Ted Joans

Black Surrealist

Jim Feast

2026

a review of
Black Surrealist: The Legend of Ted Joans by Steven Belleto. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025

Even a cursory glance at recent art magazines gives you an idea of the many prominent contemporary artists who discuss how they were influenced by Surrealism, the radical cultural movement that emerged after WWI in Europe. However, a look at their work suggests they are painting with embalming fluid.

Their efforts illustrate that they haven't grasped Surrealism's first principle: You can't be a Surrealist painter without a Surrealist life.

Black Surrealist by Steven Belleto, an academic focused on Beat literature and post-WWII literature, establishes just what living such a life entails as he examines the work of Ted Joans (1928–2003), a poet, painter, and jazz trumpeter.

Joans, growing up in the poor Black sections of Fort Wayne and Louisville, discovered Surrealism as a cast-off. His aunt "who worked as a domestic for a rich white family... would rescue books and magazines from the trash," including David Gascoyne's 1935 *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, with which the young "Joans fell madly in love." Joans heard the book's life-affirming cry and as he matured, began painting and playing trumpet in a jazz band, mining artistic wonders Surrealism suggested.

Eventually, Joans found the racism of the South and Midwest intolerable and in 1953 moved to Greenwich Village, where he began patching together a life selling his paintings, reading at coffee houses and befriending other penurious artists, including the perennially broke saxophonist Charlie Parker, who he put up in his unheated apartment.

Joans arrived in the City right before the Beat Generation movement became a literary force, but once they gained prominence, he joined as a second-generation Beat along with the more well-known seminal figures such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.

He was part of it but also satirized the public perception of the Beats by organizing a Rent-A-Beatnik service, bringing bongo-playing poets to suburban parties.

While Greenwich Village was never non-racist and so a difficult environment for Joans, what eventually especially irritated him was how the neighborhood was overrun by tourists, something he made fun of in his collage/poetry book *The Hipsters*, where in one illustration he compared colonists invading Africa to "Jivey Leaguers" and "Creepniks" pouring into the Village.

His next stop was Paris, a haven for Black writers, where he would remain until the mid-1990s, immersed in the Surrealist circle of André Breton. He traveled to the African city of Timbuktu in Mali where he often spent his winters.

In his poetry book *Afrodisia*, he depicts the hazards of the trip to the city by car, trek and steamboat, saying, "River Niger [is] like the Mississippi," his joy at returning to his roots, "back//with my tribe again," and his disgust with the continent's exploitation, "white communists//white capitalists//have declared war

on Third World power." He reached Mali in 1963, far ahead of the later wave of Black tourists. As Belleto explains, by mid-decade, a few years later, the U.S. Black Arts movement talked of making pilgrimages to Africa, and many Black cultural workers came to see Africa for themselves.

In *Afrodisia*, and other poetry books of the 1960s, Joans took up, with his own verve and nerve, themes of the Black Arts movement, seen in writers such as Sonia Sanchez and Jayne Cortez, including African roots, Black American shining lights, especially in music, and civil rights.

Later, when Joans remained outside of the U.S., living in Europe and Africa, he wrote less stridently, but still eruptively. In a 1990 poem, "Chez Café Roquet," he speaks of a favorite Paris bistro where he describes himself as "a Magnetic Center," holding court on the terrace and viewing the passing throng, both real: the noisy tourists, and surreal: a "parade of passing pangolins."

The Surrealist intrusion of African beasts also plays a large part in his art. In the collage "Bronx Bagel Baby," a Madonna stands placidly, surrounded by spiders and a tapir. In an untitled collage, the slogan Bird Lives, referring to Charlie Parker, stands on one side, on the other a list of musical greats including Armstrong and pianist Thelonious Monk. They bookend an image of two rhinos making love, perhaps egged on by the hot jazz surrounding them.

