

# **Ulysses Jenkins: A Griot for the Electronic Age**

by

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Throughout Africa, Griots have been the keepers of group history, storyteller/historians who disseminate the cultural myths of their communities. Their narratives are frequently presented in the form of songs and poetry, reflecting the powerful African oral tradition that influences and pervades so much of African American history and expressive culture. In the new century, many African American visual artists have continued the tradition of the Griot. The engaging narrative artworks of such major luminaries including Aaron Douglas, Romare Bearden, Lois Jones, Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, Tom Feelings, Faith Ringgold, and hundreds of other Black artists reflect the tragedies and triumphs of their people in the United States since their forced removal from their African homelands. Their creative efforts inform, educate, and persuade; their storytelling in visual form has made the tradition of African American art a unique feature of American art history.

Viewers of these artworks are accustomed to the traditional forms of visual art: paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and photographs. These genres have been effective in presenting major but often hidden themes and events of African American history to large audiences. Many young people who rarely learn in school about Black resistance figures like Joseph Cinque, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, A. Phillip Randolph, and many others find alternative sources in African American narrative artworks. In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new forms reflecting dramatic technological advances have made art an even more effective mechanism to sustain a more accurate vision of Black history and culture. Increasingly, contemporary artists of all racial and ethnic backgrounds have turned to video and performance to express their visions of self and society. These forms expand the boundaries of the visual arts, intensifying an interdisciplinary mode of visual creativity and expression. For African American artists, they provide an exceptional opportunity to reach larger audiences and to extend the tradition of the African Griot into the complex demands and responsibilities of the electronic and information age.

In Southern California, Ulysses Jenkins has set the qualitative standard for these new genres of visual art. A longtime artistic presence in the Los Angeles area, he has combined mural painting, performance art, video production, and music to present his stories and ideas to people of all backgrounds. His multifaceted accomplishments have made him a nationally respected figure whose work has added a dynamic dimension to the excellence of the African American artistic community in the greater Los Angeles area. His prolific exhibition record and his numerous awards and fellowships have generated the high esteem he enjoys among fellow artists and among the educated art public.

Born in 1946, Jenkins has lived most of his life in Southern California, with brief forays over the years to other American locales. When he was ten years old, his family moved to the West Side of the city, settling in an integrated neighborhood. His early experiences there both fostered his understanding of American racism and encouraged the strongly multicultural consciousness informing his artwork throughout his career. Like most young Black children in such environments, Ulysses Jenkins encountered vivid personal racial affronts. He recalls, for example, one dramatic incident where the mother of a white friend told her son that Jenkins would not be allowed in their yard. For African Americans, such experiences usually have far reaching consequences, reminding them of their perpetual “otherness” and marginality in a white dominated society.

The 60s rock and roll culture and the greater spirit of social protest and counter cultural transcendence of that tumultuous era deeply influenced the young Jenkins. In high school, he made art his major focus of study; he found art far preferable to the academic studies where he performed indifferently. He recalls that he was never truly encouraged to pursue higher education like his white counterparts. He felt instead that he was regarded as a token Black in an environment with a serious if rarely acknowledged racist social and academic climate.

After graduating from high school in 1964, Jenkins attended an historically Black college in the South, Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Majoring in art, he immersed himself in the historic struggles for civil rights sweeping the nation and transforming the moral climate of America. During his five years at Southern, he developed his art and internalized the resistance spirit that would eventually infuse his murals, performances, and videos. He regularly produced politically oriented paintings for the civil rights agitation of the times. He was also regularly exposed to the overt Southern racism that dominated the national news. Among other things, there were cross burnings on campus and surveillance by police and the FBI. Anyone with long hair in the fashion of the times was presumptively a dangerous radical, subject to police harassment and taunts and even violence by the local white populace.

Throughout college, Jenkins also experienced a curious but influential dualism. During the academic year, he participated vigorously in the social agitation of the Black community and during summer breaks in Los Angeles, he discovered the California “summer of love” youth music and drug culture that made the state a magnet for disaffected young people throughout the nation and elsewhere.

Following his graduation with a BA in painting and drawing, Ulysses Jenkins returned to Los Angeles, married, and found employment at the Los Angeles County Probation Department. Before undertaking these responsibilities, he sought work at various local art galleries, an experience he remembers as unusually racist and distasteful. From 1970 to 1972, he worked with “incorrigible” kids at the Central Juvenile Hall, a penal institution with a justifiably harsh reputation.

