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Jennifer J.L. Jones interview, 3/16/2010 - Author: Susan Moreno

An interview with Atlanta artist Jennifer J.L. Jones. A prolific and successful internationally recognized and well collected contemporary abstract artist. Among her long list of collectors is Oprah Winfrey.

SM: What did your work look like back when you graduated from art school in 1994 and started selling your art?

JJ: Oh, my, well...I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. We had a wide variety of training and classes so it exposed me to a great deal of mediums and areas to work in....after a solid foundation of traditional training,I ended up enjoying experimenting quite a bit. I would say my work appeared mostly abstract by the time I graduated. After school it took me a few years to find my own style and that's when my work actually started selling.

S.M. How is it different from the earlier work?

JJ: In school and just after, I used just about any materials I could get my hands on so the layers in the paintings were much thicker. The work was also a bit darker. Over the years I have been more selective in the materials that I use. Before, I only used oil paint but, now I use acrylic as well. About two years ago, I was putting leaves, feathers and petals into the work itself. And it was thicker but the layers have become thinner because it is more exact and precise they are not quite as experimental. I still like to experiment while I am painting but it has become more of an art in itself knowing how the materials are going to interact.... that is a big part of it.

S.M. How do you feel about the education that you received at The School Of The Art Institute of Chicago? Was it a stepping stone? If so, how? Did you have a mentor that made a difference in your development as an artist?

JJ: It was incredible. I had to fight to get to art school. When I was in high school I knew I wanted to go to a four year art college but I could not afford it. I had to apply for scholarships and grants but nothing came through. I ended up going to community college at first for foundation courses... I thought I was going to go to school in Rhode Island so I moved up to Providence to be near RISD. But, I ended up getting a partial scholarship to the school in Chicago at a portfolio day at Harvard. They accepted my art on the spot and I knew that was meant to be. That is how I ended up there which is wonderful, I had no idea what to expect. The school was incredible

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as far as offering everything and anything. Having started at the community college level I was really able to appreciate where I was. The library is great and they always had lectures to attend. I went to quite a few of them. They have tons of information that you can absorb and of course the facilities and the Art Institute Museum is part of the school so it was a very rich environment. I have never regretted a day of any of my student loans to attend SAIC; it was well worth it. I will say though that some of the instructors should have retired years ago; some were grumpy and one even said on the first day of class, "if any of you think you are going to graduate and make it out in the world as a full time artist you are just kidding yourself." I was shocked to hear an instructor say such a thing. To me it was a challenge, I use things like that to prove people wrong because there is never just one way to go about things. There is always a way to become what you want. Some of the instructors were working artists themselves and they saw some of their students as competition. Perhaps that's where some of their sentiments came from? Of course some of the instructors were inspired by us and I learned a lot just from watching them. Some were so excited to see what we were doing and wanted to see us grow. One in particular Barbara Rossi, she would not let me slack off at all. She kept pushing me and pushing me; she was someone who made a big difference with keeping me focused. Another teacher was John Rozelle. He taught a painting class called 'materials and techniques'. He pushed me as well: I would do some pretty cool looking layers and did not want to touch them because I didn't want to ruin what I had done. But he would tell me to go right back over it no matter how great it looked. He told me not to be afraid to "mess up pretty." The idea was to keep pushing further and further to see what else could happen with the work... and that is what has stayed with me and I have been able to do that with all of my work. As far as mentors, there was one person that I met when I was 18 named Myrtice Craig. She and her husband, renowned architect Robert Broward, were helpful in mentoring me in the way that I socialized. They spoke to me of networking and meeting people and encouraged me because they had known success with other artists. For me it was about being around them and learning how to talk to people. They have always been incredibly supportive and even became collectors of mine. We are still very dear friends to this day.

SM: What artists influenced your work and how or why?

JJ: It has changed a lot over the years. I was in love with Titian but in college I quickly changed to Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell, and Anselm Kiefer. They all have incredible work. However, over the years I have moved away from looking at other artists because I found that when I went to galleries and shows I

would not fall in love with something but without realizing it I was being influenced maybe subconsciously from seeing what others were doing. For a long time I removed myself from that scene: I wanted to make sure that what I was doing was just from me. I have had lots of artists contact me on my website asking me how I did certain paintings but I would not tell them. Instead, I would encourage them to experiment on their own because that is how I learned and that is how you can find your own voice. Of course they never like to hear that because it is the harder path but it's what will get you to your own style and not someone else's. At the moment I appreciate many of my contemporaries but I don't have any specific artists that influence my work.

