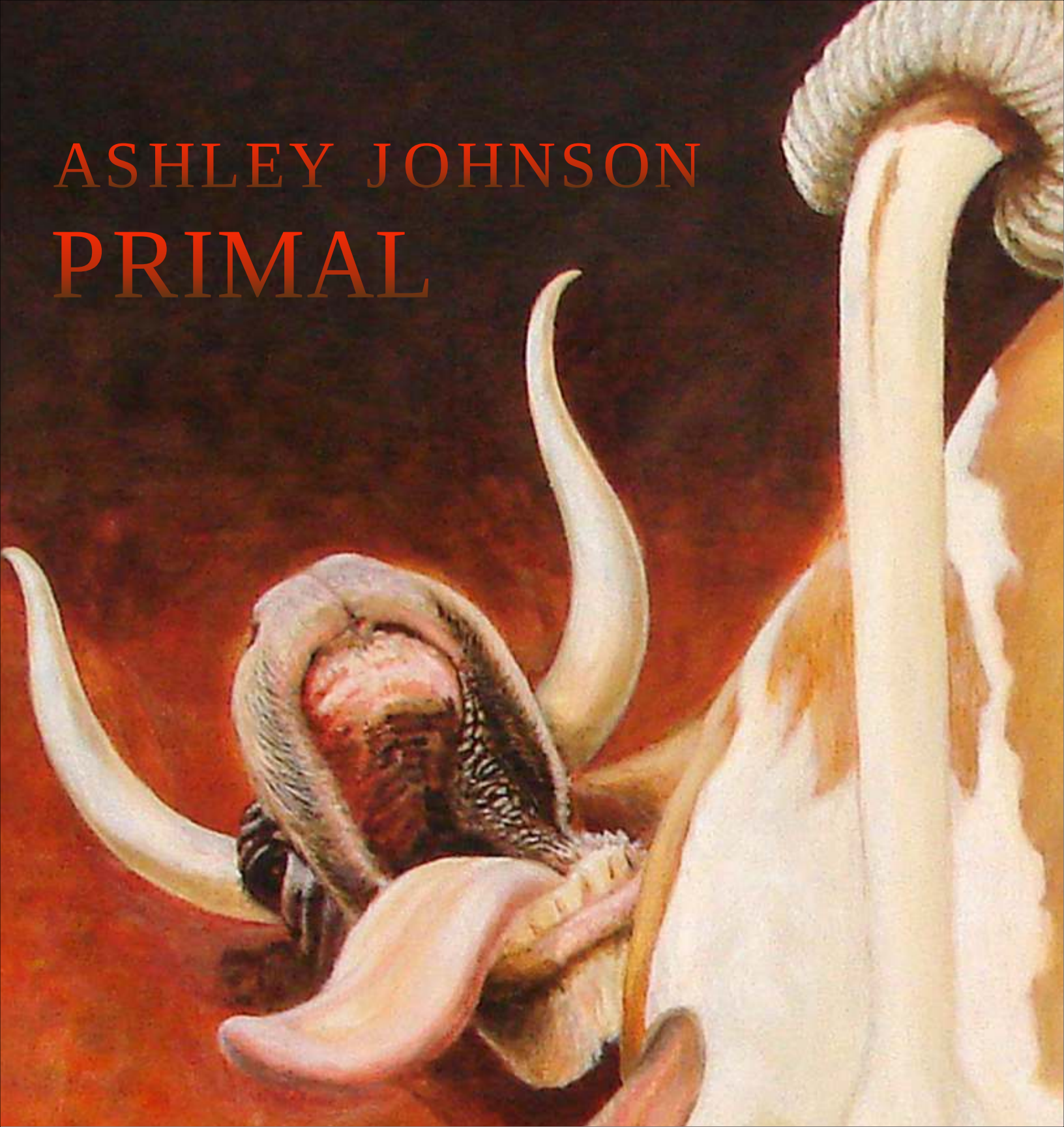

ASHLEY JOHNSON
PRIMAL

ASHLEY JOHNSON

HEADBONES GALLERY

Headbones Gallery Artist Catalogue: Ashley Johnson - Primal
Copyright © 2008, Headbones Gallery

Introduction by Julie Oakes
Copyright © 2008, Julie Oakes

Commentaries by Ashley Johnson
Copyright © 2000-08, Ashley Johnson

Artwork Copyright © 1993-2008
Ashley Johnson

Rich Fog Micro Publishing, printed in Toronto, 2008
Layout and Design, Richard Fogarty

Printed on the Ricoh SP C811DN

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 copyright act or in writing from Headbones Gallery. Requests for permission to use these images should be addressed in writing to the Ashley Johnson, c/o Headbones Gallery. www.headbonesgallery.com

ISBN: 978-1-926605-02-9

RICH FOG

Micro Publishing
Toronto Canada

ASHLEY JOHNSON

THE PRIMAL SERIES

HEADBONES GALLERY

INTRODUCTION BY JULIE OAKES

ZOOMORPHIC GESTALT

Modernity is overlaid with processes disguising our reliance upon the natural world.