This professional experience similarly influenced his artwork, especially in the murals he created later in the 1970s. He found himself listening to young people whom society regarded as superfluous and hopeless. He taught them art and assisted them in designing various sets for dramatic performances; these experiences later inspired him to pursue his own professional role as a performance artist. He realized that these young people, many of whom were abused and disturbed, nevertheless had their own stories and could reveal impressive creativity when properly stimulated and encouraged by sensitive adults.

Despite his personal gratification from this work, Ulysses Jenkins felt a compelling need to pursue his own artistic inclinations. Resigning from the Probation Department, he moved in 1972 to the offbeat beach community of Venice, where he became an active participant in its alternative lifestyle and expressive culture. He also observed the vibrant mural works being created at the time and met several of the most prominent muralists in the Venice area. Appropriately inspired, Jenkins began to paint murals in the process of extending his personal artistic vision.

His first effort, “The Rat Trap,” was located in a heavily trafficked area at the beach. Painted in 1972, this satirical acrylic and oil mural remained in existence for three years. (Many of Jenkins’s works, including “The Rat Trap,” can be seen at his official website: [www.ulyssesjenkins.com](http://www.ulyssesjenkins.com)). It represented an early example of the artist’s commitment to storytelling, using himself as the central communicator in this visual narrative. He included a nude self-portrait, an image of a young Griot sitting outside a freeway on-ramp that read “Distorted Dreams.” He sought to make sense of himself and of his rapidly changing world. Modeled after Rodin’s famous “Thinker,” the mural combines surrealistic and pointillist form and exceptionally vibrant color to offer a perplexing and frightening vision of early 70s life in America.

Jenkins employed numerous symbols to express his frustration and hope. Directly to the left of the self-portrait were two menacing snakes, signifying the oppressive rules of society that the artist and millions of his young contemporaries sought to abandon or escape. He also depicted skulls and money at the top of the composition to reveal a smoggy and menacing ambiance over the downtown commercial center of Los Angeles, intensifying the artist's sense of the oppression of modern social life.

The other mural details reflected various ways that young people in particular sought to escape the traps they faced. The foliage in the front part of the composition was a field of marijuana plants; he also painted a Mr. Goodbar wrapper, suggesting the "candy-like" quality of the extent drug culture that too often sought easy answers to complex problems. To complete Jenkins's perception that drugs were a false way out, he added a bridge leading to an unknown destination. If not drugs, then how does a person find a meaningful existence in the crass world of modern capitalism?

Finding the countercultural world of Venice increasingly intense, Ulysses Jenkins fled the U.S. mainland for the big island of Hawaii in 1973. For two and a half years, he worked in a hotel and gained needed distance from the Southern California youth drug culture. That time proved to be personally and professionally beneficial. He was able to reconnect to the social and political concerns that animated his earlier activities. Equally significant, he found that his Hawaiian experiences contributed valuably to his own consciousness. He noted, for example, how the indigenous Hawaiian population was often ruthlessly exploited and marginalized. Despite the popular rhetoric of extreme racial and cultural tolerance, he discovered that racial hierarchies and cultural discrimination played a powerful role in the political life of the 50th state. As an African American with some American Indian heritage, he identified naturally with these other oppressed people of color. The multicultural consciousness that has dominated Jenkins's mature visual artwork finds many of its sources in his 1970s travels and reflections.

Returning to the Los Angeles area in 1975, he brought a more political focus to the artwork he would shortly produce. Resuming his commitment to mural painting, Jenkins embarked on two mural projects that have contributed impressively to the region's reputation as one of the mural capitals of the world. In Los Angeles, he met Judy Baca, one of the premier muralists in the United States. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, she organized and led one of the most ambitious public art projects in the modern world. Situated in the Tujunga Wash drainage canal in the San Fernando Valley, this massive mural, the longest in the world, involved a close collaboration between mature artists and young people, many of whom were referred by the criminal justice system in Los Angeles.

