

Wadsworth Jarrell *Somethin' Else*

January 9 - February 26, 2026

Opening Reception

Friday, January 9, 2026, 6 - 8pm

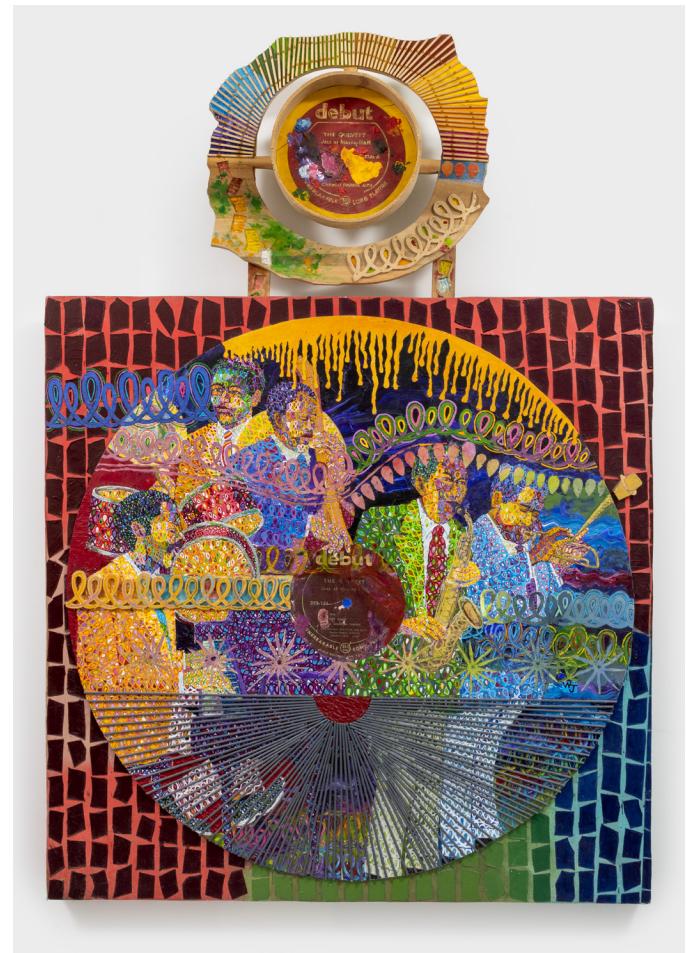
Panel Discussion

Details forthcoming, coinciding with Black History Month.

Jenkins Johnson is pleased to present *Somethin' Else*, our first solo exhibition of Wadsworth Jarrell, co-founder of the artist collective AFRICOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) established 1968 during the Black Liberation Movement. This exhibition highlights the breadth and depth of his practice, featuring works ranging from 1958, directly after Jarrell's graduation from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, to 2018, works created during the groundbreaking traveling exhibition *Soul of a Nation*.

Somethin' Else, Jenkins Johnson's second presentation at 385 Broadway, opens Friday, January 9, 2026, from 6-8pm, and will be on view through Thursday, February 26, 2026. The exhibition coincides with a new retrospective of Wadsworth and Jae Jarrell at the Albany Museum of Art opening January 2026. A panel discussion will be held coinciding with Black History Month, details forthcoming.

Jarrell's relentless creative spirit produced a body of work which defies both genre and medium. Jarrell's multifaceted practice is difficult to summarize, as cultural context significantly evolved and his aesthetic sensibilities remained fluid in response to our changing social and political landscapes. Beginning in the 1950s with expressionistic depictions of street life and jazz clubs of Chicago, Jarrell's practice grew more vibrant and energetic with the advent of the 1960s. As part of OBAC (Office of Black American



Jazz at Massey Hall, 1999

Culture) producing the influential Wall of Respect mural, and co-founding AFRICOBRA in the 1960s, Jarrell's work became patently political as he and his cohort sought to create radical art for radical times.

