

# Things He Carried

BY STEPHEN MAINE



*View of Kim Jones's exhibition, showing (foreground, left to right) Atlas, 1972-73-2007, and Mudman Structure (Large), 1974; at Luckman Gallery, Luckman Fine Arts Complex, California State University, Los Angeles. Photo Brian Forrest.*

*All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Luckman Fine Arts Complex.*



*Kim Jones's retrospective features sculptures, graphic works, and the documentation and relics of Mudman, his earth-smeared performance alter ego, who appears in a pantyhose mask and foam-rubber headdress with a stick structure on his back.*



**A** talisman, index and summary of the primary preoccupations of the protean Kim Jones, *Atlas* bears a heavy psychic and material burden. It is a 25-foot-long site-specific installation of dozens of rough bundles of wooden sticks, each up to 4 feet high, that are bound together at the center with electrical tape to form snaggy stars. Among these is a disciplined procession of black plastic novelty-shop rats, eyes front. At one end, perched on a stick bundle, is a highly wrought book sculpture, a handmade, elaborately bound tome in which fragments of maps feature prominently. Incorporated into the sculpture is a decades-old object made of foam, gauze, rubber and tape. In a performance photograph of the artist taken in the early 1970s, Jones—naked, long-haired and enviably trim—is seen wielding this very object like a trumpet.

*Atlas* is dated "1972-73-2007" to indicate the 35-year span of its development. (The artist often proceeds in this way, and many works are dated accordingly.) Thus *Atlas*, its recycling of old work into new conveying a sense of circular time with intermittent focus on an evolving piece, restates some key themes that recur throughout "Kim Jones: A Retrospective." The show was curated by Sandra Q. Firmin of the University at Buffalo, State University

of New York, where it was seen last fall, and by Julie Joyce of the Luckman Fine Arts Complex at California State University, Los Angeles, which hosted it last spring. An excellent catalogue (published by the MIT Press) includes an essay apiece by the curators and others by Kristine Stiles and Robert Storr.

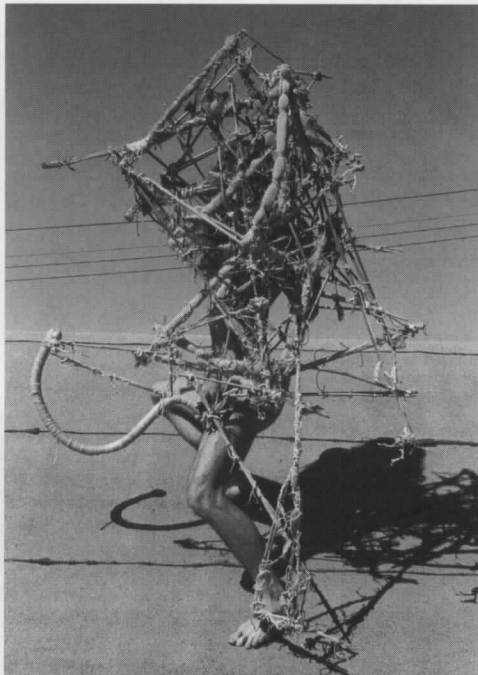
Now at its final stop, the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle, *Atlas* has been redesigned for each venue. In its creepy, goofy solemnity, the work speaks to this mercurial artist's ongoing attempt to both demystify and freight with primal intensity the ritual-based performance and body art that coalesced in his native Southern California in the early 1970s.

Jones made those earthbound, gnarly stars with the assistance of students, training them in his rudimentary yet exacting method. He says the entire effort took about an hour. "It's an easy way to make sculpture," he deadpans,<sup>1</sup> as if that's all there is to it; as if he doesn't know that the form echoes a primitive, ancient device still used in ground combat to halt the advance of vehicles; as if the swarms of them that animated his early 1990s installations at P.S.1 and the Lorence-Monk Gallery in New York didn't electrify those spaces; as if the spiky, bristling forms don't appear to be looking for trouble.





**Little Marine, 1989-99-2005, plastic soldier, acrylic, ink, wire, wood, 72 by 25½ by 12½ inches. Collection Joe Amrhein and Susan Swenson.**



**Roof Sculpture, Venice, Calif., 1973-74. Photo Judy Schaeffer.**



**Foam Rubber House, Venice, Calif., 1973. Photo Judy Schaeffer.**

In 1972, having become impatient with the limitations of the painting he'd done as an undergraduate at Chouinard and greatly interested in the work of Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman, Jones began to experiment in three dimensions, using foam rubber, cheesecloth and bamboo. His earliest sculptures were informed by the efflorescence of assemblage then occurring on the West Coast. Many of its practitioners—Ed Kienholz, Lynn Foulkes, George Herms—considered it a virtue for new work to look old and regarded Pop art—slick, accessible and besotted with consumer culture—as too productlike and much too easy to swallow.

Installations followed, and in 1973 Jones completed the *Foam Rubber House*, outfitting the interior of a small, disused storefront on then-scruffy Venice Beach with bulging and dangling strips of the titular material. There he enacted a number of solo, dancelike performances. The environment provided the setting for at least one photo shoot, yielding a cache of prints that the artist has returned to over time to rework in acrylic and ink.

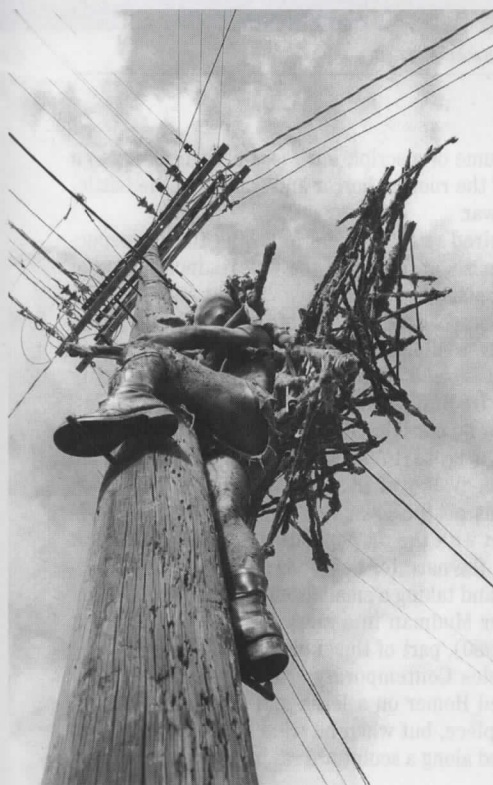
Soon thereafter Jones began attaching sculptures to his body, sometimes wearing them like backpacks by means of a harness. Many of these rough-hewn, vaguely biomorphic constructions have since been put to use in later pieces, as in *Atlas*. The artist refers to them as “roof sculptures” because they are documented in striking,

weirdly timeless black-and-white photographs of him wearing them on the nearly featureless rooftop of his studio building in Venice, Calif. In all the images, Jones's face is obscured, presaging his routine use of the pantyhose mask. Following a few peripatetic appearances on the streets of Los Angeles and Santa Monica wearing an open, latticelike structure of bamboo and cheesecloth, Jones hit on the idea of covering himself with a unifying patina of mud.