Baca and her artistic colleagues created a complex people's history of California that documented and celebrated the lives of those ordinarily omitted in conventional historical accounts. Known popularly as "The Great Wall," various sections featured the problems and contributions of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Jews, women, gays and lesbians, and others frequently neglected groups. Baca hired several artists to design and supervise individual sections of this project. With his strong artistic background and extensive experience with troubled young people, Ulysses Jenkins was a natural leader in this monumental effort. Working closely with his young collaborators in 1976, he designed and executed the "Great Wall" section on the California Gold Rush era. Appropriately, Jenkins combined both a Black and a multicultural perspective in his particular mural section. In the same year, Jenkins also completed another major multicultural mural in Los Angeles, painted on an exterior wall of the Department of Motor Vehicles office in South Central Los Angeles. That work also reflected the modern expression of the historical African Griot. One of the earliest freeway murals in the city, it highlighted the contributions of the many racial, ethnic, and national groups that have comprised the California mosaic.

By the late 1970s, Jenkins decided to resume his formal artistic training. Enrolling at Otis Art Institute, he encountered several teacher/mentors who would have a profound influence on his future artistic direction and production. During his intermediary M.F.A. studies there, he worked with many instructors, most notably Charles White. Like almost every other prominent Los Angeles area African American artist of his generation, Jenkins found that White provided enormous support and encouragement. Even now, he maintains that without White, he would not have pursued a sustained artistic career.

At Otis, Jenkins began to explore new possibilities and technologies for his artistic impulses and objectives. He found that video and performance enabled him to broaden his creative horizons and allow access to wider audiences, an especially significant objective for an emerging visual Griot in an age of rapid technological development. He had, in fact, long been fascinated with the video medium. In Venice a few years earlier, he had met a young artist, Michael Zingale, who introduced him to video. Jenkins soon became "hooked." He discovered an affordable way to record various cultural events in the community and to express his compelling drive to counteract common media stereotypes of his fellow African Americans, particularly Black men. In one of his initial video productions, "Remnants of the Watts Festival," recorded in 1972 and 1973, he provided a sympathetic view of the African American cultural expression that emerged from the ashes of the 1965 Watts rebellion. This experience reinforced his view that video, like murals, could effectively correct the negative images of Blacks in conventional media outlets.

This consciousness dominated his M.F.A. studies at Otis Art Institute. He also brought another set of influences to his graduate work, which would equally inform his mature artwork for the next three decades. In the early 1970s, Jenkins had met David Hammons and others involved with Studio Z. This institution encouraged Black artists to show films and slides, play music, and promote other creative expressions. This multidisciplinary focus coincided directly with Jenkins' rapidly developing artistic identity. During his Otis years, he produced various video and performance works that would shortly define his presence and solidify his artistic stature.

In 1978, he produced his first artistic video, entitled "Mass of Images." In this effort, which also combined performance art, Jenkins explored various malicious stereotypes in American media history that have reflected and reinforced the deeper patterns of historical racism in the United States. Drawing on such sources as "Birth of a Nation" and "The Jazz Singer," he calls effective attention to the destructive power of racist imagery; Jenkins was among the first African American artists to explore a theme that has been a staple for more than three decades, including works by such major figures as Betye Saar, Robert Colescott, Mark Greenfield, Renee Cox, and others.

After a brief trip to Europe, Ulysses Jenkins returned to complete his graduate degree. His final student work was a 1979 performance piece entitled "Just Another Rendering of the Same Old Problem." Here he focused on the historical stereotype about African American men: the myth of their over-sexualized identity that the dominant population has fostered (and cherished) as part of the deeper racism of American history and society. In this provocative work, the artist created a set with a video monitor, a dildo, and a pistol. His objective was to expose and eventually destroy the myth of ignorant Black men incapable of controlling their sexual impulses.

Playing the lead role himself, Jenkins began the work by creating a video set-up as the audience entered the gallery. Sitting at a table reading a book (itself an anti-stereotypical image of a Black male), he proceeded to expose the vibrating dildo, which is actually a white penis with a Black face appearing on the video screen for the audience to observe, however shockingly. Deliberately mocking the same blackface motif of minstrel imagery, he proceeded to remove his clothing, revealing pasties with Superman's "S," a rhinestone in his bellybutton, and silver boxer shorts. Further shocking his audience, Jenkins pulled out a mock pistol and shot the dildo with a cardboard projectile (Figure 1).



