

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.

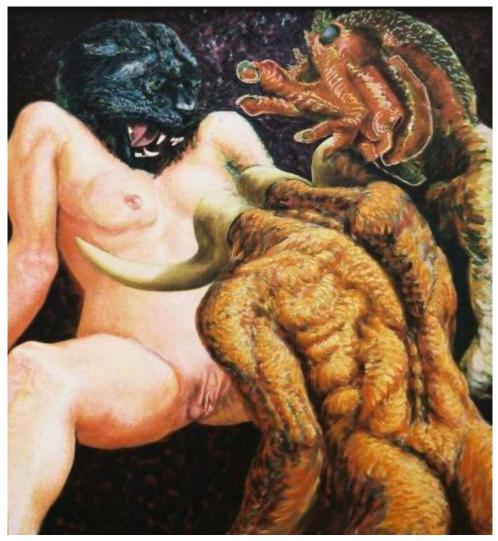
Africa, to one who is not African, may be incomprehensible and the depiction of beasts interacting with humans may strike chords that provoke horror. The unknown that is lurking beyond the periphery of knowledge is the cause of psychosis and Freud worked with this notion of recognizing and naming the 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.



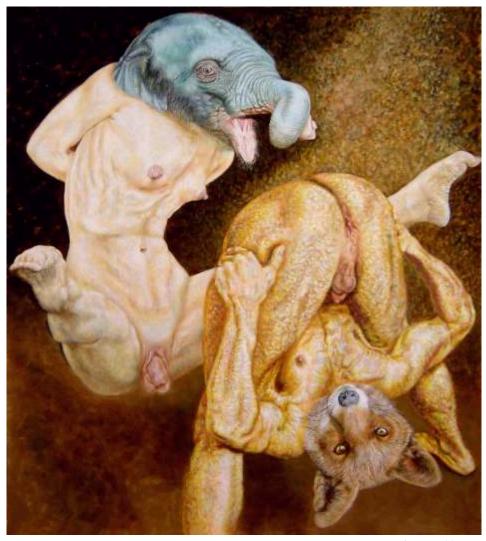
Beautiful Beasts acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches 2001



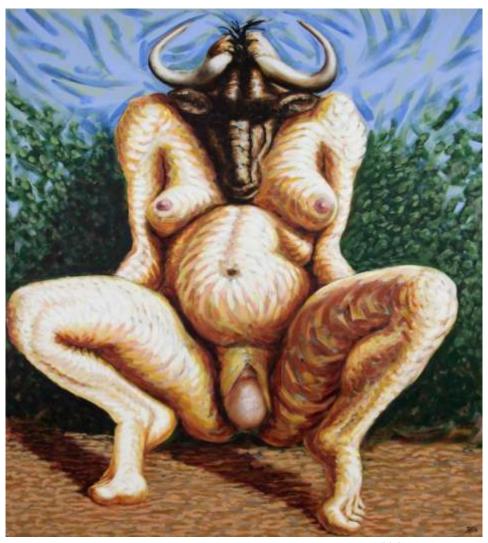
Hyena acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches 2003



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.

Wildebeest 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

ticipant
Various student exhibitions, Pietermaritzburg
FUBA Gallery, Johannesburg, group exhibition
Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg, group exhibition.
Pretoria Art Museum; Momentum Life Awards Exhibition
Little Show of Drawers, Pretoria University.
Invitation Show, Keith Alexander Gallery, Johannesburg
Kempton Park Art Competition, Kempton Park (Top 100 finalist)
Euro-virus II-V, Carfax, Johannesburg
A little Big Thing - Erotic Miniatures, Sally Thompson Gallery, Jhb
Group Spiral Music Production, Carfax, Johannesburg
"No 4" Echos performance production, Old Fort Johannesburg
Art Objects & Meditations, Gallery 111, Johannesburg

Nudes and Nakeds, Carfax, Johannesburg

Gesondaar, Aardklop Festival, Potchefstroom

"Porn Again", Merely Mortal, Johannesburg

Selected for the Brett Kebble Art Awards

Miniature show, Gordart Gallery, Johannesburg

The Stuffed Xmas show, Gordart Gallery, Johannesburg

Ethnic Convergences, Headbones Art Gallery, Toronto

The Cube, Celebration of Nine Years Carfax, Johannesburg

Sacred Spaces, Carfax, Johannesburg

The Cube I IV, Carfax, Johannesburg

Carfax Collection, Johannesburg

Kempton Park Art Competition, Kempton Park (Top 100 finalist)

Forces of Trauma and Powers of Healing, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria

New Canadians Without Borders, Varley Art Gallery, Unionville, Toronto

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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

"Concerns provoked..." by Jeff Chandler, Sunday Tribune 21 April

"Die kuns laat jou hare rys" by Charles Smith, Volksblad, 5 July

"Rituele en die wêrelddorp" Die Beeld Kalendar 23 March

" Exhibit of South African Artists" Random Lengths, March 31

Oorvleuelende kultuur op uitstalling te sien, Volksblad sept 12

Subjective Sinners, Hans Pienaar, Spat Retensie, Sept 25

"Espacio multisciplinario" Mosaico Frontera 27 August

Brugbouers, Diek Grobler, Pretoria News, 17 Mei

Arts and Leisure, Financial Mail, Mar 25

Reviews The Aesthetic, April, 2000

Transmigrations, Anno IX, Giu/Ago

"Dasart Colonial Mutations: EXPRESS takes a peek" Express, 26 June

"Exposición de Arte Contemporáneo sudarfricano en al UABC" Pintura 13 Aug

"Arte contemporáneo en la Sala de Arte de la UABC" Arte y cultura 27 August

"Transmigraciones" Expone Crosthwaite en LA Mosaico Frontera March 10

Take some time to reflect, Lightstrider, Albertus Van Dijk, Saturday Star, Apr 6

Nuwe Kunsritueel, transmigration, Andrelise Meiring, Volksblad sept 23

Uitstalling steek die grense van verskeie kulture oor, Bloemnuus sept 13

More than meets the eye, Andrea Jonker-Bryce, Daily Dispatch, Nov 18

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Articles & Reviews about Ashley or Dasart

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

Dasart Live CD-ROM, MXM Aesthetics

1999

1999 2000

2000

Dasart/Passages - Doors and Transmigration Art Share Los Angeles

Dasart - Transmigraciones: Rituales y Objetos University of Baja, California

Dasart - Transmigrations (book) Angels Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro