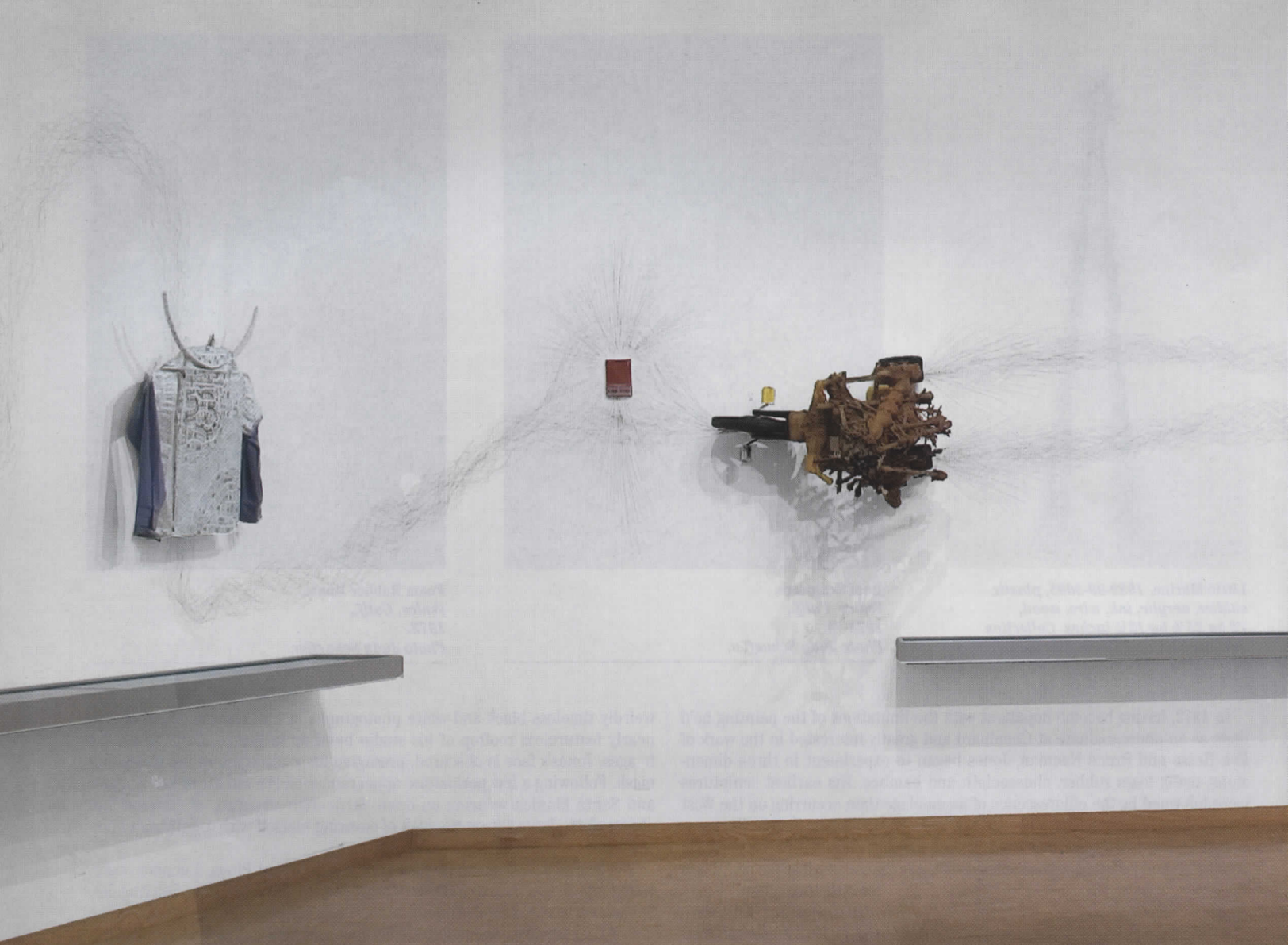
The first major Mudman performance was at Mount Pinos, a condor observation site in Los Padres National Forest just up the coast from Los Angeles. Sponsored by the R. Mutt Gallery, a neo-Dada venue in L.A., Jones spent the day of Oct. 19, 1975, walking the mountain and fielding questions from bird-watchers and hikers. With typical understatement, he often identified himself, when asked, as “an abstract sculpture.” It was the kind of answer that could only inspire more questions.

Throughout the 1970s, Mudman appeared about once a week in Venice and Santa Monica and occasionally in downtown L.A. Before long, he was well known to the Venice police, who were initially suspicious of his startling appearance. Jones attempted to mollify them by invoking the nascent “performance art” movement, and identifying his actions as “an art piece.” Nevertheless, homeless denizens of the city would warn him of the cops on the next block, empathizing with a figure who was, to look at him, a fellow outcast. During this period, Mudman received offerings of money and food from street people and was drafted for an impromptu photo shoot for a punk magazine called *NO!*

The year 1976 was tempestuous for Jones. *Explosion Piece*, an ink drawing from that year, depicts a pair of Mudmanlike figures and includes copious text, hand-lettered in ballpoint pen. A passage reads, “the thing is alive on my back it's moving I can feel it can't you it's shaking the top part is moving vibrating an electric train a worm a wire a big bunch of worthless materialistic shit on my back. . . .” As Mudman, he performed the *Wilshire Boulevard Walk* on Jan. 28, starting from 1 Wilshire Boulevard, near Pershing Square, at the heart of the city's ragged downtown, and moving west to Santa Monica State Beach along the mercantile spine of the metropolis, passing through diverse neighborhoods along its 18 miles. The performance took 12 hours—roughly from sunrise to sunset. A photographer traveling by car met up with him at numerous points along the way, but presumably Jones himself was the only witness to its entirety. On Feb. 4 he reprised the walk at night, leaving downtown at sunset and arriving at sunrise at the ocean's edge.







