



Joyce Johnson's exhibition at PAAM

Joyce Johnson

EVOLUTION OF AN ART FORM: A RETROSPECTIVE OF DRAWINGS AND SCULPTURES

Provincetown Art Association & Museum

May 16 – July 13, 2008

THIS EXHIBITION FEATURES work from Joyce Johnson's nearly 50-year career on Cape Cod, and includes over 20 new pieces. She is known for her figurative and biomorphic sculptures inspired by the natural environment. Working in clay, wood, and bronze, her idiom is small abstract sculptures whose angles and curves cast intriguing shadows. Her reliefs are inspired by the natural world—plants and flowers—creating a metaphor of tranquility.

Joyce Johnson is probably best known as the founder of Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, which she started in the backyard of her sculpture studio in Eastham in 1968. But this many-faceted woman is foremost a gifted artist and a dedicated teacher, and her love for her community and the wildness of nature that surrounds it provides the passion that fuels her art. Her figurative and biomorphic sculptures are inspired by the natural environment; working in clay, wood, and resin, her idiom is small abstract sculptures whose angles and curves cast intriguing shadows.



She lives and works close to the earth, salvaging many of her personal and artistic needs from recycled materials, and lives the life of an artist in a house in Truro that she built herself on farmland she purchased in 1963. She says of this idyllic place, "I often wonder what my work would be like if I had not been fortunate enough to purchase this land in Truro before land prices skyrocketed. The kettle pond -and the home I built there by hand have provided an oasis for over 30 years from the summer turmoil of a tourist community. But more than that, as I planted trees and a garden, I was able to watch nature in its full and varied splendor, from the ripening buds of winter to the bloom of summer, to the fragile skeletons that survive fall breezes, and foraging birds and animals. Those lingering remains have inspired my persistent theme of



“Growth I,” walnut, 2000, 24” x 16” x 12”

seed pods and bud totems through which I continue to find new forms and energy.”

Johnson spent most of her early childhood in Concord, MA, and, inspired by the many literary figures that lived there during the 19th century, she developed a passion for literature and writing. At 26 and uncertain about her future, she traveled and lived in Madrid for two years. She began her serious study of sculpture with one of Spain’s most respected sculptors, Don Ramon Mateu, who encouraged her to return to America to continue her studies. Upon graduating with honors from Boston’s School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1962, she completed a graduate teaching fellowship there the following year. The imagery from her early years in Spain has served as a thread throughout her work—mysterious cloaked men, ample women, falcons—along with symbols derived from her fascination with nature—buds and blooms, whales and waves, seed pods and weeds.

Her first love is wood carving, which she discovered when she was 10 years old. She remembers: “I’ve been drawing since I was six or seven, I had drawing lessons, and then a friend of my parents, who noticed I was whittling, brought me a set of carving tools. Later, when I was a teenager exploring, I knew I wanted to carve, but I wanted to do bigger pieces. Two people were significant in my discovery about wood and carving tools; one was Vernon Smith of South Orleans, a relief wood carver, who was head of the WPA program on Cape Cod. He took me to his studio and showed me his tools and how he carved, so I got the feel of it from him, and also an idea of what was possible. Around the same time, I ran into Bernard Collins, who was in charge of the Nauset High School woodworking shop. I was at Nickerson Lumber Company in Orleans, asking the people there what wood would be good for carving. Bernard was there and overheard the

conversation. He came up to me and said that the best thing for me to carve would be a good piece of mahogany, it’s a hard wood but it’s porous, so it’s easier to carve. It’s a very stable wood, you get a wonderful polish on it, and it has a wonderful grain. So they both got me started with their encouragement for someone who was floundering; they were tiny little stepping stones to help me find the right wood etc. in a world where wood-carving was fairly rare.” Johnson has since carved figures and totems out of massive pieces of walnut and apple, mahogany and butternut, redwood and poplar, some pieces taking a year to complete. Her work evolved to include stone carving and bronzes, alternating in scale between large pieces and exquisite miniatures, molded in clay in the curve of her hand, which often served as models for larger works.

“One of the reasons I rarely sell my woodcarvings is that they are a continuous source of inspiration to me, they inspire me to create other pieces. Also, they still feel part of me, and they nurture this little flame of creativity inside me, because you never know whether you are on track or not. The creative aspect of sculpture is so slow, it’s not like painting—the physical aspect takes so long, so you can get sidetracked. I don’t use machinery, it’s all done by hand; I take off one piece off at a time, and I have to be very careful, there isn’t much leeway.” Asked if she remembers making a mistake, she says, “Mistakes! If I make a mistake then I adjust! Though there’s a piece sitting up in my loft which I did when I thought I could do direct carving, with no drawings or clay models, and I botched it! So I learned that I need preliminary sketches, either drawings or small pieces of clay, even if only 2” or 3” tall.”

Says Johnson of this exhibition: “I am pleased with this show, but it’s probably the

last major show I’ll have because I’m getting to the point where I don’t have the kind of energy necessary to put one together. I didn’t do more wood carvings for the show because they take so long, and I didn’t know if I could get them done in time. After all, I’ll be 79 this summer, and it’s taking me longer to finish those large pieces. I’ve been working on the show since November, but the result is that I now see how precious time is—to have the time and space to work at your leisure, and the good health to do it, and have the object you want to work on—I have a great appreciation now for having that leisure time to work at my own pace.”

Johnson’s commitment to living the life of an artist includes an intense involvement in her local community, where she is actively involved in many local organizations, from a local weekly radio program to starting the Peaked Hill Trust to save the historic dune shacks on the Outer Shore. She still maintains her sculpture studio in North Eastham and also teaches. She also co-founded the Outer Cape Artists Residency Consortium and is on the board for the Highland Center Inc. and Campus Provincetown. In 1997, Cape Women Creating named her a “Living Treasure.” ▲

• Joyce Johnson is represented by the **Addison Art Gallery** in Orleans. She will teach a class, *Portraiture in Clay*, from August 4 to 7 at Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, www.castlehill.com.



“Homage to Marino Marini,” bronze



“Abstract,” mahogany, 21” x 10” x 10”

