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U.S. Painter: "In my Soul I am Cuban"

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Visiting Cuba to inaugurate a collective exhibition of abstract paintings of nine Afro-American artists, the outstanding painter Ben Jones talked exclusively with Cubasí...

He was born and lives in the United States, but he carries a small island in the heart and he dedicates part of his amazing energy to give the best of him: art. Ben Jones is a creator well aware of his origin, committed with his time and authentic as only possible under those norms.

I arrived at the National Museum of Fine Arts to meet one of the most outstanding Afro-American artists and I found a simple man who with extraordinary modesty spoke in Spanish more about the other rather than of himself.

The purpose of this visit to Cuba was to inaugurate a collective exhibition where nine of his Afro-American colleagues who work abstraction participate:

"For many years I have had the idea of bringing an exhibition of Afro-American artists with great careers in the United States and the world. I wanted those artists to be working in abstraction. I don't think the fine Arts Museum has had an exhibition like this before. The exhibition is really small, but it's got a lot of history because it's the first one... besides, abstract art is a universal language, its color, its texture, its composition, images, it's like when you are listening to music that has no theme, it's universal."

Jones also lives art as a vehicle to share and multiply man's ideas and purposes of the revolutionary man he is that's why he traveled alone: There are many people in the United States who want to visit Cuba, I had more than a hundred of people from all over the U.S. who wanted to come with me for the exhibition, from New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, different cities. Most of them are museum directors, curators, collectors, art professors, art critics, plastic art artists... two jazz musicians also came with us, and they gave a concert with Cuban jazz players".

Ben Jones travels to Cuba more than once every year and he appreciates of this land much more than its art: "I am

very much in favor of the Cuban Revolution, I support the Cuban Revolution, many of the people who came with me are interested in Cuba, in their people, in their culture... "

In fact, he works to strengthen a relationship he considers essential: "I think it's very important the exchange between the people of the United States and Cuba, as I was telling you, in my country there are a lot of people who want to know Cuba, but U.S. laws don't allow all North Americans to visit Cuba, then people working at cultural institutions, art museums, universities have the possibility to come, but only for these sort of activities, but am I trying for all North Americans, because when I tell people "I'm leaving for the Dominican Republic", they tell me "oh, have a nice trip", if I say "I'm leaving for Puerto Rico", they tell me "have a nice trip", but when I say "I'm leaving for Cuba", people ask me at once "how is it possible for me to go with you, because I want to go to Cuba? And I think it's because the Cuban culture is very strong, when Cuban musicians, painters, artists visit the United States the whole public is really interested for them."

The attempt is a two-way exchange: "right now we are organizing things to invite artists who work the Afro-Cuban theme to the U.S., to the galleries, universities and different cultural institutions to expose their work there."

Jones tells with satisfaction the results of this visit whose programme was lively and advantageous: "We had many activities with my group, we went to the Folkloric Assemble, the House of Africa, the Yoruba Cultural Society and all learned a lot about the Afro-Cuban culture here. We visited museums, galleries, artists' workshops, we had an encounter with film director Rigoberto Lopez, he has a place to show the movies about the Afro-Cuban culture. I can say on my behalf and on behalf of my group that all of them want to return, many people of my group want to organize their own groups to return, they found many artists, many charming Cubans, made friendships and are organizing groups to return."

They also visited the higher Institute of Art, San Alejandro Academy, schools of different teaching levels, an experimental art center, Belkys Ayon's house, among others: "We came for ten days, but we need at least a month, because there's a lot to see. Havana is not like New York, but it's similar in that there's a lot of energy in this city, a lot of culture, like in New York"

Issues and words that so many refuse to speak about, return over and over in the conversation of the artist who with more than 70 years old works tirelessly: " I am socialist in my thinking, then it's very easy for me to have a relationship with Cuba, because I share its ideas, the fact that education is free, health is free, in my country those of kind of things don't happen, in my country many cannot go to the doctor's because they have no money, there are some programs for the poor, but it is not enough.

"I have come to Cuba 63 times and I have a great influence of the Cuban culture, of the Cuban Revolution in my art, I have made four exhibitions in Cuba and in the future I will have others. I always tell people I am Cuban, in my soul I am Cuban, in the past I said I'm leaving for Cuba, but now I say I'm leaving for my country, Cuba is my country."

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