View of several coat and vehicle sculptures with site-specific graphite drawing on wall; at Luckman Gallery. Photo Brian Forrest.

Three weeks after the second *Wilshire Boulevard Walk*, Jones did a performance called *Rat Piece* at the Union Gallery on the CalArts campus, at the invitation of director Frank Brown. (The venue, situated a few hundred yards from the Luckman Gallery, where the retrospective was seen last summer, is now gone.) Video documentation of *Rat Piece* is included in the retrospective. The video is badly degraded, and its continued relevance hinges on the fact that, toward the end of its 28 minutes, Jones pours lighter fluid on three caged rodents and then tosses in lit matches, igniting them. Screaming in pain, they burn to death. Jones kneels and screams in unison. The public outrage and protest that followed the performance, meticulously documented in a self-published book, were sufficient to prevent him from performing for two years. Brown lost his job in the ensuing uproar; Jones was found guilty of cruelty to animals in an L.A. municipal court and fined. Even today, 31 years later, *Rat Piece* still smolders.

Jones has said that, in conceiving *Rat Piece*, which essentially reenacts a leisure-time activity of soldiers in Vietnam, it was important that the audience “actually smell something burning and dying” in the context of an art piece.<sup>4</sup> Here, he was not searching for a metaphor, but for a way to put the spectator into direct contact with the reality of death. Even Jones’s staunchest apologists fumble a bit when trying to defend this brutal work. Some cite the hypocrisy of the outraged members of the audience, who failed to intervene. But the cruelty that *Rat Piece* entailed is undeniable. Its significance is linked to its context. By incorporating a form of animal torture as an ele-

ment of an artwork, like a costume or a script, *Rat Piece* brought home to a safe campus art gallery a bit of the routine horror and trauma of the battlefield, a psychic souvenir of the war.

Exhibition of the video inspired vitriolic press following the retrospective’s Buffalo debut.<sup>5</sup> Conspicuously absent from the CalArts incarnation of the show was any reference whatsoever to *Rat Piece*. The curators and the artist felt its inclusion would “overshadow” the rest of the show.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Luckman Gallery is considerably smaller than UB, with no “project space” in which to sequester such a work. Elizabeth Brown, chief curator of the Henry Gallery, plans to include the entire Buffalo checklist.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, *Rat Piece* should be considered in the context of the artist’s ongoing use of rat imagery, right up to *Atlas*. Jones’s texts are one way in. An absorbing prose piece titled “Valley of Death,” published in *High Performance*, describes a delirious postperformance fantasy in which Jones reveals an intimate involvement with the rat population of L.A.’s MacArthur Park. In this dark, surreal tale, the narrator befriends a group of them, buying an injured one a doughnut and taking a small group of them to a movie.<sup>8</sup> Jones reveals a kinder, gentler Mudman in a story he likes to tell about *Hollywood Boulevard Walk* (1980), part of the “Public Spirit” performance series sponsored by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). He planned to put a pet rat named Homer on a leash and take him along for a walk as a component of the piece, but when he tried to lasso Homer, the rodent fainted. Mudman dragged along a sculptural rat instead.



**Ideas about mobility and disability lurk in wall sculptures hiding children's wheeled vehicles under sticks, tape, rags and acrylic paint.**

**D**espite the variety of Jones's output, an underlying workmanlike temperament holds it all together in some kind of rickety unison. Although he is primarily known for performance, he is a prodigious maker of things. Ideas about mobility and disability lurk in sculptures that use as an armature a child's wheeled toy, such as a pint-sized lawnmower or shopping cart. In *Tricycle* (1973-99), a three-wheeler is camouflaged almost completely with sticks, tape, rags and cord, and augmented with acrylic paint and plastic toy soldiers. The vehicles are mounted with their wheels to the wall, on which Jones sometimes draws swirling lines of graphite, like a jet plane's slipstream.

As installed at Luckman, the retrospective highlighted the artist's graphic work, starting with the social satire of an untitled 1971 ink-on-paper piece in which a platoon of frumpy spectators regards an orgiastic street performance and snaps pictures; one onlooker has a camera mounted on his erect penis. The drawing, like many others, evokes the brittle, theatrical eroticism of the Neue Sachlichkeit artists of the Weimar period. It is also influenced by the skittish, randy late style of John Altoon, with whom Jones had brief but important contact in the early 1960s, when Altoon dropped in on a class Jones attended at the Art Center School, then in downtown L.A.

