Culture Talk: Kellie Jones Discusses 'South of Pico,' Her Recently Published Book About African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and '70s

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Oct 26, 2017 • 5:58 am

Kellie Jones, author of "South of Pico."

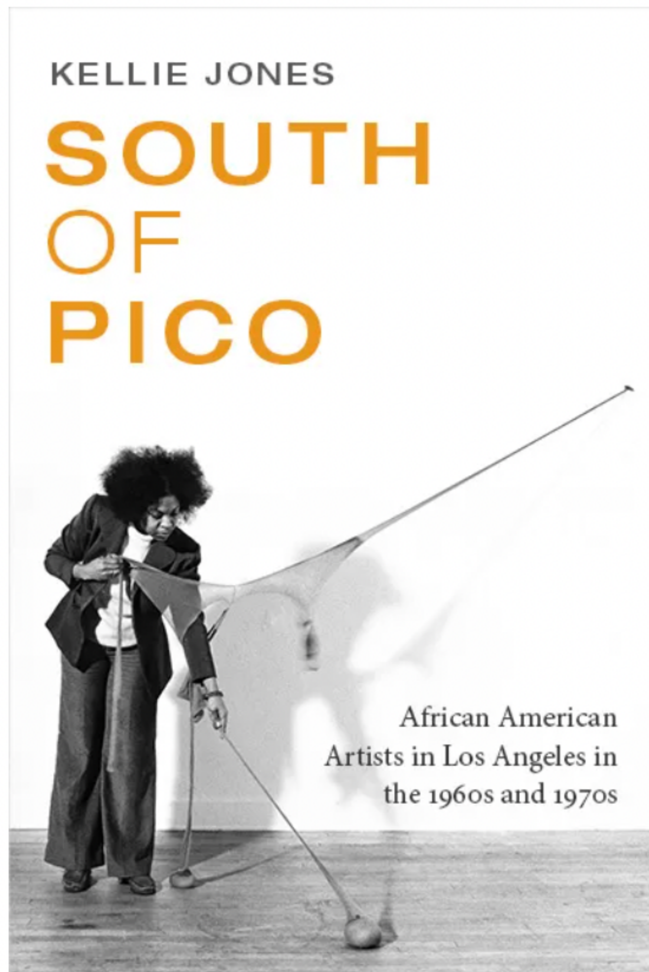
A DECADE AGO, Kellie Jones set out to write a book about African American artists in Los Angeles. The focus of her research was the 1960s and '70s, a period when artists in the city were experimenting with materials and form, and mixing art with activism. Shortly thereafter, Jones took a measured detour. She organized "Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980," with the Hammer Museum. The exhibition opened in 2011.

For many, "Now Dig This!" was an introduction to artists such as Fred Eversley, Maren Hassinger, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, and Senga Nengudi. It documented their work and established connections with more familiar figures from the era, including Melvin Edwards, David Hammons, Betye Saar, and Charles White. The first in-depth survey of the vital period brought attention to 35 artists, virtually all of them under-appreciated.

In the years since, museums across the country have presented touring retrospectives of Edwards, Eversley, Outterbridge, Purifoy, and Nengudi. Saar had her first institutional solo exhibitions in Europe at the Museum De Domijnen in the Netherlands and in Milan, Italy, where a half-century survey at the Prada Foundation featured more than 80 works. Marking the centennial of the artist's birth, "Charles White: A Retrospective" opens at the Art Institute of Chicago in June 2018.

The catalog for "Now Dig This!" concludes with a photograph of Nengudi on the back cover. With "South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s," Jones picks up where she left off. The same Nengudi image graces the front cover of her latest book, which delves further into the biographies, practices, and legacies of the artists.

Jones delivers a treasure trove of stories through a critical lens. She situates the work of assemblage artists within the context of the 1965 Watts Rebellion; examines the impact of artist-run institutions including the Brockman Gallery founded by Alonzo Davis and Dale Brockman Davis, Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32, and several Samella Lewis ventures; and charts the emergence of the "performative impulses" and de-materialized practices of Hammons, Hassinger, and Nengudi.



A professor of art history and archeology at Columbia University, Jones is a 2016 MacArthur "Genius" Fellow. I spoke with her about "South of Pico" shortly before it was released and she said the story of African American artists in Los Angeles is rooted in segregation, migration, and free expression.

CULTURE TYPE: Let's start with the basics. Tell me about the new book.

KELLIE JONES: "South of Pico" is a look at African American artists working in the 1960s and '70s in Los Angeles. What the book really looks at is how not only artist history, but also how the histories of African American migration affected the histories of objects and art making. All of the people in the book, as with most

African Americans, are affected by the history of the Great Migration. That is our history and so I am looking at how those ideas of movement and change, loss and newness, affect the art object.

How did "South of Pico" begin? What was the genesis for the book?

I had been working with many of these artists over the years, particularly David Hammons. I published my first thing on David Hammons in 1986 and that was my interview with him which is in "EyeMinded." One of the things David said when I did that interview with him, he mentioned all these artists I had never really heard of. For instance, Noah Purifoy and John Riddle. This was in the '80s and it always stuck in my head, these people he really looked up to, but we'd never really heard about.

Over the years, I started looking into various artists. Of course, I had also known Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger and Mel Edwards, some of the people who ended up in New York or on the East Coast. It was kind of like a detective story, going back and looking at these histories that seem to intersect. Charles White being someone who if you study the history of African American artists, you will find him everywhere. Of course, he is well known. The fact that his story also connected with David Hammons in L.A., that was also of interest to me. It started many years ago. I had written over the years and then decided to work on this book.

My understanding is you began working on "South of Pico" a decade ago and, in the course of the project, the opportunity to do the "Now Dig This!" exhibition and catalog came about. Is that right?

Yes. It's absolutely right. I was working on it in 2007, then "Now Dig This!" came along. I ran into Gary Garrels, who at the time was the chief curator at the Hammer, and he asked me what I was working on. (Garrels is now at SFMoMA.) I said, "I am out here working on a book on African American artists in Los Angeles." And he said," Are you going to do a show?" And I said, "When the book is done."

He called me two weeks later and he said, "Is the book done, because I have this great opportunity to do a show with the Getty Research Institute, with the Hammer?" And I said, "Sure," because what it allowed me to do is expand my research, get into personal archives, actually do a show. I could bring out some of these objects that I had never seen because they are not on view. It also allowed me to give back to the artists who I'd worked with for many years, who I had done interviews with, talking about this book.

Give back to the artists in what way?

I was able to give them new images of their work, high resolution images. Some of these objects were not scanned before or photographed. We did oral histories. We did symposia. Doing ["Now Dig This!"] gave me greater access to personal archives, for instance of Dale and Alonzo Davis, the Charles White archives, the Just Above Midtown

Gallery archives. I'd known about these archives. I'd had some connection with them. But to be able to have more time to go into detail, to actually scan a lot of the documents and use them in the ["Now Dig This!"] catalog—and then some of them also migrated into ["South of Pico"]—it deepened my research more than anything.

That's how ["South of Pico"] started and the project got slowed down because of the show, but the show was a great opportunity. People started looking at [these artists] again. People started buying their work again. It was a great win for us all and now finally the book is out.

A photo of Senga Nengudi graces the cover of "South of Pico." Tell me about the photo. Why did you choose it?

I love that photo. I like it because I wanted to have a woman on the cover. I love the vintage quality of the photo. It's black and white. It really speaks to this idea of creating something anew. It speaks to the kind of conceptual practice that I end the book with. All of those things that she's working. She maybe looks like an artist, right? I love the way she looks. I love her hair. She's very intent on what she's doing. If you don't know art, you don't know what she's doing. I like the kind of strangeness of it, too. The kind of mystery of it. It spoke to everything I wanted for the book.

CHARLES WHITE, "Harriet," 1972 (Oil wash on board). | Courtesy © 1972 Charles White Archives

In the introduction, you mention curator Naima Keith. She developed the title for "Now Dig This!" and also influenced the "South of Pico" concept. Can you talk about her contributions?

