

Nicholson Geoff, 'The summer of art - Kim Jones, walking wounded'. ArtReview, nr.11, May 2007, p.85-91.

Kim Jones

walking wounded

ONE DAY IN 1983, in Washington, DC, the artist Kim Jones walked from the White House to the Vietnam Memorial, a common enough route, but Jones's excursion was made extremely uncommon by the fact that he had transformed himself into his alter ego, Mudman. This involved coating his body in mud, pulling a thick nylon stocking over his head, putting on a sort of foam headdress and then strapping to his back a large lattice structure made of wooden slats, tree branches, wax, wire, tape and whatnot. He also had a glove on his left hand from which a number of long wooden spikes protruded all the way to the ground. The effect was, and remains, visually and conceptually compelling.

When I talked to Jones about it, he said, "I was stopped along the way by a reporter who seemed worried, and asked if I was trying to get arrested. I overheard some cops say, 'He's OK. He's the Mudman.'"

Mudman made his first appearances in and around Los Angeles during the mid-1970s; these, in turn, had evolved out of a series of performances and installations, often in Venice, California, where Jones lived at the time. One of Mudman's most famous walks was a 12-hour trek along the 18 miles of Wilshire Boulevard, from downtown to the ocean in Santa Monica. Over the years he has also walked in San Francisco, Chicago, London, Rome, Germany and Switzerland. Sometimes his own faeces have been added to the mud, while in Rome he didn't use mud at all, preferring yoghurt and cottage cheese.

The walking artist is, of course, no novelty. In Britain we're thoroughly aware of the exploits of Richard Long and Hamish Iulston, and although Jones knows their work too, he says his own output is more influenced by the work of Eva Hesse, Vito Acconci and Joseph Beuys.

Mudman is a living sculpture, one that invokes a whole raft of visual associations. He looks grotesque yet vulnerable, sinister perhaps, but not humourless. The idea of the man made out of mud is as old as the Golem or Adam, and certainly Jones's creation has elements of ancient religion: part shaman, part witch doctor, part Wicker Man. The structure on his back looks like broken wings, like a cross he has to bear.

But Mudman also looks like something out of pop culture, a superhero, though one of the more blighted sort, like Swamp Thing or the Incredible Hulk, and it's not at all clear what superpowers he has, if any. The stocking, without holes for eyes or mouth, serves as a blank mask, more inscrutable than Batman's or Spiderman's, though like them he definitely seems to be hiding something. At the same time this very blankness allows viewers to project their own fantasies and interpretations onto him.

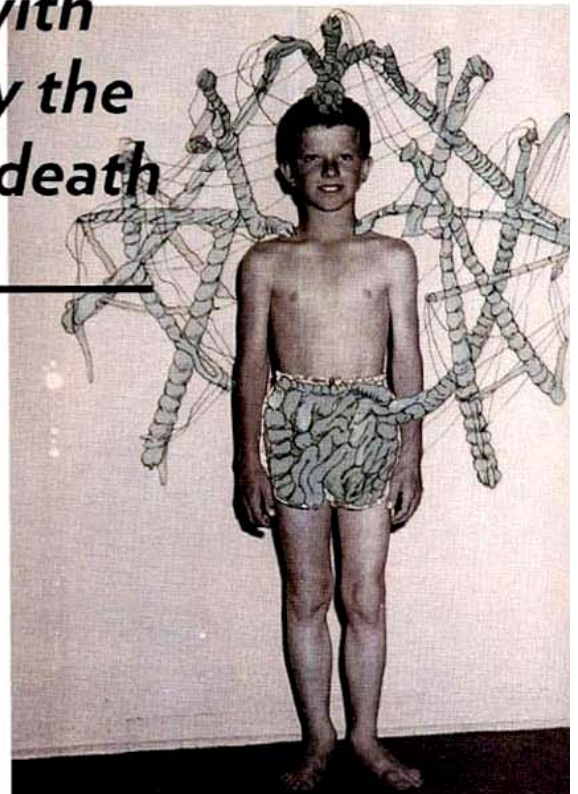
Yet for all the mythic aura surrounding Mudman, some of his origins are firmly rooted in Jones's autobiography. Between the ages of seven and ten he suffered from Perthes disease, one of nature's more savage little jokes, a condition that only affects children, restricting blood supply to the ball-and-socket joint at the top of the femur, and causing the thigh bones to soften and break. It's not strictly curable, but it will pass of its own accord if the body is protected and allowed to heal itself. Bed rest, leg braces and wheelchairs tend to be part of the process, and Jones endured them all. Like a number of artists before him, long stretches of Jones's childhood were spent in bed, where he drew, read comics, played with toy soldiers and let his imagination take him away from his troubling immediate circumstances.





