

# ARTFORUM

## Jeff Donaldson

KRAVETS WEHBY GALLERY

Jeff Donaldson (1932–2004) attained many distinctions in his lifetime. In addition to chalking up a highly impressive list of academic and pedagogical achievements, culminating in a Ph.D. in African and African American art history from Chicago's Northwestern University and, later in life, a long-standing deanship at Howard University in Washington, DC, he played a defining role in the development of a "trans-African" aesthetic that endeavored to help shape attitudes toward the African diaspora via unifying signs of protest, positivity, and cultural pride. A founding member of the Organization of Black American Culture, with which he participated through its Visual Arts Workshop in the painting of the historic *Wall of Respect*, 1967—a montaged pantheon of African American heroes and heroines that graced the exterior of a building in the heart of Chicago's once so-called Black Belt—Donaldson was also a founding member of the collective AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists). Hatched amid the turbulent ferment of the civil rights movement, the philosophical precepts and aesthetic practices developed by the AfriCOBRA artists were geared toward the advancement of black liberation and self-determination, but with room for individual expression.

Now representing the artist's estate, Kravets Wehby presented a compact yet potent selection of thirteen mostly mixed-media works executed between 1969 and 1999. Consistently complex, intricate, and finely crafted, each of these pictures pulsates with a kaleidoscopic visual intensity hawking a fecund activation of politicized words and images. Unabashedly graphic in nature, especially the earlier works, form and content conspire seductively here to convey an idealized, but also



Jeff Donaldson, *Wives of Sango*, 1969, mixed media, 36 × 24".

fantastical, black iconography. *Wives of Sango*, 1969, for instance, depicts the titular subjects of Nigerian Yoruba mythology in a bold, symmetrical composition drenched in decorative details such as pixelated and filigree patterning and pasted-on silver- and gold-foil adornments. The figures' postures project confidence and defiance. Ammunition belts and rifles are slung across hips and shoulders, a symbolic—or literal—call to arms, making clear the artist's militant stance. Though the majority of the works on display provided aspirational models, one early piece stood out for its relatively explicit social critique: *J. D. McClain's Day in Court*, 1970, skewers the American justice system, reimagining in paint a famous news photo depicting a white judge held hostage at gunpoint by a black man, both of whom died in a hail of bullets minutes later. The newspaper image itself is clipped and collaged into the composition, whose disassembled

and reconstituted elements allegorize and out the implicit power circuitry of the photo, casting the black figure as a convict statistic and the white figure as a castrating harbinger of death.

In a slang-peppered AfriCOBRA manifesto from 1970, Donaldson describes the group's visual output as "poster art," conceived with "the idea of mass production" in mind. And poster art it is . . . but then some, in this artist's case at least. Certainly, Donaldson's early works serve, by inference or example, to promote a sociopolitical agenda, tackling urgent issues of representation concerning not only race but also gender. Yet operating in tandem with the work's heuristic semiotics is a commanding affect made palpable by evidence of fastidious, patient, even loving, creative labor. Take *Patriot*, 1975, in which the artist uses corrugated cardboard as the substrate to create a subtle relief. Sections of the cardboard facing are cut along lines that echo the rhythmic interactions between overlapping imagery and decorative embellishments, then peeled off to reveal the grooves below, adding an abstract material texture to the composition while embedding a cleverly veiled image of a black soldier in its support. Equally transfixing, a more recent post-AfriCOBRA trio of body-scale paintings in acrylic centered on the depiction of musicians and their instruments amid a swirling consonance of almost baroque, high-key geometric patterning and deliriously tessellated fills. The overall effect is symphonic. Indeed, there is an enchanting musicality running through all this work that lends allure to its outlook. In the AfriCOBRA phase, aesthetics played backup to a righteous ideology; in these later works, the balance shifts, such that the medium harmonizes with the message.

—Jeff Gibson