The mysterious roots of animism, 'otherly' and unusual to contemporary western understanding, had logic behind it at one time. In order to survive, symbiotic relationships with the animals had to be fulfilled - 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.

When an artist knows a truth and has a means to picture it, the result is often incredible; it seems so extraordinary as not to be possible. Historically, that incredulous understanding has been couched in allegory.

Connections between animal and human domains have long been used in art and religion as a way of understanding human existence. Sacred ceremonies used masks with costumes of hides and feathers, centaurs, Pan, Medusa, the Holy Spirit as a dove, Luke as a lion, winged angels, horned devils, Ganesha, the elephant headed deity, Hanuman with his monkey parts, Shiva as a snake, the Egyptian Nekhbet as vulture, Horus as hawk or Wadjet as cobra, Fenrisulfra as a wolf with Norse mythology, the Sphinx from Socrates, harpies, - the list of zoomorphic instances is a long one, historically.

Modern science has also drawn parallels to the animal world as in the study of psychological correlations between the human and animal states or the imaging of animal systems (pigs, rats, hamsters, dogs) for the study of the internal workings of the body in medicine.

Language utilises zoomorphism both directly (an ill kempt woman as a dog, an informer as a rat or a mole, a pretty girl as a chick, a sly person as a fox, or in contemporary clichés such as police as pig, hipster as cat, or female genitalia as pussy) and metaphorically (cute as a bug's ear).

Literature abounds with animals that communicate with humans or deities who use animal forms to further their ends, with Greek mythology being especially fecund. Leda, raped by Zeus begat Helen of Troy and then Zeus as a bull coupled with Europa, from which the word Europe originated. Demeter transformed herself into a mare to escape Poseidon but Poseidon counter-transformed himself into a stallion to pursue her, and succeeded in the rape. The white rabbit led a psychedelic chase, frogs became princes, Marvel Comics created Beastboy and Wolfsbane, and Harry Potter converses with owls. Even modern manufacturing has assimilated animals naming such products as Mustang, Pinto, and Greyhound after the beasts or the new BMW, simply called Shapeshifter.

We are accustomed to the transfiguration of human to animal (therianthropy) and yet Ashley Johnson's work contains a shock. A gestalt. A jolt. In a culture grown used to visual trauma through the wide range of imagery made available through the internet, global media and cinematic expertise, the power of a painting on paper can still hit a nerve and shock with the impact of visual depictions foreign to our knowledge. This jarring of sensibility, when executed in a manner that is readable, is a positive step towards wisdom. That the response felt might be one of repulsion rather than attraction, is not a negative reaction. It is simply, an intelligent awakening.

The reception for work from the *Primal* series might be compared to an imagined reaction to Hieronymus Bosch's work at the time that it was first presented. Johnson and Bosch each present a visualisation of the makings, members and happenings of an underworld. It is a nether land of phantasms that impacts the human psyche for it is recognised. It is *virtually* recognisable for Johnson uses a high realism with an admirable and adept painting style to further his revelations just as did Bosch. Bosch, however was using literal descriptions from the bible from which he patterned his creatures. It was a common narrative of the time.

Today the story is more complex. To bring about such a gestalt within our mechanised, technological, environment by using animals - and rather exotic and strange animals to which we may not have even been actually exposed - demonstrates that there is a reflection of *self* in the imagery. This gestalt is pertinent to our contemporary existence.

It is impossible to deconstruct the work into parts that add up to the whole impact of a Johnson painting because it is a *realised* gestalt, something that has not happened before and for which there is no preparation other than the personal potential to assimilate the work. Africa, to one who is not African, may be incomprehensible and the depiction of beasts interacting with humans strike chords that provoke a kind of fear, a 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.