Naima Keith is a native of Los Angeles. When she worked on "Now Dig This!," she was my assistant. (Keith is now deputy director of the California African American Museum.) She was the curatorial researcher on the show. I worked with her for three years. She was fantastic. I knew Los Angeles from a scholarly point of view, from a research point of view. She knew it as a person who had grown up there. Her mother is a collector, Dr. Joy Simmons, so she also knew the world of black collectors. That was great to be able to work with somebody like that. She knew the art world. She grew up in it, because her parents were collectors.

She also came up with the title "Now Dig This!" We were throwing around ideas and she came up with it. It comes from a music album. She was just looking at titles of old records. It's from something from that period. We spoke, I think every week for three years, on the phone or in person. She taught me a lot about the day-to-day living of Los Angeles.
What insights did she give you about the history and culture of Los Angeles, about living in the city?

One of the things she told me about was this concept of South of Pico, like living on the other side of the tracks. That's where with restrictive covenants blacks could live, for the most part. (Neighborhoods located south of Pico Boulevard include Inglewood, Leimert Park, Baldwin Hills, Watts, and Compton.) It just made sense, because the book is really about the inheritances of the South, the kind of diaspora that live on in the work of these artists from L.A. As Maren Hassinger says in the book, all of us are really from the South. Thinking about that just made sense and I love the title. I love that phrase. I thought it really captured something that was very Los Angeles.

You have to know about Pico Boulevard. In the introduction, I talk about Pio Pico being the last Mexican governor of California and also being a person of African descent and having a boulevard named after him, which is huge in L.A. It's a very, very long street. So, I thought it was a great concept in so many ways. It's like a colloquialism and then it has a real history to it that is also about blackness that I think is unknown to the larger public. [The title] was a way to bring that all together and then also talk about art and concepts, conceptualism.

What first sparked your interest in the Los Angeles art scene?

Those were some of the first people I met when I graduated from college and started working as a curator. I never really thought about it until later on, but many of them came from Los Angeles. If we think about the New York art scene, it's been around for years, decades, centuries. Black people have been a part of the East Coast art world even going back to the 19th century, if you look at people who were in Boston or Providence, Rhode Island. When we get to the 20th century for sure, the Harlem Renaissance, the '30s, so

much of that is happening in New York. The ’60s, a lot of it when we think historically of the black art world or the art world in general, it’s based in New York. New York is one of the major art centers of the world, right? You don’t necessarily think of L.A.

One of the things that the Getty Research Institute did, and I think that I do with the book, is that in doing Pacific Standard Time said, let’s do some research on the art of Southern California because so much of what passes for American art history is East Coast based. Because the New York art world and the East Coast are older, more sedimented, calcified, as I talk about in the book, California became a place to be freer.

“The art world in general, it’s based in New York. You don’t necessarily think of L.A. …So much of what passes for American art history is East Coast based. Because the New York art world and the East Coast are older, more sedimented, calcified, as I talk about in the book, California became a place to be freer.” — Kellie Jones

SENGA NENGUDI, “Costume Study for Mesh Mirage,” 1977 (performance, Los Angeles). | Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York; Photographby by Adam Avila

Freer in what way, in terms of materials, or maybe expanding the definition of what is considered art?

People were able to do these multimedia things. Nobody was looking down on them and saying, “Hey, this isn’t painting. This isn’t sculpture.” Even if you look at some of their contemporaries at that time on the East Coast. Let’s take Al Loving as an example. He’s making paintings. You’re very clear that he is making paintings, even when he takes them

off of the stretcher in the '70s. You're not really clear David Hammons is making prints in the beginning. Then he makes stuff with hair. Senga Nengudi is making stuff with pantyhose and sand. At the same time, they are sculpture. They are site specific. They are interactive.

It's a very different aesthetic and part of that comes from the fact that Los Angeles didn't have a kind of parochial art world in the same way as New York. New York was much more traditional in that way. It had many more roots than Los Angeles. The kind of freedom that people sought through migration is also mirrored in the art itself.