Figure 1

This dramatic action signifies the African American rejection of the irrational and harmful sexual perceptions about millions of Black men over the years. The ostensibly destructive action of shooting the dildo, in retrospect, becomes an admirable act of self-determination and liberation. The artist himself takes control of the situation, no longer tolerant of white control of Black sexual identity. In shooting the dildo, Jenkins proclaims boldly that African Americans themselves control their own sexual identity, forsaking forever the perverse notion that over-sexualized Black men are driven by carnal impulses alone, and devoid of intellectual ability, creative potential, and mature sexuality.

M.F.A. in hand in 1979, Ulysses Jenkins embarked upon his formal career as a professional visual artist. Until he obtained his present permanent position in Fine Arts at the University of California at Irvine in 1993, he had several shorter-term faculty assignments at various institutions. He also taught video at various youth community centers and schools, drawing effectively on his long and successful experience in helping young adults find productive alternatives and opportunities. Finally, he served as artist-in-residence at several major California art museums in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Jenkins simultaneously intensified his personal work in video art, solidifying his growing national reputation. Early on, he received valuable advice to engage his audiences in the first seven seconds from the late Nam June Paik, one of the acknowledged masters of this visual medium. He produced several works over the next several years and continued to implement the Griot role he had established at the outset of his artistic journey.

Jenkins retained in his video and performance art the social thrust that had earlier informed his public murals. In 1985, he wrote, produced, and directed a work entitled “Peace and Anwar Sadat,” a 21 minute effort combining performance, music, sound, text, and storytelling--a modern version of the African oral tradition that underlies his entire creative identity. This video’s exemplary technical skill is directed to an intriguing fusion of personal reflection and political commentary. At the outset, the artist himself provides an oral tribute to his recently deceased mother, an inextricable source of his broader artistic homage to martyred Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

Poetic and lyrical, the work effectively intersperses cold war news footage with Jenkins’s oral observations and the musical background he has selected. The artist provides a meditation on the close relationships between inner peace and world peace, using images of the world’s frightening flirtations with the Apocalypse during the cold war era from 1945 to the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. Above all, the video is a celebration of courage of Anwar Sadat himself (Figure 2). His historic visit to Israel in 1977 and his subsequent peace treaty with former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin began to crack the longstanding Mideast conflict and deadlock between the two countries. More fundamental, however, Sadat’s boldness in resisting the intransigent attitudes and policies of many of his fellow Arab leaders represented a paradigm shift in international affairs--a shift that led to his own assassination in 1981. This video tribute is accordingly a much deeper celebration of Sadat’s courageous vision, a reminder to audiences that genuine peace requires risk, trust, and structurally new ways of approaching political affairs. That message is as relevant to the present Israeli/Palestinian conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where inflexibility and intransigence on both sides still tragically prevail, as it was when the artist initially produced the work.





Figure 2: Anwar Sadat

Ulysses Jenkins's video works during the 1990s continued his successful quest to adapt an older tradition of poetic communication to the technology of the modern age. "The Nomadics," produced in 1991, evokes a profound view of the African origins of the artist's sustained multicultural perspective. Combining performance with music and dance, this video traces East African peoples' movements and cultural influence, linking them effectively to a convincing vision of the African sources of human civilization. The work is replete with imagery of Africans' artistic and spiritual quests and of their nomadic wanderings throughout the globe. Jenkins uses African American artist Matthew Thomas's engagingly produced sandpaintings throughout the 12-minute video as the metaphorical vehicle of cultural transmission and dissemination. Like hundreds of his African American artistic predecessors and contemporaries, Jenkins discovers and communicates the grandeur of Africa as a unifying signifier for his people's creative accomplishments. And as the African sojourners in "The Nomadics" arrive at such disparate destinations as Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, Indonesia, and Polynesia, audiences can appreciate again the linkages and similarities of all peoples in a racially and ethnically heterogeneous world.

Compellingly photographed and imaginatively edited, the video contains literally scores of details worth critical scrutiny and fuller examination. One early image, for example (Figure 3), is especially noteworthy for its deeper historical and cultural implications. Here Jenkins pictures an old woman whose wizened face merges seamlessly into the tree of life directly above. Her smiling expression suggests nobility and continuity, springing from her African identity and extending to all with the good fortune of coming into contact with her. Significantly, Jenkins selected artist Ruth Waddy to play this role in his loving homage to the matriarchal spirit of the African ancestral homeland. A few knowledgeable viewers can derive even further satisfaction from this video detail. Ruth Waddy herself served for decades as the matriarch of African American art in Los Angeles. Her personal visual contributions and her exceptional support for younger Black artists have justifiably made her a modern legend in the Southern California African American community. By selecting her to symbolize the triumph of spirit pervading “The Nomadics” as a whole, Jenkins reinforces his excellence in documenting his community and validating his history.