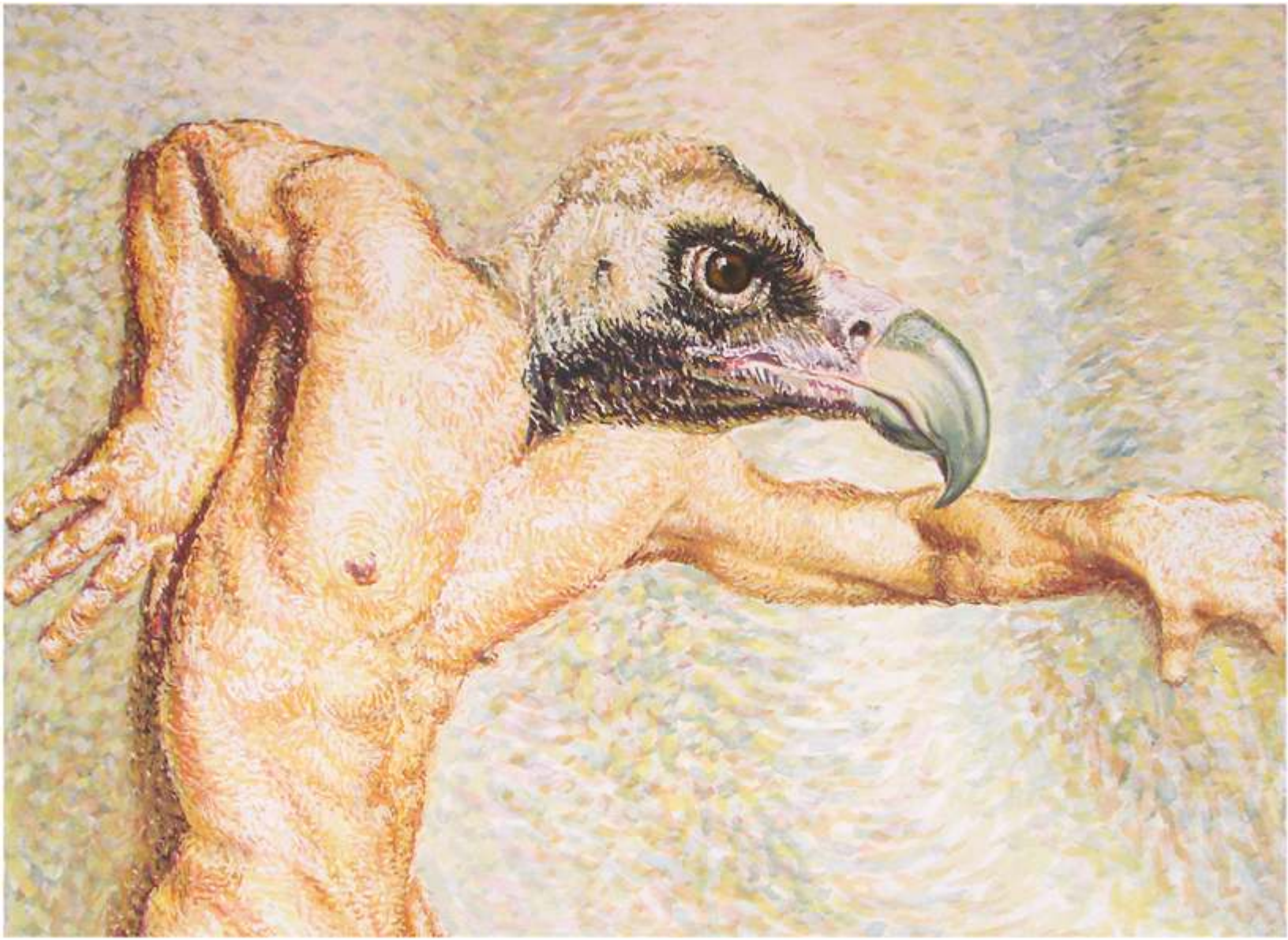
To use hyenas, nocturnal carnivores that feed primarily upon carrion, as the image of the predator upon a female human infant in order to describe the abhorrent practice of the rape of infants to cure AIDS, absolutely and effectively depicts the desperation of the disease. This confused and inadequate prescription of the shamans is counteracted by telling of the practice in order to stop it. Johnson is to be commended for his bravery.

Are these monsters that the artist is showing us? Is it monstrous to inflict such visions upon a world already saturated in

disturbing ideas and images? Johnson takes absolute pains to describe his concepts through these visuals and engage. The ravenous, guttural, un-socialized instincts of raw incredulity are placed within a reasonable over-the-couch size painting for contemplation. The work is beautifully put together. The colors are lush and often harmonious. Each painting is industriously rendered, planned and composed. And in order to further the disambiguation, Johnson has written a piece inspired by his own life experience that is placed in juxtaposition to each visual (rather than as an explanation).

Johnson has placed conceptually difficult material in a form that is as accessible as he is able to make it. The gestalt arrives through a manipulation of elements that appeal to the higher aspects of the consciousness through a fine aesthetic. The subject matter becomes realisable, not so foreign, a bed for a seed of enlightenment on the nature of man.