How does the migration narrative or the migration experience show up in the art?

It shows up in different ways. Somebody like Melvin Edwards comes from Texas to California. That's a traditional migration route. A lot of people from Texas and Louisiana end up in L.A. Somebody like Charles White actually thinks about the South a lot in his work through showing some of his relatives, but also people like Harriet Tubman. In thinking about freedom fighters, he also was thinking about the history of the South. His mother is also a migrant.

I'm trying to think of some better ways that it shows up. Somebody like Betye Saar, she has a whole series. When you are looking at her assemblages that are dedicated to her aunt—who was her great aunt, she was like her grandmother. It's a long story that I talk about in the book, that looks at her family really being constituted through migration. Basically, her great aunt was a migrant from St. Louis and ends up in L.A. as part of the migration.

Somebody like John Outterbridge is really involved with using techniques that you may find in the South that are what we would call vernacular making or making from self-taught artists. He is from North Carolina and some of that was about creating sites of protection in the segregated space. Creating sites of beauty under segregation. Some of those techniques even further go back to Africa.

But again, if we are just thinking about migration, he is referencing these techniques from his home place in North Carolina and the same also with [Noah] Purifoy. All of these people are migrants and they all basically get to California as a place to actually make work and I argue that their experiences as migrants really inflects what they are making.

BETYE SAAR, "Black Girl's Window," 1969 (assemblage in window). | The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Modern Women's Fund and Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, Courtesy Hammer Museum

Are the black artists in New York aware of the artists in Los Angeles and vice versa?

People were in contact. Samella Lewis is in contact with Benny Andrews. They are protesting the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and their shortfalls in showing the work of African American artists and hiring African Americans in the same way that the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition that Benny Andrews was one of the co-founders of is protesting the Whitney, is protesting the Met.

I found correspondence between them. There was a lot of correspondence. Samella Lewis flew out to New York to support those protests. They are aware of each other and there are shows of California artists that come to the Studio Museum in Harlem during the '70s, maybe even in the late '60s.

The shared stories and shared interests and activism created a real community among the artists.

In the book, [John] Outterbridge says the material of art was not just in the object, but also in the social situation. Part of that work was being active in what was going on at the time and the activism in the protest for change. It was a time to get together and talk about what artists were doing. Or how can art change the world. How can art help change the dialogue?

Gallery 32 run by Suzanne Jackson had a much more political profile say than the Brockman Gallery or any of Samella Lewis's places. But I would argue that the work they were doing was still political. They were creating a space. They were keeping a space alive. In the beginning, with Brockman Gallery, they were all working other jobs to support a gallery. They were running a gallery and then you're teaching high school or teaching college. They continued to make all these efforts to keep these things going.
Noah Purifoy is the first director at the Watts Towers Arts Center. John Outterbridge comes a little later, maybe about 10 years later. Part of their wanting to do that is they want to bring art to people, to black people, because they think it will change their lives. It's going to be part of the change we need in this world. Giving people better education. Better food. Better health services. Let's give them some art. Make their lives better. Make them creative beings to make them feel better about themselves. Noah Purifoy is also trained in social work. For him, his arts activism was about helping black people as a kind of social service, in some ways, providing them with outlets of creativity.

"[Noah Purifoy and John Outterbridge] want to bring art to people, to black people, because they think it will change their lives. It's going to be part of the change we need in this world." — Kellie Jones

DAVID HAMMONS, "Hair and Wire, Venice Beach," 1977 (gelatin silver print) by Bruce W. Talamon | Courtesy Bruce W. Talamon

There is a lot happening in Los Angeles now, really exciting artists and important curators. How would you compare and contrast what was going on in the ’60s and ’70s and what’s happening today in L.A.?