Figure 3

He implemented another dimension of this objective in his 1994 video entitled “Secrecy: Help Me To Understand.” Returning to more overt social criticism in this work, Jenkins’s tape investigates American media portrayals of Black men, a theme understandably recurring throughout his career. He focuses effectively on specific visual images of such controversial African American males as Mike Tyson, O. J. Simpson, and Louis Farrakhan, juxtaposed with images of classical Greek tragedy, King Kong, and other provocative details. The artist’s tight and artful editing develops and sustains a persuasive central theme: the recurring media demonization of African American males who dare to stray from tightly constructed, nonthreatening roles in entertainment and athletics.

Jenkins also cleverly underscores his message by highlighting and repeating the image of Sidney Poitier (Figure 4), playing the archetypal “Good Negro.” Appropriated from the film “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner,” Poitier is shown asking plaintively, “Help me to understand. What went wrong? And I don’t mean this morning?” The video then requests viewers to respond to an even more pointed inquiry: You Decide. Jenkins repeats these five-minute segments five times, thus dramatizing and underscoring his view of the repetitive media destruction of notable African American male figures. Throughout American history, the press and other dominant institutions have savagely attacked strong Black men, including militant political activists and assertive entertainers and athletes departing from “acceptable” standards of decorum and docility. The list is long and continuous: Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey, Jack Johnson, W.E. B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Adam Clayton Powell, Malcolm X, Rob Williams, Muhammad Ali, and many others. “Secrecy: Help Me To Understand” invites viewers to contemplate the deeper implications of this tragic reality.