In a later untitled drawing (1980-2003), the tension between antagonists has become open, epic conflict, and the vocabulary mythological. A wild-eyed St. Sebastianlike character, pierced by numerous arrows and bearing a load of rats on his back, reaches down from the wharf on which he is sprawled into the water below, rescuing—or trying to drown—one of several panicked Cupids. Against the warm buff paper, a coiling arabesque in pale, cold gray, articulated by Jones's febrile black line, circulates through the scene, becoming entrails, seaweed, rope and musculature. The masts and rigging of a ship in the background morph into a Mudman-style structure for an emaciated figure who stands thigh-deep in the water, holding a huge fish. H.C. Westermann's brooding "Death Ship" series looks buoyant in comparison.

In *Figure* (1974-2002), acrylic paint in concrete gray plays off the warm tones of photographic emulsion in a piece typical of Jones's altered perfor-

*continued on page 239*



*Untitled, 1980-2003,  
acrylic and ink on paper,  
18 by 24 inches.*



*Figure, 1974-2004,  
acrylic and ink on photograph,  
17½ by 23½ inches.*



# Jones

*continued from page 189*

mance documentation. The photo shows Jones in a ceremonial posture, nude and harshly lit against a blank backdrop, wielding an early bamboo structure. The image is embellished with a queasy mix of entrails, struts and wires that arise from the figure's head and obscure his face. Reimagining his identity and rewriting his history, the former wheelchair-bound boy here remakes himself as a gargantuan double amputee who towers above a ruined city on stumps of legs.

Represented in the show are the many map-like "War Drawings" that Jones has worked on intermittently for decades, in which battalions of Xs and dots skirmish endlessly in urban terrain demarcated by pencil lines and repeatedly revised by erasure. Jones doesn't remember when he began to make the "War Drawings," so elemental an extension are they of his recuperative boyhood fantasy world. He began to exhibit them seriously about 15 years ago. That graphic vocabulary has become a staple of his studio practice and earned him a spot in "Mapping," curated by Storr for New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1994.

Storr also included Jones in his "Think with the Senses/Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense" for the 52nd Venice Biennale this year. For his installation in the Arsenale, Jones hung a large *War Drawing* on canvas and extended its intricate network outward to cover much of the available wall space. This was flanked by *Trench Coat #1* (2004) and *Trench Coat #2* (2005), examples of a series of works in which



**White Trench #2, 2005, acrylic, ink, cloth, wood, approx. 45 by 40 by 5 inches.**  
*Courtesy Pierogi, Brooklyn.*

Jones depicts on his old coats and jackets the architectural components of the "War Drawings," minus troops, tanks and enemy fire. These are crisply rendered in pristine black and white acrylic. In them, and in works like *Puffy Jacket* (2004), which is included in the retrospective, incorporated bits of wood emphasize the sculptural aspect of the work, nod to the Mudman structure, allude to cumbersome military gear and suggest that this artist, like all others but more than most, carries his never-ending battles with him wherever he goes. □

1. Interview with the author, May 28, 2007.
2. Interview with the author, September 2006. A heavily edited version of this interview appeared in the November 2006 issue of *The Brooklyn Rail*.
3. Key texts by Jones are collected in *Unwinding the Vietnam War: From War Into Peace*, ed. Reese Williams, Seattle, Real Comet Press, 1987.
4. Interview with the author, September 2006.
5. See Richard Huntington, "Plenty of Vermin," *Buffalo News*, Nov. 10, 2006.
6. Interview with the author, Mar. 24, 2007.

7. Ibid.

8. *High Performance*, Winter 1979-80, pp. 2-8.

*"Kim Jones: A Retrospective," curated by Sandra Q. Firmin and Julie Joyce, originated at the UB Art Gallery, State University of New York, Buffalo [Oct. 19-Dec. 17, 2006], and traveled to the Luckman Fine Arts Complex at California State University, Los Angeles [Mar. 24-May 19, 2007]. It currently on view at the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle [Oct. 20, 2007-Jan. 20, 2008].*

Author: Stephen Maine is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn.