



The Drawers - Headbones Gallery

Contemporary Drawing, Sculpture and Works on Paper

Ashley Johnson

Ethnic Convergence

February 22 - April 3, 2007



Commentary by Julie Oakes

Ashley Johnson

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Ashley Johnson

Julie Oakes

Modern living is overlaid with processes disguising our reliance upon the natural world. Animism, mysterious to contemporary Western understanding, establishes symbiotic relationships with animals - practically and symbolically. The masks of the native West Coast aboriginals for instance, often frightening, were used as a visual channel to understanding the spirit of the animal.

Historically, that incredulous understanding has been couched in allegory. Satyrs, centaurs and the many animal manifestations that Zeus assumed in order to interact with women (with Leda he became a swan; with Europa a bull) were a part of the visual vocabulary of the Greeks.

By morphing the human with the animal or depicting an interaction, Ashley Johnson breaks taboos to reveal concepts that are not commonly part of our existence. Johnson is telling stories using animals that are drawn from both the Western psyche and African culture. In one image, hyenas, nocturnal carnivores that feed primarily upon carrion, prey upon a female human infant. This image describes the abhorrent practice of raping infants to cure AIDS, absolutely and effectively depicting the desperation of the disease.

The impact of visual depictions foreign to our knowledge can be shocking. This jarring of sensibility, when executed in a readable manner, as it is by Johnson's dramatically cropped compositions and luminous coloring; is frankly powerful. The imagery touches one and is provocative. This is a positive step towards wisdom. That one might feel repulsion rather than attraction, is not a negative reaction, it is simply an intelligent awakening.

Africa, to one who is not African, may be incomprehensible and the depiction of beasts interacting with humans may strike chords that provoke horror. The unknown that is lurking beyond the periphery of knowledge is the cause of psychosis and Freud worked with this notion of recognizing and naming the areas of the consciousness that we have been socialized to ignore. With recognition, fear is allayed as the 'mysterious other' becomes an identifiable quotient. Once identified, it can be dealt with.



Beautiful Beasts
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
2001



Hyena
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
2003



Feral Encounter
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
2005



Anomalous Position
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
2007



Wildebeest Woman
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
2001



Therianthrope
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
2000



Simian III
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
1993



Trans-X
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
2000



Simian II
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
1993



Rut
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
1997



Simian I
acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches
1993

ARTISTS STATEMENT

Ashley Johnson
Primal Series

This is a series of eleven acrylic paintings on paper, all 106 cm x 96 cm, that are thematically linked around the Human/Animal dichotomy. They try to find the animal within the human psyche.

Ancient cultures like the San or Bushman have an interesting concept of the power possessed by animals. This power is called *n/um* and seems to be an energy that can be beneficial to humanity if controlled or destructive if not channeled. The San perform the Trance Dance, which is a healing ritual, around a fire at night. The women sit in a circle and clap the intricate rhythms of wordless songs that are named after "strong" things like Eland or Gemsbok antelopes. The men dance in a line within the circle and alternate the vortices by changing direction. (This manner of engaging with energy is mirrored in contemporary homeopathic procedures for preparing medicines). Spirit animals are attracted to the dance site. The dancers describe a boiling in their stomachs and begin to see pathways of light that lead to the spirit world. At a point some go into a trance that enables them to blend with the spirit world and in certain cases become spirit animals. This allows them to transcend physical barriers to become shamans. These healers will now physically seek out the "sickness" in the other individuals, drawing it out through sites like belly buttons. Finally, they collapse exhausted and are coaxed back to life by the others through song and stroking.

Conventional Western perceptions of reality have very defined separations between fact and fiction or objects in space. Cultures like the San blur the boundaries between observed reality and the spirit world. They engage with reality using a range of strategies to deceive bad spirits, so for instance a successful hunter will deny hitting his prey and will only modestly admit to scratching it. The purpose is to avoid giving offense to the spirit of the animal killed. Similarly, myths can contain several contradictory stories like an onion with many layers. Reality is in truth a very complex, multi-layered experience.