**The rats screamed
and Jones screamed
right along with
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rats burned to death**

Kambou 1999



above: *Untitled*, 1980, ink on paper. Photo: Dorothy Zeidman. Courtesy Luckman Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles

right: *Untitled*, 1955-99, acrylic on colour photorepy, 45 x 28 cm. Photo: Alan Weiner. Courtesy the artist and Pierogi, Brooklyn

preceding page: *Wilshire Boulevard Walk*, 28 January 1976. Photo: Jeff Gubbins. Courtesy Luckman Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles



Untitled, 1980-2003, acrylic and ink on paper, 46 x 61 cm. Photo: Alan Weiner. Courtesy the artist and Pierogi, Brooklyn

Jones recovered in due course. One of his legs is a little shorter than the other, he tells me, but that doesn't stop him walking. Nor for that matter did it stop him enlisting as a Marine in 1966 and going to Vietnam a year later. If you were an artist looking to perform a radical and perverse gesture in mid-1960s America, this was about as good as it gets. "I wanted a very friendly reaction", he says, "but the one I got from peace-loving friends was horror."

I'm not sure whether Jones had a good or a bad war. We know that it involved doing a certain amount of walking, or at least marching, but his main job was delivering mail. That meant he wasn't involved in front-line action, and although some people might regard that as a lucky break, a dedicated soldier might equally regard it as a failure and frustration. Nevertheless, the war provided him with images for his art. Mudman looks like a combatant but also like a war victim. It also gave Jones material for his performance called *Rat Piece* (1976).

The things that bring attention and notoriety to a young artist have a tendency to come back and haunt him or her in mid-career; think of Karen Finley, the yam and her bottom. In 1976 at the Union Gallery on the California State University campus in LA, Jones, dressed as Mudman, poured barbecue lighter fluid over three caged rats and ignited them. The rats screamed and Jones screamed right along with them, but only the rats burned to death.

There were some predictable and not unreasonable repercussions: Jones was prosecuted for cruelty to animals and wisely pleaded no contest, the organiser of the performance was fired by the university, there were the usual declarations of support and condemnation, and for a short while Jones was *persona non grata* in the Los Angeles artworld.

In an essay in the catalogue for the Kim Jones retrospective that's currently on show at the Luckman Gallery in LA, Kristine Stile claims that by burning the rats 'Jones materialized the underlying cultural psychosis related to the Vietnam War', to which the only sane response is, "Oh no he didn't". Clearly *Rat Piece* is concerned with suffering; it may indeed be concerned with the war in Vietnam – setting fire to rats was apparently regarded as R & R by some of Jones's cohorts in the Marines. But the objection is surely not that the piece is 'about' suffering, but that it actually causes suffering, and OK, yes, animals and indeed humans die in worse ways every day, but I don't think it's being a hopeless bleeding heart to think that the entreaty 'do no harm' might apply to artists every bit as much as it does to doctors.

When I asked Jones whether, with hindsight, he'd still burn the rats, he said, "Yes I would. Smell is very important. You do not forget smell. You can talk about death. You can write or draw a picture of it, but I gave them [the audience] the smell and the choice. They could have stopped me. Of course some people didn't want the experience. Fair enough. They ran out or were very angry. Also fair enough. But I had to do it. I had to try to get through."

Later, softening just a little, he added, "I have no need to kill rats now, I like rats."

A more salutary consequence of Jones's time in the military is his 'war drawings', works on paper that look like maps or battlefield diagrams, perhaps places where Mudman might walk. They depict a conflict between two opposing factions, Xs and dots, and Jones has been working and reworking them over the years, sometimes for decades, making erasures, tracking, as it were, troop movements and changing battlefronts.

