

**JEFF DONALDSON**

American, born Pine Bluff, AK, 1932, died Washington, DC, 2004

*Study for the Wall of Respect (Miles Davis)*, 1967

Oil on heavy cream wove paper with mixed media, 24 x 18 inches

Block Friends of Art Fund purchase, 2017.2

---

“The single most important factor in convincing the group to adopt the project was the fact that it would be a ‘guerrilla mural.’ ...The unauthorized painting of the wall was to be a revolutionary act in and of itself even beyond the astounding effects the project would itself engender.”<sup>1</sup>

—Jeff Donaldson, *The People’s Art: Black Murals, 1967–1978*

In 1967, during a climate of rising political fervor in Black America, the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) was established on Chicago’s South Side, with help from Jeff Donaldson. That same year, Aretha Franklin released a revamp of “Respect,” and artist William Walker proposed that OBAC create the *Wall of Respect*, a mural project on Chicago’s South Side. OBAC artists understood the urgent need to reflect the overall theme of “Black Heroes” in a popular visual culture bereft of realistic Black images, let alone venerated ones. The *Wall of Respect* shifted in form and content over time, but its first iteration debuted on August 24, 1967. The *Wall* was divided into seven sections: Theatre, Statesmen, Religion, Literature, Sports, Rhythm & Blues, with the final section, Jazz, designated to Donaldson. *Wall of Respect* was painted over in 1971; this study is one of the few remaining physical documents of the project. In 1968, one year after the first iteration of the *Wall of Respect*, Jeff Donaldson submitted his dissertation outline, themed around the cross-generational reciprocity of Black artists in the United States. Donaldson would be the first African American to earn a doctorate in art history at Northwestern University.

In *Study for the Wall of Respect (Miles Davis)* the figure of Miles Davis melds into the energetic paint daubs of the background, resisting any easy dichotomy of figuration versus abstraction. The 1969 manifesto Donaldson penned as cofounder of AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) reframes mimesis as “the spot where...the abstract and the concrete” meet. His own multifaceted revolutionary practice consisted of abstraction and figuration; teaching and writing. Here Donaldson portrays Davis as the embodiment of blackness and a performer of unseen histories. This work reminds us that black life—black study—exceeds the academy, the “proper,” and even property.

—Benjamin Jones ’23 PhD, Art History

1 *The People’s Art: Black Murals, 1967–1978* (Philadelphia: The African American Historical and Cultural Museum, 1986).