SM: How did you go about approaching galleries or what strategy did you use to approach the business part of art making in the beginning?

JJ: Unfortunately, they did not teach us the business part of art in college. We had workshops about how to take slides... but that's about it. I bought a lot of books and read a lot to find out how to approach galleries and run a business. The first kick-off was here in Atlanta when I came during the Olympics to visit a friend who lived with the photographer Colleen Casey. She had been given a gallery space to curate for two months and really liked my work. She said to me "if you can get nine paintings done within a month I will put you in a show". So, I did. I worked my full time job and then non-stop painting at night until the work was finished. That was a wonderful opportunity and was my first show in Atlanta. At that time I started asking other artists about where the local galleries were taking on new artists. There was a place called Lansdell Gallery that took on emerging artists so I brought a couple of pieces over and she accepted them. We worked together for several years.

SM: You didn't have a bio, statement or slides?

JJ: No, I just showed up with my work one day. I might have called first but I remember leaving my work with her for consignment the day we met. I did send slides to other galleries. That is the protocol and works for many artists, but my experience has been that the galleries that have sought me out and found me instead of the other way around have been the ones to work with. I started sending postcards out all over the country just to get my work and name in front of them hoping that maybe at some point they would recognize my work. If I saw a gallery that I liked I would send them slides but generally they would lose them even if I sent a SASE or they would be interested and we'd keep in touch but nothing much would ever happen. It was hit or miss. I've had hopes and disappointments but realized those just

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weren't the right places for me or my work. Some of the best references can come from fellow artists who introduce your work to gallery owners. Or sometimes the galleries would see my work hanging at a collector's home and would contact me directly. One of the best stories about finding a gallery for me was when I went to visit friends in Santa Fe. I had been wanting to get out here to check out the art scene so I did a little bit of research and flew out with my portfolio. Other artists laughed at me and said it was ridiculous to go out to NM in the heat of the summer which was also prime time for galleries to be busy. For the most part galleries in Santa Fe are saturated and walking in out of the blue with a portfolio would be a sure way to be rejected because they simply wouldn't have the time to see me and artists just don't do it like that. I said, "I am here and I am going to see what happens!" I did and it was great. I don't recommend this way for most artists but every now and then you never know. In my experience when people say you can't do something one way and it has to be another way... I don't believe it. It has never been the case for me.

SM: You showed up with your transparencies and they looked at them?

JJ: Yes, I walked up and down Canyon Rd. where there are hundreds of galleries... Some of them I would walk in and walk right out of if I did not like the space or the art. Some of them I liked, some of them made time for me, some of them could not spend a second talking to me because I was an artist and they'd rather talk to people buying art. Still, others were very open and they loved my work. One of them has even moved from working in a gallery to owning a gallery over the years and I have happily kept in touch with her. Just by taking the time to visit and talk to people I got a lot of leads and it made a difference. Several years later I ended up getting courted by a gallery who found my work through another artist who was showing there. They wanted to see some of my work so I had them visit one of my collectors in the area. The gallery said they liked them but would want to see bigger pieces before they could offer me representation. I was in touch with this gallery for about a year and I ended up flying out there to help facilitate things. I didn't have much money for shipping so I took a triptych with me by packing it in a huge suitcase and wrapping all my clothes around it. I went to the gallery and it was beautiful and I liked the art but I did not like the owner of the gallery. I got a bad feeling, he was all about money not really about the art. At least that was my first impression. He was hesitant to be firm with any offers as well and by the end of our meeting I knew I didn't want to work with him. I was disappointed; I had spent a year working to make this contact and I felt all my effort was for naught. Somehow though I found my energy again and I got up the next morning and thought "I have one more day here I am going to make the most of it." As fate would have it, the first gallery I walked in

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was my meant to be gallery. The owner and I met and she loved my work and all of our ideas about art and business aligned. By the time I left I had a gallery contract and the triptych was sold within the first week. Everything with this gallery has been serendipitous ever since. I have been showing there successfully for six years now. They are my top selling gallery. Oh, and the guy that was across the street... his gallery went out of business.