Recent scientific theories like Quantum Mechanics present a dilemma for Western thought since reality can be described as either particle or wave. The conceptual lexicon is unable to accommodate ambiguity or contradiction. Essentially the entire Western edifice of knowledge is built upon an inadequate understanding of reality. The challenge for this century is to re-synthesize perception. We need to understand that we project what we see. We visualize and assign properties to objects and situations according to predetermined cultural decisions. For instance, we emphasize the individual in

Western Culture, imagining a body separate from surroundings. The interpenetrating energies at a sub-atomic level would deny that separation. San people experience the spirit world as a manifestation of their reality and do not emphasize individualism. To them the supernatural is real. Scientific theory has yet to find a way of acknowledging or describing these phenomena.

The reason to develop a new way of seeing is to alter our effect on the environment. Instead of seeing a tree we need to see the larger organism. The individual must relinquish boundaries so that environment merges with self. The San provide an example of a culture that achieves this.

The Primal paintings have been evolving sporadically from these ideas since the 90's. The earlier works tried to find the animal in broad brushstrokes, examples of which are Simians I, II and III, and were not primarily concerned with representation but rather with passages of energy. They were inspired by memories of primates in old-style zoos yet with humans transposed into their forms.

These Victorian zoos only considered the viewer so animals had no privacy. Often baser human nature would taunt and intimidate. Lighted cigarettes would get passed through the fence to them, causing addiction. Strangely, humans would delight most when the primates emulated them. However, the abuse was not entirely one-sided as occasionally the monkeys would hit their target with well-aimed excrement, adding to the crowd's excitement.

Therianthrope is inspired by San ideas of spirit animals as explained above. This image is engaged in a private act and yet on edge. The pulsing life force is always on guard for hidden dangers even when engaged in nefarious matters.

Rut reflects on lust and how it is both an imprisoning and uncompromising impulse. An animal in musk will impale itself in the effort to satisfy the urge. There is also an undercurrent of homosexuality in the piece if one reads two separate people. At the time I saw two moments in a single individual.

Trans-X relates to trans-sexuality. Originally it was an inversion of the Leda and the Swan myth. In this version an androgen driven older female is rapacious towards a she-male swan that is coy. It is a myth for the 21st century.

Wilbebest Woman is about the deep place women have recourse to during birthing. Having participated in the birth of my children, it was interesting to note the loss of consciousness as deeper, animal instincts took over. Bovines seem to epitomize inner strength and ability to suffer. The doctor who delivered my first born, which took 36 hours, had been working in the Congo region where he said the African women had very few problems delivering. He ascribed this to the fact that they worked in the fields and in many cases even gave birth there. Apparently the squatting position is quite beneficial as an aid to deliverance.

Beautiful Beasts indulges in erotic fantasy and contrasts the warthog, which is considered ugly, with a beautiful woman, blessed with the behind of an Indian Rhinoceros. They engage the viewer with their glances, perhaps imparting some of their pleasure. Or, perhaps it is the inscrutability that fascinates.

Hyena was inspired by the phenomenon of infant rape, an unfortunate reality in South African society. About 30% of the population has AIDS, is largely poverty-stricken and illiterate. Traditional beliefs persist and some sangomas or witch-doctors promoted the idea that having sex with a new born would cure the disease. This led to a spate of baby rapes which still continues as it is impossible for the authorities to control. The government desires to be seen as a progressive force in Africa so it was very embarrassing for them and they went into denial. I felt it was important to expose this part of the human psyche, which apparently also reared its head during the Black Death period of European history. However, the infant's head is that of an old man, probably my father, who used to delight in visiting my studio when he was still alive. Her feet are hyena's paws. This indicates perpetuity.