VULTURE MAN



Vultureman I: Explorer - 2008, gouache on paper, 12.75 x 17.5 inches

ASHLEY JOHNSON

PRIMAL SERIES

Simian I - 1993, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

This is a series of acrylic paintings on paper 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

Simian II - 1993, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

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

Simian III - 1993, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

Therianthrope - 1994, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

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.

Rut - 1997, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

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

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

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.

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

ASHLEY JOHNSON

RETHINK

Over the centuries Western society has postulated a relationship between humanity and animals that sees humans as superior. The original perceptions derive from religious dogma but Charles Darwin's 19th century Theory of Evolution has added the linear idea of natural selection. Environmental circumstances were supposed to have favored certain genetic predispositions through chance, thus eclipsing life forms less suited. It translated to the survival of the fittest paradigm, which was obviously humanity according to the common sense. The misleading image of hunched apes gradually transforming into the upright human has long graced our classroom psyche.

This painting uses August Rodin's famous statue, The Thinker, liberated from its pedestal and combined with a hamadryas baboon head reminiscent of those ubiquitous Albert Einstein photographs. The Chimpanzee in the background 'apes' the Thinker's pose. Bonobos are complex animals that use sex as currency for social interactions. The female sex organ is external and very prominent. Their society is matriarchal, benign and very tolerant of diversity.

Neo Darwinists state that humanity shares a common ancestor with bonobos and chimps. The implication is that genetic mutations took the lines in different directions, but the fossil evidence has not been very conclusive. There are examples like Australopithecus, which are closer to chimps, and ancient humans like Neanderthal but nothing in between. It is tempting to make the evidence suit the hypothesis.

The question arises whether our current theory of evolution is entirely correct and also, if it were not, would we accommodate an alternative theory? John A. Davison, a professor of Biology at Vermont University wrote a manifesto called An Evolutionary Manifesto: A New Hypothesis for Organic Change, which essentially calls into question the Neo Darwinist version of events. http://www.uvm.edu/~jdavison/davison-manifesto.html.

Davison defers to theorists like Richard B. Goldschmidt and William Bateson whose ideas were current when Darwin's theory first became prominent but were ignored. In essence, Davison's focus is on the chromosomes, not the genes, and he suggests that evolution took place at the first meiotic division through irreversible breaks in the chromosomes, centromeres and centrioles. He concludes that the second meiotic division or sex developed as a conservative measure to limit evolution. He predicts that no further evolution will take place.

It is interesting how ideas take root and how difficult it is to dislodge them. Richard Dawkins, the arch Neo

Rethink - 2008, Acrylic on paper, 40 x 37 inches

Darwinist, is currently promoting his book, 'The God Delusion'. It will be amusing if he turns out to be equally deluded. It is clear though that we need to rethink our relationship with animals. Current social biology studies are revealing that many of our cultural and altruistic attributes are present in other ape societies too. It is important for our own survival to recognize that humanity is not the pinnacle of evolutionary success.

PRIMAL

MYTH

There is a myth that is replicating furiously on the net from blog to blog. To quote from one site:

African tribal men eat cows' menstrual matter and grow huge testicles. 2004/11/18

Scanty nourishment and the permanent lack of microelements and vitamins made people of the Bubal tribe ask their only wealth - cows - for help. The tribers learned that eating the menstrual matter of cows helps them fight such diseases as rachitis, scurvy and leukemia.

The mysterious tribe and their cows roam on the border between Kenya and Somalia. This is the only nation in the world, which practices a very unusual tradition: their children eat cows' menstrual matter until they get married. The Bubals believe that the licking of cow's vagina makes would-be warriors strong and courageous. Italian scientists have recently discovered that the menstrual matter of cows is a source of such vitamins as B6, B12, E and D. In addition, it makes up the deficiency of iron, magnesium, phosphorus, calcium and potassium. That is why, scientists think, cows protect the tribe from the most horrible disease of the region - anemia (the lack of haemoglobin). The most interesting thing happens afterwards, though. Hormone changes become extremely conspicuous with all males of the African tribe, after they reach puberty: their testicles grow up to 70-80 centimeters in diameter. The "miracle of nature" happens on account of the untraditional nourishment that tribal individuals practice in their adolescence. The hormone-rich menstrual secretion of the cattle causes irreversible hormone changes with humans. It is noteworthy, that such giant testicles do not exert any negative influence on the reproductive function, although they do cause many other obvious problems. Tourists from all over the world are ready to pay huge money to take a look at giant testicles. Tourists' money help the tribal nation improve the quality of their meals. It is not ruled out that the next generation of Bubals will have nothing to boast with. Express Gazeta

ASHLEY JOHNSON

LATCH

In actuality, African people living in tropical mosquito ridden regions do exhibit more of this abnormality but it has nothing to do with eating the menstrual blood of cows. It is elephantiasis, a condition brought on by a worm thought to be mosquito borne.

