by Ben Jones

CULTURES

Layering Christian and African Symbolic Worlds

By Dennis Raverty

Veteran African American artist Ben Jones has long explained his art as a corollary of his spiritual journey, having not only a formal beauty and a social message, but also a spiritual purpose. In his most recent works, many of them on an exceptionally large scale, the artist, now in his 80s, integrates aspects of traditional Christian with non-Christian West African formats and belief systems into a rich, creole visual language of multilayered references. They are manifested in dense, photographically derived, multimedia compositions that resemble Christian altarpieces both in form and content. They also contain allusions to Yoruba and Fon traditions and the transatlantic African diaspora, as well as references to recent events.

In *Pay Close Attention*, the composition is tripartite and resembles a triptych with a broad central panel and wings. The 16th-century *Isenheim Altarpiece* is one of the most familiar works in this format. A grisly representation of the crucifixion dominates the central panel, flanked by saints on the side panels, whose lives are related to the theme of suffering.

The painting was originally designed as an altarpiece for the chapel in a hospice where monks treated the victims of ergot poisoning. Such poisoning causes lesions in the skin similar to those represented on Christ's body, thus demonstrating for patients that Jesus understood them and shared in their suffering. Beyond its artistic merit, it was intended to promote healing. Healing, both individual and societal, is also an important aspiration of Jones's work.

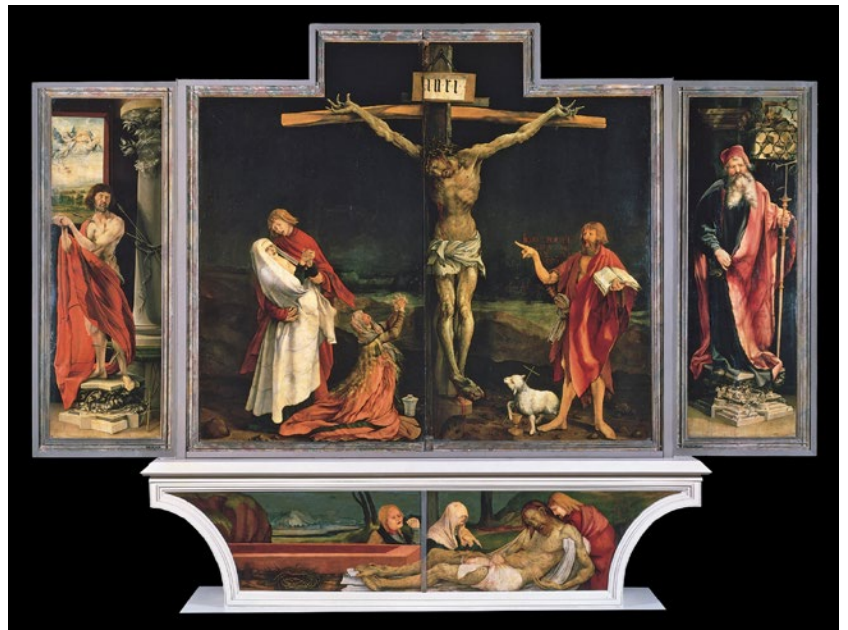
In *Pay Close Attention*, behind the central circular form with the fish, sideways and partially hidden from view, peers the face of Tray-von Martin, a 17-year-old youth who was tragically killed in 2012 by a community watch volunteer. The ensuing trial garnered national publicity, and the photo of Martin wearing the hoodie became a widely reproduced symbol of resistance.

In the context of Jones's work, it refers to an unjust death corresponding to the crucifixion in the *Isenheim*, not explicitly stated but merely alluded to. It is a ghostly and haunting image that might at first go unnoticed, a subtext for a narrative of suffering. But whereas Christ's suffering had a higher purpose, the death of Martin is an unmitigated, senseless, and thoroughly avoidable tragedy. He is treated here as a martyr, like the St. Sebastian shown in the left panel of the *Isenheim* triptych.

Although the format of the Jones painting is analogous to a three-paneled altarpiece, it also bears a resemblance to traditional Ifa boards, sometimes referred to as divination trays, used by the Yoruba and Fon peoples of West Africa and incorporated into diaspora spiritual practices. In traditional Yoruba cosmology, God delegates his power to the orishas, invisible spirit beings he created to help administer the cosmos, which are similar to angels. Two orishas mediate divination or "fortune telling": Eshu (also known as Legba), the "master of the crossroads," and Ifa, sometimes identified as the orisha of destiny.