SM: Wow! what a great story. So this was a big stepping stone?

JJ: Yes, I had already been working with other galleries, but this was huge. I look at galleries as tiers; some want emerging artists, some mid career, this was the first time that my art was starting to get to a higher category of exposure and the type of gallery that I am in now.

SM: It happened pretty quick for you, within three to five years?

JJ: Yes. Once my work was recognized, things took off quickly.

SM: What is an example of an idea or feeling that you bring into the studio to paint in your current series of work in reference to spirituality and energy?

JJ: That is a good question. I was thinking about something last night, I am going through a breakup this guy meant a lot to me. He opened my heart more than any other relationship. What was in my mind was knowing what a gift that was as well as trying to get through it to see what is on the other side. Today I am thinking about colors and what can emerge from something like that. I have been working with more blacks and greys and a punch of color. I am bringing that idea in today and considering an image of a butterfly; something delicate making a track or trace through different colors on the surface something dark and mysterious. A black night and something that could be a new season. I am trying to translate those feelings into an image using the colors.

SM: The colors that have that feeling for you?

JJ: Right, exactly.

SM: I think it's so great that you have that capability of taking what is going on in your life now and putting it into your art.

JJ: Yes, sometimes it is not even a conscious effort. I will be half way through a piece and will think "oh that's what it is." So, I work out some of that while working on the piece. This is the idea of meditating while we are working getting lost in

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the action of painting and layering. Things start to become revealed. It's incredibly therapeutic.

SM: Your work is very intuitive. You don't work with a sketch and know where your lights and darks are going to be or what your composition is?

JM: No, I used to do that years ago but it would always change by the end of it it would be completely different. Sketches for me are a waste of time.

SM: How do you stay motivated when things get tough in the studio?

JJ: For years I didn't take a break I just keep going and going, show after show, no real vacation time. I finally took a break when things started slowing down with the economy and the galleries a couple of years ago. I took about a month off but it was almost a bad thing because I think it was too long. I was in the studio but not all the time like I had been. It was hard to get my momentum back again. When I am working on one piece I get an idea for another piece and then I will start the second piece that is how my work flows. But I was working on one piece and not getting inspired immediately, so I was getting nervous. My inspiration was not there. Finally, I accepted and realized how important that down time is. It's just as important as the time of creating. I would let myself relax and go to Stone Mountain go be in nature- and do something that relaxed me. Then I could bring something back into the studio. Sometimes even if I was not feeling it, I would do the action of painting that would help get me back up to speed again. Letting go of ideas of shoulds and coulds helps. There were some days that I would walk into the studio and say no and walk out and close the door. I used to force myself to keep working on something and that was not good. Now, I just let it happen when the moment is right.

SM: What is a typical day for you?

JJ: The business side of it; keeping up with receipts and consignments, software that you have to update, uploading images I do that in the mornings before noon. Then I am working in my studio by 2:00 p.m. and I work three to four hours. It depends on the project, if I have a commission I will work on it, go home and let it dry and come back and work. I don't have a lot of typical days. I can get a lot done when I am sure the inspiration is there. When I have that I work as much as I can. If I am not feeling it I stay away. I have a couple of commission pieces that are due in about a week and I will be able to get those completed because they are more specific and I know what somebody is looking for or the idea is very clear. But, if it is me wondering and

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creating and trying to figure out where I am going with the next piece that is when I wait for it to come. Timing is so important.

SM: You glue textures or papers to the wood panels and use asphalt can you give an example?

JJ: Because my work has become more refined over the years, I don't use wax or the textured papers quite so much anymore. What I used to use the paper for I now do with a paint brush. So, if I am looking for a texture with a flower I get thicker with the paint. . . I do enjoy working with asphalt. And I like to try new things if I find them... for instance, about a year and a half ago I found dried fruit through a company in California. It is cut very thin and I love the colors and the shapes, so I put those in the art work and sealed everything. They were a big success!

SM: In the beginning how did you learn to trust your judgement or build your-confidence about your art? For example, when you completed a piece did you know that it had merit or did you question your judgement?

JJ: I have always had a feeling for completion with the works. I liked what I was doing but when I finished a piece I would know that I could do better it was a challenge. When other people would see it they would say we love it and that would help. We all need encouragement but it mostly has to come from within.

SM: What would happen when you got mixed reactions about your work?