I think it’s really exciting. It’s inherited in some way. Art + Practice that Mark Bradford and Eileen Harris Norton opened in Leimert Park is in the same area the Brockman Gallery was for 22 years. That area as a black business district post-Watts is super important. It’s exciting to see that inheritance. The California African American Museum (CAAM) comes at the end of the book. The opening of it comes in the ’80s and now Naima Keith is the deputy director there. So exciting. Jamilah James is working at ICA LA. The Underground museum. Henry Taylor. You can just go on and on. Brenna Youngblood and the people who are from there that are not there anymore, Kehinde Wiley.

It’s a really exciting time in L.A., in general, and certainly for African American artists, especially with Mark Bradford representing the United States in Venice at the Venice Biennale this summer. I think Naima Keith is really bringing a lot of great new energy to CAAM and look forward to seeing what she continues to do there.

Your parents were both poets and involved in the arts. Growing up, you had artists and activists and musicians at your home and you frequented art galleries. What about that experience resonated with you and made you want to study art and make it your career?
Actually, like most children, you don’t want to have anything to do with it, at first. You know like, “Oh my God, these people are broke.” I really wanted to be a diplomat. I wanted to travel around the world and work at the UN. That was my goal in life. But I got to college and I was like, “Hmm, maybe I should rethink this diplomat thing.” I realized people didn’t know artists. I realized what a gift it was.

I went to an arts high school called La Guardia in New York. It’s an urban New York City high school. It’s a very diverse place, all God’s people. But you are studying art history there and you are like, “Wait a minute. There are no people of color, except the very ancient Egyptians, Mayans, and Aztecs.” Those are the only people of color you see in the pictures. And you go to college, same thing. In fact, everybody’s dead. All the artists you study are dead. But all the artists I knew were alive. So, I thought, “Hmm, this is interesting.”

You realized the value of your experiences and what was so familiar to you.

Right. It kind of got me thinking about a gift that I had and in fact there was a place where people could work in the field of art, but you didn’t have to be an artist. You could be a writer. You could be a curator. I realized this was a place where change needed to happen. There were very few books. But there’s also a lineage I come from.
James Porter and David Driskell and Samella Lewis, these people who wrote about art. In fact, some of the first histories that I read of African American artists were from Samella Lewis, “Art: African American,” her book that came out in 1978. And then David Driskell’s “Two Centuries of Black American Art,” which was a catalog, but it was encyclopedic. So,

I did read things. I did see things. James Porter's book comes out 1943. There were a few books out there, but you really had to search for them.

There was an area that needed to be changed and I figured I was a good person to do it and it was fun. I could still do all of the things I wanted to do, which was travel the world—I've done exhibitions in Brazil and South Africa and England—and still be able to speak all the languages, all the things you would do as a diplomat. When I recently met last year the person who was then the ambassador from the U.S. to South Africa, Patrick Gaspard, I told him my story. He said, "But you have been doing that all this time. You've been practicing cultural diplomacy. You've been a cultural diplomat." And I thought, "Wow." It was great, because I actually did what I set out to do. CT

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

TOP IMAGE: Courtesy Kellie Jones
FIND MORE Earlier this week, Kellie Jones was in conversation with Naima Keith at the California African American Museum. Yesterday, she spoke with UCLA professor Robin D.G. Kelley at the Hammer Museum and, this evening, she is giving a lecture at UC Santa Barbara's Art, Design & Architecture Museum.

JOHN OUTTERBRIDGE, "Case in Point," from the Rag Man Series, c. 1970 (mixed media). | Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, Courtesy Hammer Museum

BOOKSHELF

In addition to “South of Pico,” Kellie Jones is the author of “EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art.” She has contributed to several exhibition catalogs, most prominently, Jones edited “Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980,” and co-edited “Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties.” Presenting an overview of the Los Angeles assemblage movement and David Hammons’s innovative body print process, “L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints,” documents an exhibition at Roberts & Tilton gallery that coincided with the opening of “Now Dig This!” at the Hammer Museum. Recently published, “David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale” is a critical examination of the artist’s iconic performance work. Also consider “Melvin Edwards: Five Decades” and “Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada.” Finally, “Betye Saar: Still Tickin'” and “Betye Saar: Uneasy Dancer” were produced in conjunction with two major exhibitions of Saar’s work.