

HOWARD JONES

By Robert Duffy
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The three white Washington University buildings at the corner of Forsyth and Skinker on Washington University's campus exerted a special magnetism for all of us on campus infected with a fascination for the visual arts in the turbulence of the magnificent 1960s.

Gaining access to these buildings and this atmosphere didn't require actually making things or designing things. What mattered was being interested in art and architecture and their histories, and being fascinated by the changes that were braiding together heightened sensitivities toward new art and politics and human behavior.

The real estate is now sewn up as the Sam Fox School of the Visual Arts and Design. But back then – in what seems like a twinkling but now almost a half a century past – the various schools housed in those buildings offered extraordinary excitement. This is not to say that such energy has diminished over the years. Far from it. As a teacher, I go back there every semester to have my batteries recharged and to be schooled by those I am supposed to be teaching. But for those of us who were studying at Washington University back then the institutions, and the men and women who worked there, offered the opportunity to shape ideas, to refocus, to grow and to work for changes in worlds of one sort or another.

All sorts of artists, architects, intellectuals, hippies, poseurs, conservatives, liberals and radicals hung around, along with people who were bewildered or bemused, people who were searching desperately or smugly believed they had found all the answers. In general, however, those who were there were dedicated to looking, learning and producing. There was a certain aura of aesthetic gravitas, perhaps because in the previous two decades Washington University moved into the international arena by having had Philip Guston and

Max Beckmann on the faculty; by having had H.W. Janson not only teaching in the department of art and archaeology and publishing his monumental textbook but also collecting with astonishing perspicacity for the Gallery of Art; and by having had Joe Passonneau in the school of architecture as its dean.

Taken all together, that assembly of thinkers, creators and philosophers congregated something of a work of art itself – fractious, brilliant in many cases, extraordinarily curious and productive. Some were rigorous traditionalists and defenders of pre-modernist doctrines. Others were authentically radical in their promotion of modernism's inclinations toward experimentation and rule-breaking.

One influential representative of the latter was Howard Jones, whose work is the subject of this luminous exhibition at the Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis. Jones was the sort of fellow who broke rules all the time. He was a member of a respected academy but decreed that art was not something that could be taught, and who, it is said, turned his back toward his colleagues at faculty meetings. He was gregarious and friendly but on the other hand did not suffer fools at all.

For these reasons, he attracted detractors and disciples, and his disciples, I thought, were the smartest kids in the room in those days. Without falling into the trap of the cliché, Jones was a model 1960s personage but did not look the part of the artist necessarily. He was a big, vigorous man, fine featured, tough, and although his interests were all over the place he channeled them into discreet directions. His intelligence was sunk deep into the history of his chosen vocation, and that, perhaps, is a reason why he was able to break the rules so successfully.

He also did a good job of living the *vie bobème*, without being at all prissy about it. He and his wife, the late artist Helen Jones, whom everyone called Wiz, and his daughter, Brandyn, who has contributed so much to this show, lived upstairs in a building that was originally a mounted police station on Newstead Avenue between Laclede and West Pine. Legend had it that the ransom money from the Greenlease kidnapping made it into the building and never made it out. And on top of that, so the story goes, the building was – is I guess – haunted. Jones found it much to his liking, one guesses, because its generous spaces were so accommodating of living and working at the same time. Another part of the legend was the parties, which were fantastic.

Howard William Jones was born in Ilion, New York in 1922, and came into his own as an artist in the 1950s. His work in the '50s displayed the sort of ecstatic freedom characteristic of abstract expressionism, both in its non-representational characteristics and its vigor. By the time I knew him, however, he had made a turn toward technology.

But as his colleague and friend, the art historian Udo Kultermann noted, “Technology was never a goal for Howard Jones – it was a vehicle he used to express changing perceptions of reality in a continuously poetic and artistic manner.” Sound was an important part of this exploratory process. As was light.

Light is, of course, fundamental to all creation. Always, forever, it has captivated and energized us. All of art is dependent upon it, as are all biological functions. Jones was drawn to it like a great genius of a moth, and his fascination revealed itself in various ways here at the gallery. This show, mounted in his memory, provides a sense of the durability of Jones’s work with light by connecting it to more recent work being shown in installations and exhibitions in the Grand Center performing arts district now.

Across the street from the gallery, at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, is a mesmerizing, *tour de force*

tribute to the work of the late Dan Flavin. And all around the Pulitzer building and the Bruno David Gallery are installations that form “The Light Project.” This includes work by the Danish artist Ann Lislegaard; by Sebastian Hungerer and Rainer Kehres, from Karlsruhe, Germany; and by Spencer Finch and by Jason Peters, both from New York City.

“Memory and Refraction” at Bruno David represents only a flash of Jones’s total body of work and his work with light in particular. A fine retrospective was at the Washington University Gallery of Art in 1993, and, fittingly, the show was a collaboration of artists, curators, art historians and engineers. As a testament to Jones’s vitality and energy, it took something of a village to put together what he assembled largely on his own in that magical, haunted series of spaces on Newstead Avenue.

In the years immediately before his death in 1991, he and Wiz Jones lived and worked together at a beautiful place in Missouri’s Arcadia Valley south of St. Louis. There, his attention was tuned to the natural landscape, and he portrayed it and its denizens with a focus as sharp, crisp and inventive as that used for these electrified manifestations of his talent.

But for me – perhaps because I first saw these works in the 1960s when the lights were coming on for me in regard to the art of our time – the light paintings continue to affect me most directly, and hang in my memory and my imagination. When their switches are thrown and they go dark, their ghosts remind me most indelibly of Howard Jones and his sorcery and the pleasure they have provided me all these years.

—Robert W. Duffy

Robert W. Duffy is the associate editor of the St. Louis Beacon and former cultural news editor of the St. Louis Post Dispatch. This essay is one in a series of the gallery’s exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.