JJ: I used to bring friends into my studio and I would show them something unfinished or the finished piece did not have the impact that I wanted and I would be extremely disappointed by their reaction. I realized they couldn't see what I saw though... I had the vision of where it was going but they had no idea. I assumed that somebody close to me would get it or see it... but this was never the case. It taught me to trust my own judgement. If I like it, it's my work and I just have to put it out there and see what happens. It's going to be hard if we are counting on somebody else's opinion. We have to trust ourselves. This is key in so many areas of our lives. The pieces that have been most successful for me or that sold quickly or received the most praise are always the ones I felt best about. If I feel this about the piece then I know others are going to love it too. I learned from experience of having that happen. When I finish a piece and I love it and when others see it they go nuts for it. As artists we are putting our energy into our work. That is what people are picking

up on. I believe colors, imagery, the intention that we are putting into something is what affects people.

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SM: What happens when you finish paintings that you like but maybe they are not your favorites?

JJ: There have been paintings that were not my favorites. They were completed and in a show people liked them but they never made an offer. And, out of the blue somebody would walk in and say "this is the best thing I have ever seen." I think it has to strike the right person people are going to find different things in the piece. If it is a painting that you are not crazy about as the artist then it may mean that you are meant to do something more with your idea and to move on. Sometimes people come into my studio and see something that is half finished or just started and they love it and they want it. And, I think to myself, what? But, it's not even finished! Everybody has different taste.

SM: Based on your years of experience do you pretty much know what is going to work?

JJ: Yes, I have a couple of favorites one is hanging in my house. Because it did not sell at the gallery and I have not sent it to another gallery, I was surprised. When that happens I usually keep it or maybe I will send it to different gallery. What is funny about that is that it will usually sells at the other gallery. I have had some pieces at a gallery for two years and the gallery will say we love it I don't know why it has not sold. And, within two weeks the other gallery will sell it. So, who knows if it is the area or timing or what?

SM: You are in so many shows and events. Do you ever get overwhelmed or feel anxious about getting it all done?

JJ: Oh, yes all the time; it's a full time job. Especially when a lot of the work depends on your emotions to create. I have my fair share of feeling very overwhelmed and anxious when shows are coming up or I have a deadline. I will think, I need more time to get everything done, it has to be better than or as good as last time. I am always doing that to myself; challenging myself. It's important for me to put those pressures on myself and not just get by. I want to create my best work always. But, at times putting too much pressure on myself can be a detriment because the more time spent worrying about it is less time being used to get it done. It always works out though; it all gets done.

SM: You know you can do this.

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JJ: Yes, that never goes away entirely. At times when I am tired and very busy it feels hard when galleries or clients are needing things at specific times.

SM: So, you may have two or three galleries calling and asking when is it going to be done?

JJ: Yes. Many galleries work with designers and have clients that need artwork installed for deadlines. That is the pressure of their business. They love me as a person and as an artist so they work with me as they can... but, there is that side to it that can be very stressful because art takes time to create. I think some people have the idea that if you are a full time artist, that you just hang around and paint whenever you feel like it and it is a leisurely life. Well, yes I work for myself and I get to make my own schedule and there are days when I can be lazy if I want. But, there is a lot of pressure because there is the business side to keeping everything going.

SM: You are a great role model for artists, what advice would you give to an artist in the first few years of her art career in reference to developing as an artist persevering with her artistic goals. What do you think helped get you where you are in your art career?

JJ: Thank you! One of the biggest things is connections networking and talking to people as well as offering something. Such as volunteering somewhere. The biggest thing for me was that I keep in touch with people. It is probably a bit easier today because of the Internet. A lot of artists that I have met over the years have asked for help and I would say sure, I will introduce you to this gallery owner and then I would never hear from them again. That is a no-no. People want to know that they are appreciated and you want to be able to help other people. It's a give and take. When you stay in touch with people and you show your appreciation it will take you a long way. Also, when you are just starting out it is very important to have a solid body of work. That is something I didn't really have at first and it made it harder on myself. I was more motivated to go out and find the galleries than to spend time only painting. It's very important to have your current artwork available to offer to the galleries. Choose to have quality over quantity. And if you are looking for galleries, have some marketing material such as a business card or postcard to send out. It is a good first impression that shows them you have invested in yourself and believe in yourself. When the galleries see you take yourself seriously, they will as well. And don't forget

to follow up with people! The galleries are extremely busy and they don't always remember names and faces. Keep at it and they will remember you!

