

# The New York Times

## *ART IN REVIEW; Jeff Sonhouse*

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By HOLLAND COTTER DEC. 6, 2002

Jack Tilton/Anna Kustera Gallery

49 Greene Street, SoHo

Through Dec. 21

"Tailored Larceny," the title of the promising first solo by the New York artist Jeff Sonhouse, gives a nice sense of the offbeat tone of his work. Each of the paintings, shown singly or as part of a series, is a bust-length image of an African-American man wearing a mask that leaves his nose, mouth and eyes visible. No two masks are alike. Some are white; others are composed of colored grids reminiscent of digital pixels; still others are patterned with designer logos, rays of glitter or rhinestones.

Each figure is also distinctively dressed, in pinstripes, plaids, gaudy ties and so on. Several wear their hair in a full Afro, and some of the Afros have been made of collages assembled with wooden or paper matches. In a few cases, the matches have been lighted, then extinguished, so that the head is surrounded by an aureole of soot, as if the head had exploded and was still smoldering.

Potential references accumulate as you look: to African masks, mug shots, fashion photos, clown faces, Frantz Fanon's book "Black Skin/White Masks," Jason in "Friday the 13th," movie clichés of hustlers and pimps, crimes and carnivals. The faces under the masks at first look the same but aren't: eye color changes from painting to painting. And although the expression in every case seems locked in a blankly aggressive stare, the mask designs suggest many possible readings for half-hidden psyches. There's a lot going on in this stimulating, well executed debut. HOLLAND COTTER