In both these fields, Joan's devotion to making art took precedence over making "bread." His life was an exemplar of the type of existence that was frightening to the ruling class. As sociologist Edgar Friedenberg put it, "a modern industrial state...cannot permit its citizens...to have experiences that diminish their alienation [and] put them in touch with their real feelings."

None of this should be taken to suggest the Surrealist life means flitting from place to place. Rather, as Joans embodies it, this life is one of fearlessly crashing into terrain seemingly barred to those of one's class/gender/race. When Joans declared himself Surrealist, there were already *Black Surrealist*s, such as Aime Cesaire of Martinique. When Joans got to Mali, there were already Americans in the country, but not Black, anti-colonialist ones. Surrealism founder André Breton declared Joans to be "the only Afro-American Surrealist."

The Surrealist life meant despising the capitalist world of 9-to-5 conformity, which Joans ridiculed poetically, as the place where people were ashamed of their bodies, "Wild West Savages... their kiss is mouthwashed//their embrace is deodorized." In this constricted world, one courted partners of one's own class/race, but in Joans' Surrealist universe one found love in whatever direction it appeared.

And, lastly, from this perspective, through art creation, one poured as much dream into one's life as possible.

Black Surrealist is an example of the perfection of the biographer's art. Not only does Belleto look intently at Joans' life and creative output, but he fleshes out the contexts to which Joans was contributing, such as the Black Arts movement, the Happening (like those Joans put on in Copenhagen), and Cesaire's Black perspective on Surrealism.

Nor does Belleto hold back from pointing to Joans' contradictions and weaknesses. For example, Joans often read at USIA (United States Information Agency) libraries in Africa. He got many such engagements because of "the U.S. State Department's decades-long interest in the diplomatic potential of... the circulation of Black American artists abroad." Belleto quotes historian Penny Von Eschen, who notes that the agency was sending Black jazz players to Africa, such as Louis Armstrong, "because it could be touted as an indigenous American art form, and because it seemed to show the Third World that [news of] America's domestic racial problems were overblown."

Belleto explains, "It may seem somewhat surprising to imagine Joans appearing at USIA libraries given his aversion to American racial and political ideology... But, on the other hand, beyond the obvious practical benefits to someone who was living hand-to-mouth, Joans saw his visits to USIA centers as opportunities to share a version of Black American art and poetry both unapologetic in its celebration of Africa and uncompromising in its insistence on the liberation of Black people across the Third World."

As to his personal views, early on Joans denigrated homosexuals, but as he matured, his attitude changed to a willing acceptance, more in keeping with the welcoming view characteristic of Surrealism. Moreover, in Joans' commitment to moving from place to place and his embrace of change, he often left

behind friends, lovers and wives. As Belleto puts it, this meant "others had to accept that... [and let him go] no matter how close they may have felt to him."

Belleto suggests that Surrealist notions of reality played a large part in shaping Joans' perception of life. One such idea is that of Objective Chance. American Surrealist Penelope Rosemont pictures this as something that defines "unforeseen encounters that coincide amazingly with one's own desire." This manifests for Joans in his running into people on the street, ones he has never met but recognizes from photos. Coincidentally or rather objective chance-ly, this occurred when Joans was walking on rue Bonaparte in Paris upon his arrival and by happenstance met André Breton. Chance encounters pile up allowing Belleto to suggest objective chance was one of Joans' guiding lights.

Overall, one could not find a better biographer to chronicle Joans' rambling, protean, ever-creative, barrier-busting life, that of—if it's not too paradoxical of an epithet—a conscientious Surrealist.

Jim Feast lives in Brooklyn. His latest book is *Karl Marx, Private Eye* (PM Press). His essay on the relation of Matt Shipp's music to 1980s Lower East Side squat culture appears on the **Jazz Right Now** website and, under the title "Thoughts on Clifford Allen's Singularity Codex," on Legacy of Matthew Shipp site at **legacyofmatthewshipp.com**.

fifth estate

Jim Feast
Ted Joans
Black Surrealist
2026

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/418-summer-2026/ted-joans
Fifth Estate #418, Summer 2026

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net