In Africa, particularly amongst the Masai of Kenya, it is common to make a cut on a cow's neck and drink the blood as a source of nourishment. Cattle are seen as a source and sign of wealth, much like money in Western society. The horns are meticulously shaved on one side so they grow into decorative shapes.

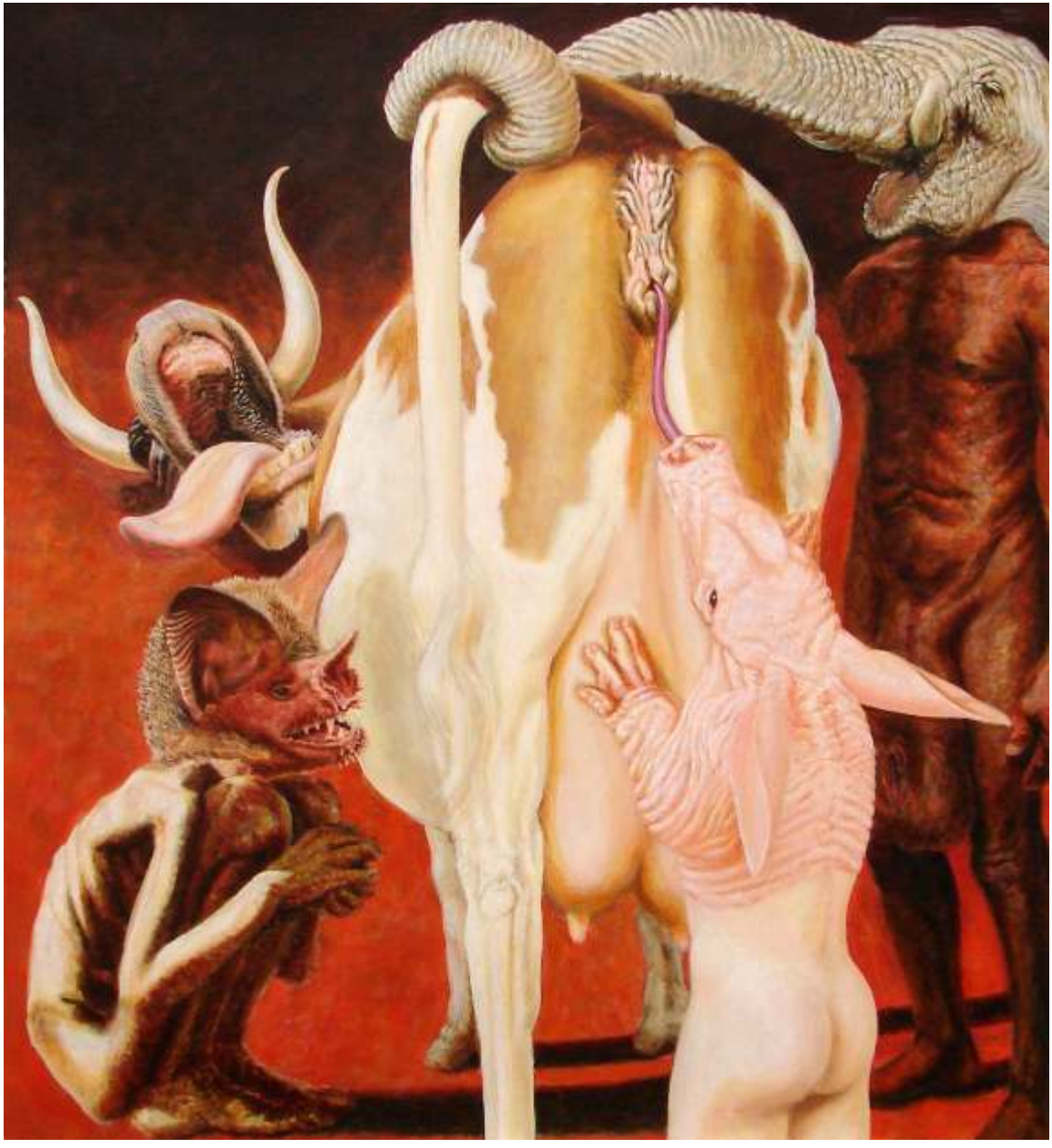
Early 17th century encounters between African people and European settlers in South Africa were initially friendly. The Africans gave the farmers heifers, and according to their tradition, the settlers were supposed to give the first calf born back to the tribe. Unfortunately, the European settlers were either ignorant of this tradition or unwilling to give. This led to cattle theft when the Africans took back what they perceived as belonging to them. In reaction the settlers began to raid the tribes and urge the government to take action. This led to police and military action, including the restriction of movement to control the situation. It is arguable that this original misunderstanding or lack of generosity was the beginning of the mistrust that developed into the Apartheid system.

Famous battles between the British and the Zulus like the Battle of Rorke's Drift in 1879 would seem to have been exacerbated by the British confiscating Zulu cattle. My great-grandfather was present at these events and his diary notes that the Officer Commanding sold the cattle to the butchers. In writing about the aftermath, he comments that he was very shocked by the mutilation and dismemberment of the corpses by the Zulus. In anger, they buried dead and still living Zulus in the same mass graves. Naturally, the history books only mention in passing that the cattle were seized.

An important social custom amongst African people is hospitality. Even strangers can knock on a door and expect food and lodging. Most probably this evolved due to the harsh nature of the African environment.

The myth about Africans eating menstrual matter and growing huge testicles is a modern example of the same inability to empathize or understand other cultures. It seems to say more about the people who invented it and the society that nurtures it. This painting, Latch, tries to tell some of the story. The title is taken from maternal jargon where the baby is said to latch, learning to drink from its mother's breast.

LATCH



Latch - 2008, Acrylic on paper, 40 x 37 inches

GRADE RAPE

Grade Rape - 2008, (painting in progress) Acrylic on paper, 40 x 37 inches

ASHLEY JOHNSON

GRADE RAPE

This painting refers to events in my life. The Galapagos tortoise represents age and the raccoon, badger and Tasmanian devil stand for small scavengers.

My friend had been having premonitions for days that something was wrong with her 92 year-old mother-in-law. She visited her house and found that she had been held hostage and raped by street children for two days while they ransacked the house. There was blood everywhere.

She was an Italian lady who had had land confiscated by Mussolini. She and her husband moved to Africa, where they had a rubber plantation in Togoland before eventually settling in South Africa. While alive, he was a cabinetmaker and because of a general distrust of banks, built secret drawers and safes throughout his furniture and house.

We took her to a nearby hospital and left her there while my friend tried to think of a long-term solution. On returning a few days later, in order to move her to the Mary Mount hospice, we found the nurses had refused to wash her. She spoke no English and was traumatized so perhaps she wouldn't cooperate with them. In any event, we moved her to the hospice, which coincidentally, was the place where I was born. After a few weeks she died.

The police had not made any progress in finding these perpetrators so the local Italian mafia decided to help. One of them had some dogs that were trained to maul a person's stomach the moment the interrogator put a baseball cap on the victim. They found someone to do this to, and I believe, a person completely unconnected to the crime or perpetrators. I don't think anyone was ever apprehended for either crime.

The street children in South Africa live in doorways or wherever they can. They beg for money at traffic intersections while sniffing glue to obviate hunger. Generally they are orphaned or have run away from home. Tribal custom always required veneration for age so they are a measure of cultural disintegration as new ordering structures form. There are few social mechanisms to rehabilitate and reintegrate them into society.

It is also worth noting that the concept of the child we uphold has only been in existence since the 19th century after the efforts of the British philanthropists and reformers. Africa, while cherishing children, has a different view, and is quite comfortable with the concept of child soldiers and exploitation of labour. Slavery developed in Africa as a strategy for survival. As crops failed and drought took over, so people would indenture their family members to other tribes not in dire straits.

ASHLEY JOHNSON

NECROMANCE

Necromancy is the practice of laying hands on the dead in order to communicate. Necrophilia is having sex with the dead. There are several famous cases in Western culture, like Jeffrey Dahmer and many grotesque urban legends about morgue events. Apparently it was a common practice for priests in some pagan cultures like the Moche of South America, to have sex with the sacrificial victim after death in an effort to communicate with the spirit world. Necromancy has a long tradition in Western cultures like the Greeks and Romans and many rituals were developed to facilitate the exchange.