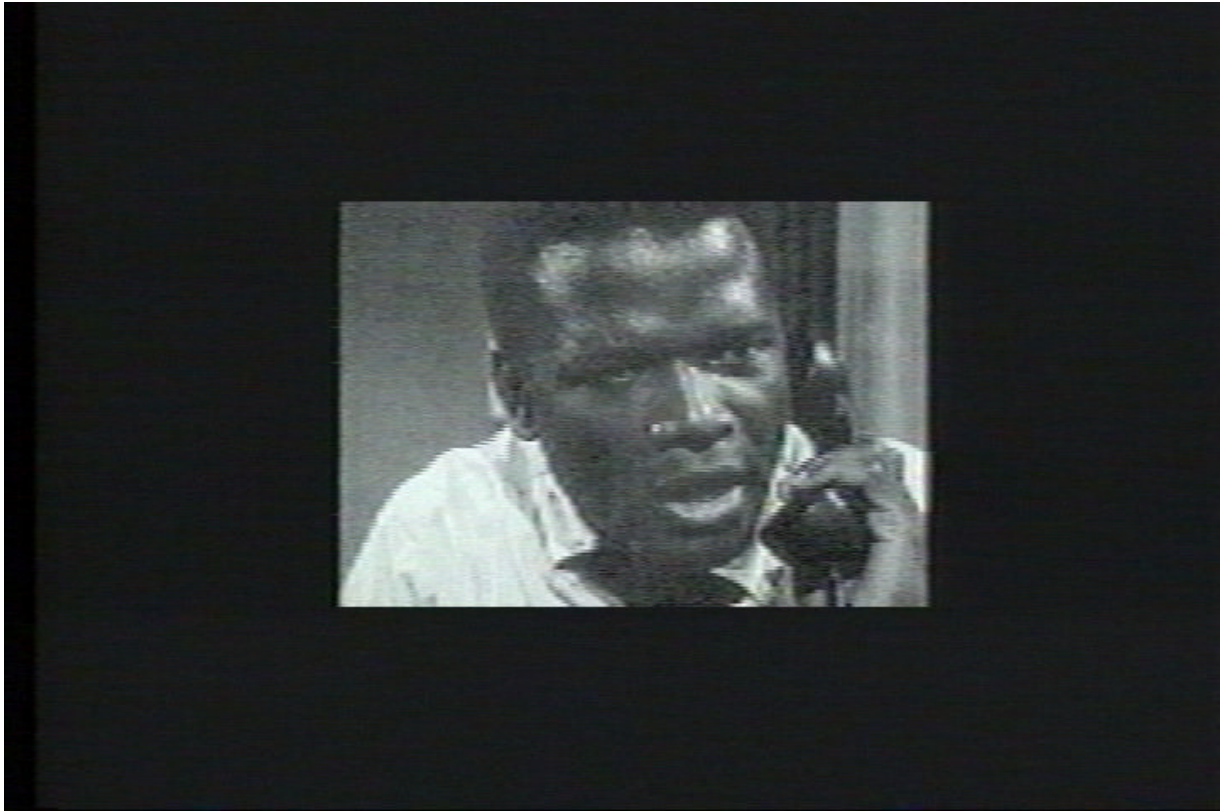


Figure 4: Sidney Poitier

Poitier's question--really an historical lament--has an all too obvious answer. What went wrong is still going wrong. Despite its sophisticated tokenism, perhaps including the election of President Barack Obama, American racism still largely excludes African Americans from the social, professional, political, and commercial mainstream. And it rigidly enforces a behavioral code of exaggerated gratitude and passivity among the few permitted wealth and success in sports and entertainment. Hostility towards Tyson and Simpson, for example, goes far beyond their specific criminal misdeeds. Its venomous character represents, instead, an underlying racial animus that has never truly disappeared from American life. Television and the press have intensified this reaction, allowing millions of whites to express attitudes lying unnervingly close to the surface. Jenkins's video compels a close examination of this problem; his effort, however disturbing, represents the finest expression of socially conscious art.

In 1996, Ulysses Jenkins added a new element to his role as a Griot of the information age. He joined nine other artists in a public art project entitled "Projection Intermission Images." Organized by Karen Atkinson and Sylvia Bowyer, this effort presented visual artworks in the non-traditional venue of a contemporary movie theater. Each of the contributing artists produced one work, in slide form, shown for eight seconds during the intermissions at the AMC Theaters in Pasadena and the Magic Johnson Theaters in Los Angeles. These works were placed in a slide carousel and flashed on the screen three times during the intermission. The works in this project were created to provide movie audiences, many of whom have little contact with traditional art institutions, a unique opportunity to see works from major visual artists. The project sought a dramatic alternative to the usual fare of film trailers, trivia questions, and concession advertisements. These artworks, moreover, reflected provocative themes designed to both entertain and educate.

Jenkins's contribution, "American Apartheid," continued his career-long commitment to oppressed populations of color in the United States. Drawing on his own partial Native American heritage, he offered a trenchant commentary about the human consequences of the white colonization and cultural destruction of the Indian population throughout American history. His slide in the Projections project pictured a Native American man moving into the bankrupt commercial terrain of white America, emphasizing the cynical manipulation of Native American symbols for crass commercial objectives. The colonizing culture has historically appropriated (and trivialized) Indian dress, ceremonies, and customs for profitable use in films, sports events, and numerous other features of dominant popular culture. Meanwhile, Native Americans themselves remain mired in egregious poverty and social neglect. Jenkins's slide invited contemporary movie audiences to reflect on this continuing human tragedy. Like his murals, performances pieces, and videos, moreover, "American Apartheid" offered a broader multicultural vision, a recurring theme among many 20th century African American artists.

For almost 40 years, Ulysses Jenkins has used several artistic forms to pursue the communicative objectives of his creative identity. His efforts in the new millennium have added enormous distinction to his prolific body of work. His short video entitled "Vulnerable," from 2000, is a disquieting psychological treatment of ethnic profiling and stereotyping. Set on a Los Angeles subway late at night, the effort invites audiences to examine the attitudes of the two protagonists: an African American male and a white male. The surrealistic character of "Vulnerable" adds an effective artistic dimension to the long history of emotionally unnerving racial assumptions. Viewers, perhaps especially in urban areas, can find resonance with Jenkins's vision, with parallel examples of racial anxiety far beyond the realm of contemporary transportation; encounters in elevators, stores, government offices, and even on public streets similarly generate feelings of racial distress and confusion. By highlighting such issues in his video, Jenkins invites his audiences to reflect more deeply about issues that millions of Americans prefer to avoid, at least overtly.



