<u>A House We Should All Know Better</u>

By Brett Busang

If you live in the Brookland neighborhood in Washington, you've probably wandered the lively neighborhood that contains, among other attractions, a Yes Market with decent aisle space; a slew of restaurants of bohemianish countenance, and street-traffic that is neither teeming nor post-apocalyptic. It looks and acts like an established neighborhood with nothing to prove, traditions worth saving, and people who – if you asked them what they thought of the place – might tell you how livable it is. Or how easy it is to get around. A friendly place, but aware that it is not only surrounded by a city to reckon with, but can be just such a place itself.

Brookland can have an edge, as when whites and blacks find they don't share much common ground – even if they must occupy it together. The young have been pouring in while the old keep to their yards and porches. In an ornery mood, black folk might say that they were here first – a very plausible and time-honored claim, given not only the neighborhood's cast and condition – which is sturdily present - but its history as an African-American community. It is a pity that, once a place has established a certain character, that it can be so easily and irrevocably shaken. Yet from all appearances, Brookland is more about sharing than schism and that is what's likely to keep it alive.

I am not sure, when I go to the Yes Market, whether my fellow shoppers are aware that, on an adjacent street, Lois Mallou Jones lived out an astonishingly productive life that included forays into Africa; a Haitian sojourn; New York and Parisian periods that are inimitably brought to life on paper and canvas; innumerable awards; and a prestige that attracted fellow artists, somewhat awed statesmen, and the kind of ordinary people she would pick out of a crowd and invite them, as if to show that human dignity was not obliged to produce a resume, to sit for a painting.

Her house is not remarkable, though it is as solid as an older house can be. It is serene, it is spacious; one might even pronounce it – in light of the limitations that cramp so many other houses – sprawling. (Her studio space, a second-floor aerie that must afford Quincy Street's most spectacular view of Catholic University, could not be anything else. No other house on that street or neighborhood is graced with a similar attachment.) Here you might read a book in one room and eat your breakfast in another. It looks a whole lot different from the front than it does from the backyard, which is what she knew best. It was here, in a second-story studio, that she studied Africans masks; pondered her dual heritages; and painted pictures that attempted to reconcile them. It was from here that she drove, or took a bus, to Howard University, from which she retired in 1977 as a professor emeritus – though she was accorded the "a", as in "Emerita", acquiescent colleagues would not deny her. It was in this house, set just slightly back from the sidewalk, and still in decent repair, that she stood her ground – albeit quietly – against the racism that had preferred light-skinned mediocrities over almost any black person, not only in her early years, but for a life that spanned an entire century. A lot of people survive, but she *overcame*. Her father was the role model minorities of almost any kind desperately need – and so often lack. By day,

he managed a major property; by night, he put himself through law school, from which he graduated at the age of forty. His daughter's career was not circuitous. It began in Boston, accelerated in Washington and New York, and found a permanent niche in both cities. One might qualify her achievements and say that, for a woman of color, she did pretty well. I would qualify *that* and say that, because she was a woman of color, she had to try harder, do better, and ignore such slights as came, almost daily, with being who she was.

Fortunately, she found mentors along the way. Alain Locke advised her to incorporate African motifs while a favorite professor exhorted her to go to Paris – which she did when Howard University, which had hired her after a stint at a North Carolina college. Recognizing her potential, Howard granted her a year's sabbatical, which was fortuitously doubled.

In Paris, she moved a little closer to the aesthetic and stylistic preferences which would characterize her work for many years to come.

Fortunately, her Parisian portfolio was successful. To exhibits in that city, she added others, notably at the Vose Gallery in Boston – as impregnable a bastion as there could have been and not necessarily friendly to black artists.

While on assignment in Haiti, she met her husband, who was a graphic designer and stayed on for a project that kept her busy for a year. (Given her long and productive life, a year might be considered a sort of staggered vacation.)

Presidents seemed to have a particular affection for her. Beginning with Eisenhower, she was a guest of honor at the White House. There are pictures of her with Nixon, Carter, and Clinton, who was so captivated by her vision that he saw to it that, not only would she visit him personally, but that a painting of hers entered a collection that would outlast him and, possibly, the presidency itself. Her impact was so undeniable that it cut a wide swath through politics and journalism. Sam Donaldson not only admired her, he saw to it that her work entered major collections. While few serious artists regard such triumphs as inevitable, a lesser number would argue about their desirability. Jones was not the sort of artist to eschew success, just as she did not relinquish her principles to get it.

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When I'm in the part of Brookland where Jones lived for over twenty years, I'm often tempted to ask people whether they've heard of her. One day, I was sorely tempted to present myself at the door of her house – which is occupied by other people - and ask them what they might know of the place's history. It is not unusual for houses of special lineage to be overlooked. When I first moved to Washington, I'd heard that Carter Woodson's house had fallen into the bleak and porous dereliction, which will – if it is not rescued and contained – condemn such a place to a status that is more familiar to the demolition man than the historian. Duke Ellington had grown up in a house near U Street, but where? I have searched in vain for some sort of plaque or trail that might point latter-day pilgrims toward such a shrine. For a white person interested in what one might, with gratuitous reticence, call "alternative history", such places surely abound.

I learned that Jones had lived here by those very means that have eluded Ellington's. There's a plaque outside of her house and it tells whoever cares to stop and read it that she had lived in it for what might be described as the greatest years of her life. The more I know about this lady, the happier I am that she was able to find a comfortably unpretentious sort of place in which to recover, unwind, and plan future assaults. For there is nothing passive about an artistic career. Lois Mallou Jones proved that it not only had to be seized – as anything that will get away from you if you let it – and managed. There must be records of her correspondence with dealers and other artists. Given the implicit respect she commanded in her later years, I doubt if these letters were anything but forthright. Given the tenuous nature of an artist's business relationships – not to mention colleagues who, often as not, wish to destroy as well as nurture – Jones' candor possibly raised eyebrows. But I encountered none of the rancorous tales that churn in the wake of so many artistic careers. While so many of her male counterparts languished, she prevailed. The timeliness of her aesthetics was no doubt influential. When she came to New York, the Harlem Renaissance was in full career. She didn't have to prompt it; it was already there. Yet she was immediately accepted and given such pride of place as an artist might earn gradually – as so many late-comers did – or, as Jones seemed to have done throughout her life: on the spot and without significant opposition.

I will not insult her with the phrase "For an artist, she. . ." (I have already dispensed with "For a woman of color, she. . ." and do not wish to qualify her success – which she guaranteed by fumbling with her identity, sitting with her shortcomings, nurturing her skills, and gaining in confidence over time.) It is important to know that a black woman can do these things – as so many have proven since – but it's equally important to consider that every human being must try them out, utilize them generously, and keep them going for as long as he or she can. Lois Maillou Jones' signal contribution might consist in validating the *human* capacity to confront obstacles; gamely oppose them; and emerge a triumphant individual – whatever her accomplishments may be. Given the scope of Jones', it would be difficult to argue that her triumph was not as complete as most of us can know.

Having overcome the window-peeking urges that would have done nobody any good, I am content, these days, to imagine her, at any number of life-stages, walking up Twelfth Street, making the turn at Quincy, and – being in love with the moment that occurs whenever somebody's been away from home and knows he or she will soon be in it - walking, with a combination of wonder and hesitation, to her door. "Look," she might have said. "I can do this, possibly because I've earned the right and privilege, but also because I *need* to do it." And paused for a moment to acknowledge her great good luck in having good parents, selfless mentors, and a galloping curiosity.

After that, she went in to see what she might have for dinner.