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SM: How does an artist produce a body of work if she is still experimenting?

JJ: For a while in 1997-98 I had a gallery that was interested in my work and was watching me. I was still experimenting, I was over here and over there. I didn't really know where I was going to tell you the truth. I was just painting whatever came to me. I did not have a solid body of work that was cohesive enough for him to get an idea of where I was going. He wanted to show my work but it took him about two years of watching the development of my work before he actually offered me a show. There is nothing wrong with artists growing and changing styles but when you are starting out and looking for someone to represent you it needs to be really clear. Because if they are going to start representing your work they want to be able to talk about it to their clients in a way that makes sense and if you come in two weeks or two months later and you have something totally different they are going to be confused. It's okay to have different things going but it's important to show cohesiveness of one idea within each area and that way you know what your intention is and you don't have a couple of pieces that look like this and a couple of pieces that look like that. It needs to make sense for them so they can link it together, exhibit it, talk about it and sell it. Many collectors see art as an investment and they need to see where you are heading!

SM: In your judgement what encompasses a body of work?

JJ: I would say at least ten pieces.

SM: How would you describe your work as a body of work?

JJ: My work is contemporary abstract. It's all based and inspired by nature. I use a glazing method and concentration in color theory. I think that could go with any of my series that I have done they all link together even if it is something that I did five years ago, it is still the same idea.

SM: How has the current economy effected your sales?

JJ: My sales have been down. Last year I lost 30-40% of my sales. The commissions that I used to get from one of the galleries dropped radically. But, I have been keeping busy which is great. The shows that I have had have been very success-

ful. Commissions have come in slower a lot of that has been word of mouth. Two of my galleries closed. But things are picking up again.

SM: But, the gallery in Santa Fe is doing is okay.

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JJ: Yes, they are doing very well. In the winter they are always a bit slow but during late spring to early summer it gets busy for them. They have been able to stay open and do okay. The owner is an excellent business person. Even so, it depends on who is buying in our economy... and because many people and businesses stopped buying a lot of galleries have closed. It has been very hard even when art buyers express interest they are not spending like they used to or they are nervous. At least a dozen people have contacted me and they say they want to commission a painting but then they don't and that has not happened for a long time. I have a show coming up in Santa Fe this Memorial Day weekend and we are very excited about it! I am hopeful it will be a big success!

SM: Your client base, wouldn't they be more higher income where the economy would not effect them?

JJ: Yes, but, I guess some of them might be waiting for things to change like the rest of us and might be holding out for the time being. I have been very fortunate to stay busy and keep my sales going even if it is half of what it used to be, it is still plenty to keep me busy. I am hopeful I think that summer is going to be a big deal. You always have to keep up hope.

SM: The people that walk in to your studio are they through galleries or your own marketing?

JJ: I've had successful marketing pay off. Lots of word of mouth helps. And, I've even met some collectors through designers. But, the people that find my work though the galleries work with the galleries. It's important you don't step on anybody's toes.

SM: What do you do for fun?

JJ: I like to go hiking, go see movies, listen to music, travel, and hang out with friends. I love being with my family, so whenever there is time I go visit them.

SM: Is your family here?

SM: No, they come to visit, but are spread out all over the U.S. My parents live in Florida in a little sailboat. They have one little 6" by 6" piece of my work which

they have mounted inside the sailboat so they take my work with them wherever they go.

SM: Do you have siblings?

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JJ: Yes, I am the last of five. My sister is the oldest and I have three brothers.

SM: So, you had a lot of family support?

JJ: Yes, but when I first decided I wanted to be a full time artist in high school my dad was encouraging me to get a business degree. They didn't know anybody that was successful with their art and making a living with it. And, he thought- oh my god- we are going to have to support her for the rest of her life (laugh). But, I just knew. . . that was the intuition that I had. I never had a doubt that it was not going to happen. There were times that it was a big struggle, counting pennies. But, when it really starts to happen it happens big. You get other people excited about what you are doing and it blossoms. It's very exciting to have the support from other people. My family has been incredible.

SM: It's very inspirational to hear a success story like yours. You are a great role model!

JJ: Thank you!!