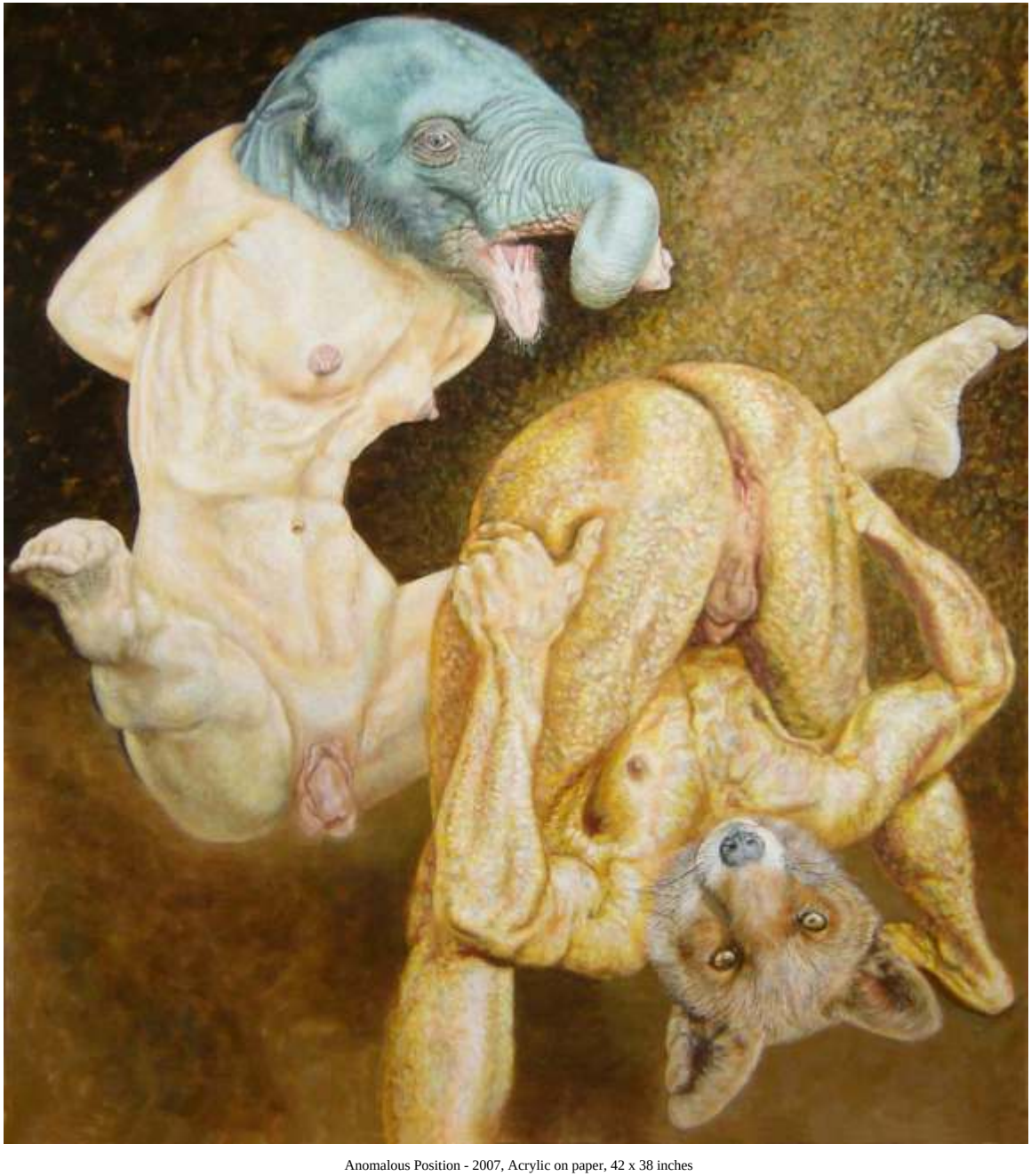
While sourcing imagery for my dead deer, I came across an interesting story. Bryan James Hathaway was arrested for having sex with a dead deer that had been killed by a car. The Wisconsin State was seeking to have him incarcerated for two years for a crime against sexual morality. Quite apart from his strange perversity, it says a lot about our Western society that the concept of having 'sex' with a dead animal is so taboo. There is an anomaly in deciding when an animal ceases to be an animal and becomes a carcass.

We have a vision of life and death that, for many Western religions, devalues animals. Humans move through death to the hereafter, not animals. Life is separated from death and for many adherents of a scientific worldview death is merely decomposition. Despite these dogmatic insistences, Spiritualism remains a widespread belief. By contrast, the Tibetan Book of the Dead outlines procedures for passing over and communicating with the dead.

Environmental interdependence has become a pervasive ideal and it seems important to revisit these taboos. Religious culture has formalized a system of morality that is out of step with the natural world. Animal identity needs to be fused with human to expand our restrictive notion of individuality. We have to look at our own animal nature squarely in the eye.