Following the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Jenkins responded with a complex, multimedia video entitled "Bequest." Once again reflecting the Griot role pervading his artistic career, he created a composition focusing on the horrific treatment of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Casting Iranian-born Los Angeles artist Amitis Motevalli as the main character, Jenkins portrays her on a spiritual journey of liberation, involving a transformation from oppression to self-empowerment. The video's other features combine musical and poetic elements, extending the artist's creative multidisciplinary vision in his recent work.

"Planet X" in 2005 likewise adds luster to Ulysses Jenkins's artistic reputation. This video's narrative emerges from contemporary predictions about asteroids or comets colliding into the earth. It also draws upon the 6000 year-old Sumerian descriptions of the solar system, including the tenth planet called "Niburu," or "Planet X." The most vivid--indeed, unnerving--features of this production are the linkages to present-day climate changes in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The video addresses issues of global warming and, most devastatingly, the horrific impact of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. The background scenes of the devastation to the historically Black 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans are both a chilling reminder of official governmental neglect and the extraordinary power of art to call attention to major problems of social injustice and political misconduct.

In 2007, Jenkins returned to the African sources of African American musical heritage in his powerfully engaging video "Notions of Freedom." Combining inventive graphic imagery with compelling historical footage (Figure 5), he offers viewers a striking vision of how slave culture transformed African rhythms into an enduring tradition of musical excellence in the new world. This video effectively uses visual documents about the history of jazz, including references to many of the giant figures of that tradition, including Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and above all Miles Davis. Using the sound track by Kei Akagi, who himself played in Davis's last performing band, Jenkins offers his audiences a moving pastiche of imagery that links music with the broader social and political struggles of Americans of African origin. Like other examples of artistic excellence, "Notions of Freedom" simultaneously engages audiences' intellects and emotions. The result is highly satisfying, encouraging durable reflection about the profound historical impact of African American jazz.



Figure 5: Notions of Freedom

Ulysses Jenkins's most recent work is among the most exciting of his career, enabling him to link together many of the themes that have pervaded his artwork over the decades. He has explored the dynamic culture of African Brazilian life in Brazil, allowing him to add new dimensions to his diasporic artistic vision. Interested profoundly in the musical heritage of the Black population there, Jenkins has spent parts of two summers in Salvador, the region with the highest concentration of Blacks in the country. He witnessed and recorded the drum and dance rhythms that clearly emerged from the African motherland. His investigations have led to his most recent video, "Quiet as Kept: Change," an exhilarating tribute to that vibrant musical tradition. Once again, the fusion of visual images and music attracts instant audience attention. Images of African Brazilian women are especially enthralling, showing their relentless resilience even in a Brazilian society of economic deprivation and a legacy of continuing racial discrimination and injustice.

The most dramatic presentation of “Quiet as Kept: Change” occurred on February 27, 2009 at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. There, in an extremely well attended multimedia performance, Jenkins projected the video on the walls of the museum building while performing musically on the stage. Concurrently, the crowd participated energetically in the evening’s events, especially in dancing throughout the main floor of the museum (Figure 6). Among many others, iconic African American artists Betye Saar and Artis Lane, both over 80 years old, joined in the robust activities. Together, this event reflected the energy of Jenkins’s artistry that culminated so effectively in that seminal event.



Figure 6: Quiet as Kept: Change

Beyond his outstanding visual arts accomplishments, Jenkins has been involved in many other musical performances to advance the narrative thrust of his professional existence. His Othervisions Art Band performs and records music that expresses conceptual viewpoints combining experimental blues, funk, spoken word, rock, and hip hop rap style. Defining himself as a new mythmaker, he has sought to reconceptualize African American experiences and to connect them to a more inclusive vision of the human condition.



Ulysses Jenkins has established himself as a visibly successful pioneer among African American artists in using modern technologies to reach ever-wider audiences. Blazing these trails, he seeks even newer ways to extend the honored tradition of the African Griot. While continuing his video efforts, he has begun to examine the Internet for its artistic possibilities. In the early years of the 21st century, he expects to create and present virtual performances on the information superhighway. For a consummate storyteller like Jenkins, all avenues of access in the electronic age are amenable to his creative pursuits. In this world of continuing strife, turmoil, tragedy, and hope, many stories remain to be told. The tradition of the African Griot remains alive and well in the artistry of Ulysses Jenkins.