By the 1980s, Jarrell's scope expanded to include sculpture, both freestanding and in conjunction with paintings, which grew more textured and abstract, inspired in part by the drawings of his children. By the 2000s, Jarrell's practice found ways to unify the lessons of the prior 50 years and stood as testament to a lifetime of creative exploration. Above, *Jazz at Massey Hall* illustrates one example of his mature period.

While the aesthetics of the work would dynamically evolve through multiple distinct phases, the practice as a whole would remain unshakably committed to celebrating Black culture. Inspired by the rich history of African American music, Jarrell's work



Above: *Quarter to Five*, 1960

Below: *Tribute to a Head Dress*, 1993

has consistently referenced specific musicians and has sought to visualize music phenomena through rhythm, harmony, and repetition with change in his colors and mark-making. Further exploring Black history through political figures, iconic athletes, textual references, archival collage and assemblage objects, Jarrell's use of his art as a political and cultural statement is a lifelong commitment.

This exhibition features work from every decade from the 1950s through the 2010s—illustrating not only Jarrell's enduring creative spirit, but tracing the recurrent threads visually and thematically across his total oeuvre.

Left, we see *Quarter to Five*, 1960, illustrative of Jarrell's practice on the cusp of the AFRICOBRA period. Already, we see Jarrell's interest in vibrant color and the valorization of African diaspora experience, though many of his formal principles were yet to crystallize. By comparison, *Tribute to a Head Dress* was executed more than 30 years later in 1993. Expanding to sculpture, we see a more complex engagement with color, texture, form, and content.

For much of the past 15 years, Jarrell has been subject to significant retrospective acclaim, both as a part of AFRICOBRA and as an individual artist. In 2026, a new retrospective on Wadsworth & Jae Jarrell titled *Wadsworth & Jae Jarrell: Art Making / World Making* will debut at the Albany Museum of Art, Albany, Georgia, Jarrell's home town. This will be the first dedicated museum exhibition on the Jarrells since *Heritage: Wadsworth and Jae Jarrell*, at Cleveland Museum of Art, 2018.

Jarrell has been part of group shows organized by many of the most influential young curators of our times, including Naomi Beckwith, Rujeko Hockley, and Adrienne Edwards. Recent exhibitions include *Edges of Ailey* at Whitney Museum of American Art, 2024; *AfriCOBRA: Nation Time* in the 58th Venice Biennale, 2019; *AfriCOBRA: Messages to the People*, Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, 2018; *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which debuted at Tate Modern, London, UK, 2017, and traveled to Crystal Bridges, Brooklyn Museum, The Broad, DeYoung, and Museum

of Fine Art, Houston; *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85*, which debuted at Brooklyn Museum, 2017, and traveled to ICA Boston; *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, which debuted at Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2015, and traveled to ICA Philadelphia.

Widely collected, his work is in institutional collections including Museum of Modern Art, New York; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C.; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit; and High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

Biography

Wadsworth Jarrell was born in Albany, Georgia, in 1929, where early on his family encouraged him to embrace his creative ambitions. After serving in the armed forces in the early 1950s, Jarrell settled in Chicago where he attended art school and worked a variety of jobs. His practice rapidly developed throughout the turbulent cultural conditions of the Civil Rights era, capturing images of street life and jazz clubs while growing increasingly colorful and expressive.

In 1967, OBAC (Office of Black American Culture) put together **the Wall of Respect**, the first mural of its kind in the United States. Collaboratively conceived and painted by fourteen artists, the mural celebrated

Black history and inspired a whole generation of muralists around the country. Art historian Michael D. Harris noted that within eight years, approximately 1500 murals around the nation were painted in the model of The Wall of Respect. Jarrell's contribution to the mural celebrated rhythm and blues. In the subsequent months, Jarrell and fellow participant Jeff Donaldson would discuss the broader need for an art movement to encapsulate the new political consciousness of their life and times—this concept would plant the seed for AFRICOBRA. While this was transpiring, Jarrell married his wife Elaine A. Johnson, best known as "Jae," in 1967.