Feral Encounter is a psychosexual portrait from an autobiographical incident. The animals are how the people saw themselves at the time but I have tried to capture their mentalities. I am the cuttlefish. The woman appeared out of nowhere in the night at my country home and engaged me in an intellectual dialogue about sex. Later I realized that she was writing a book about her sexual experiences for her Ph.D. She was an English teacher at a secondary school and had cut a deal with an acquaintance of mine. He was to provide her with intellectuals and she would introduce him to some of her students. There was a complex sexual relationship which seemed to express mutual hate and fascination. I became a voyeur at close-hand to some very aberrant sensibilities.

Anomalous Position is an uncertain coupling. It deals with the anomalies of inter-sex where female and male possibilities coexist. The reality that we surround ourselves with often doesn't make allowance for ambiguity and contradiction. In defining ourselves we induce imprisonment even as we express freedom. I am suspicious of explanations like the theory of evolution, which have become entrenched in the scientific psyche, because they use a conceptual lexicon that is already compromised with limitation. To my mind, reality is a figment of the imagination. By this I mean that the creative chaos of possibility is the flux of existence and the act of naming or identifying co-ordinates, merely indicates a momentary bias.

As a body, the works have an undercurrent of sensuality and movement between states.

Ashley Johnson

Education

Bachelor Arts, Fine Art, (BAFA) 4yr course; University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg

Higher Diploma in Education, (HDE); University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (Teaching Diploma)

Personal Exhibitions

Karen McKerron Gallery, Johannesburg

Galerie Binnenland, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

SA Embassy, Bonn, Germany.

Dasart Exhibitions

1992 Jack Heath Gallery, Pietermaritzburg

1993 Natal Technikon, Durban

1993 Institute of Contemporary Art, (ICA) Johannesburg

1994 University of South Africa (UNISA) Art Gallery, Pretoria

1995 Mega Music, Johannesburg Biennale

1995 "Dasart Victoria I" Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg

1995 "Dasart Hugging Itself Twice" Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg

1996 "Dasart Victoria II, Durban Art Gallery, City Hall, Durban

1996 "Dasart Colonial Mutations" Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein

1997 Dasart at the Second Johannesburg Biennale, Carfax, Johannesburg

1998 "Dasart draws the Line" Gallery 111, Johannesburg

1999 "Transmigrations: Rituals and Items" Civic Theatre Gallery, Johannesburg

1999 "Transmigrations: Rituals and Items" ArtShare Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

1999 "Transmigrations: Rituals and Items" University of Baja California, Tijuana, Mexico

2000 "Transmigrations: Rituals and Items" Angels Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro, California

2002 "Transmigrations: Rituals and Items" Pretoria Art Museum, South Africa

2002 "Transmigrations: Rituals and Items" Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa

2002 "Transmigrations: Rituals and Items" Ann Bryant Art Gallery, East London, South Africa

Invited Participant

- 1978-82 Various student exhibitions, Pietermaritzburg
- 1986 FUBA Gallery, Johannesburg, group exhibition
- 1993 Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg, group exhibition.
- 1993 Pretoria Art Museum; Momentum Life Awards Exhibition
- 1996 Little Show of Drawers, Pretoria University.
- 1996 Invitation Show, Keith Alexander Gallery, Johannesburg
- 1997 Kempton Park Art Competition, Kempton Park (Top 100 finalist)
- 1997 Euro-virus II-V, Carfax, Johannesburg
- 1997 A little Big Thing - Erotic Miniatures, Sally Thompson Gallery, Jhb
- 1997 Group Spiral Music Production, Carfax, Johannesburg
- 1997 "No 4" Echos performance production, Old Fort Johannesburg
- 1998 Art Objects & Meditations, Gallery 111, Johannesburg
- 1998 Kempton Park Art Competition, Kempton Park (Top 100 finalist)
- 1998 Nudes and Naked, Carfax, Johannesburg
- 1998 Sacred Spaces, Carfax, Johannesburg
- 2000 Forces of Trauma and Powers of Healing, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria
- 2003 The Cube I IV, Carfax, Johannesburg
- 2003 Gesondaar, Aardklop Festival, Potchefstroom
- 2003 The Stuffed Xmas show, Gordart Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2004 The Cube, Celebration of Nine Years Carfax, Johannesburg
- 2005 "Porn Again", Merely Mortal, Johannesburg
- 2005 Miniature show, Gordart Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2005 Carfax Collection, Johannesburg
- 2006 Selected for the Brett Kebble Art Awards
- 2007 New Canadians Without Borders, Varley Art Gallery, Unionville, Toronto
- 2007 Ethnic Convergences, Headbones Art Gallery, Toronto