In the Yoruba divination board shown at right, the face of Eshu/Legba is shown on both sides of the plate, so his image is facing both the client and the diviner, a ritual technician who interprets and sits across from the client during a consultation. To open the ceremony, a cross is traced by the diviner in the central dish to rep-

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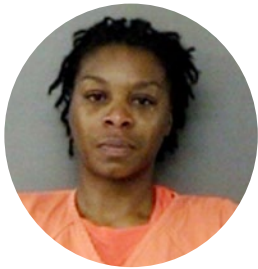
Unterlinden Museum
Isenheim Altarpiece, 1512-1516

Although the snake is associated with evil and temptation in the Abrahamic religions, in West African narratives, it is most often a sign of new beginnings and resurrection, because the snake sheds its skin periodically and emerges from its old casing "reborn."

Yoruba Ifa Tray
Musée Barbier-Mueller



Another zigzag shape pointing downward overlays the photo of a burning building, and includes a portrait of Sandra Bland, who died in the custody of police under suspicious circumstances. Like Trayvon Martin, her photo is placed sideways. She is surrounded by a halo of dots — another martyr.



Bland



Martin

(Continued from previous page)

resent the crossroads (both a sacred site and an allegory of free choice). On the sides of the cross are symbols of eternity and renewal in the ribbon-like figure eight form on the left, as well as the intertwined stylized snakes on the right. Although the snake is associated with evil and temptation in the Abrahamic religions, in West African narratives, it is most often a sign of new beginnings and resurrection, because the snake sheds its skin periodically and emerges from its old casing “reborn.”

Cowrie shells are cast in the tray multiple times during a consultation, and the position of the shells is interpreted by the diviner as a revelation of the person’s Ifa. Ifa is the only orisha that is never represented in art. Often interpreted as “destiny,” it is more properly translated as “potential,” according to some scholars, because nothing is fixed or predestined in Yoruba cosmology.

Instead, the universe is ruled by the principle of synchronicity, a radical interdependence of all things as free agents before the threshold of an undetermined future. A person’s Ifa is what God intends for that person’s life. Of course, people may not live up to their “destiny.” But then Ifa tells us not what is to be, but only what might be, with God’s help and perhaps a little bit of luck (Eshu/Legba, a trickster, is the orisha of accident and chance).

The fish that traverses the platter in Jones’s painting recalls both the miracle of the multiplication of fishes by Christ, as well as suggesting contemporary ecological concerns, along with the solar panels and the pine forest just barely visible in the background of the central “panel” upon closer inspection. Cowrie shells have already apparently been cast and are represented in the painting as a direct reference to the ancient tradition of Ifa.

Jones places the viewer at the very center of the divining tray/altarpiece, at the crossroads. The “dice” have been cast and we are presented with a “reading” that involves two alternative paths in the side panels, two moral choices: a downward spiral on the left, and an upward, enlightened path to progress on the right, not unlike the damned and

the saved in a traditional representation of the Last Judgment.

The left “panel” depicts a crumpled dollar bill and a strong, zigzag arrow pointing downward with an intertwined upward arrow in the same configuration as the snakes in the divination dish. Another zigzag shape pointing downward overlays the photo of a burning building, and includes a portrait of Sandra Bland, who died in the custody of police under suspicious circumstances. Like Trayvon Martin, her photo is placed sideways. She is surrounded by a halo of dots — another martyr. The zigzags also suggest lightning bolts, the symbolic attribute of the orisha of divine justice, Shango. The double-headed ax at the bottom of the central part of the composition is also a sign of this spirit.

The right “panel” or section of this work is more optimistic in tone, with its strong upward thrust in African Nationalist colors. The schematic eye on the bottom brings to mind both the ancient Egyptian stylized manner of representation and the Hamsa, a Jewish folk protection against the “evil eye.” The lightbulb, as enlightenment, reveals within itself a rich blue sky punctuated by cumulous clouds. It contains, on a small, easily overlooked scale, the sign of the cross, a symbol of Christian redemption but also the sign of the crossroads and thus individual and collective choice and agency, the realm of Eshu/Legba.

According to tradition, this orisha has been given the task of dispensing *ashe*, the life force similar to the Christian concept of grace. According to Nigerian art historian Babatunde Lawal, *ashe* is “the power to make things happen,” and implies not merely the passive dispensation of grace but an active, enlivening power that is accessible through divining the will of God and acting as an agent of his intentions in transforming the world. Ben Jones is just such a mystical agent of *ashe*.

Dr. Dennis Raverty is a retired associate professor of art history who has taught the art of West Africa and the diaspora and has published widely on African American art.