In 1968, Jarrell and Donaldson put together an informal discussion group along with fashion designer Jae Jarrell, printmaker Barbara Jones-Hogu, and painter Gerald Williams. Through their dialog, they established a set of tenets about how art could serve the Black community—this became the foundations of **AFRICOBRA**, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. The group discussed the importance of vibrant “Cool Ade” [sic] color, visual rhythm, repetition with change, symmetry, positive imagery depicting Black people, clear messages communicated through text, and a variety of other concepts which would help the medium and message harmonize. They sought to make work which operated outside of institutional art standards, defying conventions of the western art canon; instead, they wanted work which was made for the contemporary Black community, celebrated Black history, and envisioned a liberated future. *Homage*



Homage to a Giant, 1970



The Africobra, 1992

to a Giant, below, stands as a key example of the AFRICOBRA style, and is one of Jarrell's masterpieces from the early AFRICOBRA period. Dedicated to el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (Malcolm X) and featuring text from Ossie Davis's eulogy to him, the painting's dynamic blend of color, form, figure, and text exemplifies the collective's goals.

The importance of Black family was also a fixture in AFRICOBRA dialog, inspired in part to Jarrell's growing family at the time—Wadsworth Jr., also known as Jerry, would be born in 1968 and was a regular fixture at early AFRICOBRA meetings, and their second child Jennifer was born thereafter.

AFRICOBRA's first major group show, *AFRICOBRA 1: Ten in Search of a Nation*, would debut at the **Studio Museum in Harlem** in **1970**, and subsequently traveled to Boston and Chicago. A sequel show titled *AFRICOBRA II* debuted at the Studio Museum in 1971, and would travel to even more venues. *AFRICOBRA III* would debut at Howard University in 1973, coinciding with the Jarrells relocating to Washington DC as Wadsworth had taken a teaching position at Howard, around the birth of their third child, Roslyn.

One of the great culminations of AFRICOBRA's ambitions would transpire in **1977**, when AFRICOBRA was tasked with representing visual art of the United States at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, better known as **FESTAC'77**, in Lagos, Nigeria. Envisioned as

a global conference celebrating the diverse culture of the African diaspora globally, FESTAC brought together more than 16,000 creatives from around the world to share the unique cultural perspectives of Black people globally. Today considered a watershed moment for global Black consciousness, FESTAC'77 will be subject to a forthcoming retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, including Jarrell's artwork.

The painting ***The Africobra*** (1992), left, commemorates the early years of the group, based on a photograph of the original ten members who took part in the 1970 debut exhibition: the five founders Wadsworth & Jae Jarrell, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu and Gerald Williams, and five recruited members Sherman Beck, Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Omar Lama, Carolyn Lawrence, and Nelson Stevens. A fitting tribute to the influence of those years on his practice, the piece doesn't seek to recapture his exact style from the era, but instead, embraces how his practice evolved and allows his past and present to come together harmoniously.

The Jarrell family relocated again in the late 1970s, when Wadsworth took a teaching position at the University of Georgia. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Jarrell's practice continued to evolve as he began integrating more impasto painting techniques into his work, as well as collage elements, sculpture and wood-working, electronic components, found-objects and assemblage, and a variety of other gestures. All of these would be synthesized into his painting practice, but he would also venture into the making of freestanding sculptures, and wall-mounted works which defy categorization.

Wadsworth & Jae Jarrell subsequently moved to New York for many years, and eventually settled in Cleveland, where they still live and work.

Somethin' Else will be on view at 385 Broadway, 3rd Floor, New York, NY, from Friday, January 9 through Thursday, February 26, 2026. Gallery hours 10am-6pm, Tuesdays through Saturdays. Please send inquiries to info@jenkinsjohnsongallery.com and follow us @jenkinsjohnsongallery on Instagram. All images copyright Wadsworth Jarrell and courtesy the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.