Articles & Reviews about Ashley or Dasart

- 1990 Time Out, by Michael Coulson, Financial Mail, February
- 1991 "Tinten van landschap en ANC" Trouw, Netherlands, 8 August
- 1992 Natal Arts Trust Newsletter, Valerie Leigh editor, Issue 12, December
- 1993 "Stimulerende ervaring", Beeld, 18 October
- 1993 "Dasart show at Natal Tech", Daily News, 16 April
- 1995 "Inside Art" Cover story, The Star, 28 February
- 1995 "Rich Associations Inform and Test" by Prof. T King, Natal Witness, 24 July
- 1995 "Raw Art" by Suzy Bell, Daily News, 28 July
- 1996 Gallery Notes by Marianne Meijer, Mercury, 17 April
- 1996 "We are the New Imperialism" by Ingrid Shevlin, Sunday Tribune, 14 April
- 1996 "Concerns provoked..." by Jeff Chandler, Sunday Tribune 21 April
- 1996 "Dasart Colonial Mutations: EXPRESS takes a peek" Express, 26 June
- 1996 "Die kuns laat jou hare rys" by Charles Smith, Volksblad, 5 July
- 1999 Arts and Leisure, Financial Mail, Mar 25
- 1999 "Rituele en die wêrelddorp" Die Beeld Kalendar 23 March
- 1999 "Exposición de Arte Contemporáneo sudarfricano en al UABC" Pintura 13 Aug
- 1999 "Espacio multidisciplinario" Mosaico Frontera 27 August
- 1999 "Arte contemporáneo en la Sala de Arte de la UABC" Arte y cultura 27 August
- 2000 " Transmigraciones" Expone Crosthwaite en LA Mosaico Frontera March 10
- 2000 " Exhibit of South African Artists" Random Lengths, March 31
- 2000 Reviews The Aesthetic, April, 2000
- 2002 Brugbouers, Diek Grobler, Pretoria News, 17 Mei
- 2002 Take some time to reflect, Lightstrider, Albertus Van Dijk, Saturday Star, Apr 6
- 2002 Transmigrations, Anno IX, Giu/Ago
- 2002 Nuwe Kunsritueel, transmigratie, Andrelise Meiring, Volksblad sept 23
- 2002 Oorvleuelende kultuur op uitstalling te sien, Volksblad sept 12
- 2002 Uitstalling steek die grense van verskeie kulture oor, Bloemnuus sept 13
- 2002 More than meets the eye, Andrea Jonker-Bryce, Daily Dispatch, Nov 18
- 2003 Subjective Sinners, Hans Pienaar, Spat Retensie, Sept 25

Publications

- 1994 UNISA catalogue, Andrew Weldrick editor
- 1995 Mega Music Catalogue
- 1995 "Victoria / Dasart" (book), Brevitas Publishers
- 1995 Dasart Colonial Mutations Oliewenhuis Museum
- 1996 "Dasart Colonial Mutations" (book), Dasart Productions
- 1999 Transmigrations: Rituals and Items Civic Theatre Gallery catalogue
- 1999 Dasart/Passages - Doors and Transmigration Art Share Los Angeles
- 1999 Dasart - Transmigraciones: Rituales y Objetos University of Baja, California
- 2000 Dasart - Transmigrations (book) Angels Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro
- 2000 Dasart Live CD-ROM, MXM Aesthetics

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