Necromance - 2008, Acrylic on paper, 40 x 37 inches

ANOMALOUS POSITION



Anomalous Position - 2007, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

ASHLEY JOHNSON

ANOMALOUS POSITION

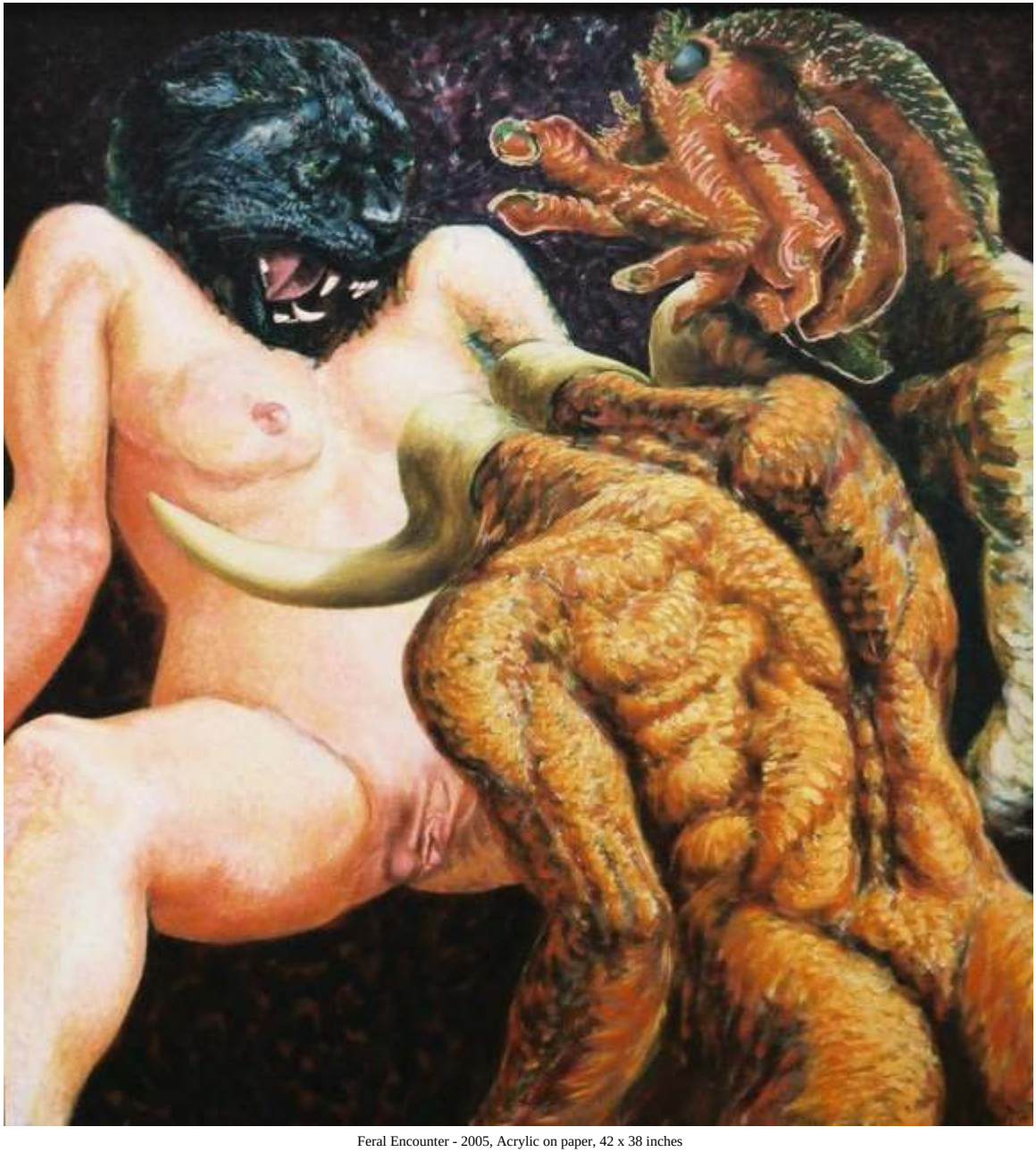
Anomalous Position is an uncertain coupling. It deals with the anomalies of inter-sex where female and male possibilities coexist. The reality that we surround ourselves with often doesn't make allowance for ambiguity and contradiction. In defining ourselves we induce imprisonment even as we express 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.

ASHLEY JOHNSON

FERAL ENCOUNTER

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.

FERAL ENCOUNTER



Feral Encounter - 2005, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

HYENA

Hyena - 2003, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

ASHLEY JOHNSON

HYENA

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.

ASHLEY JOHNSON

BEAUTIFUL BEASTS

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.

BEAUTIFUL BEASTS

Beautiful Beasts - 2001, Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

ASHLEY JOHNSON

WILDEBEEST WOMAN

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.

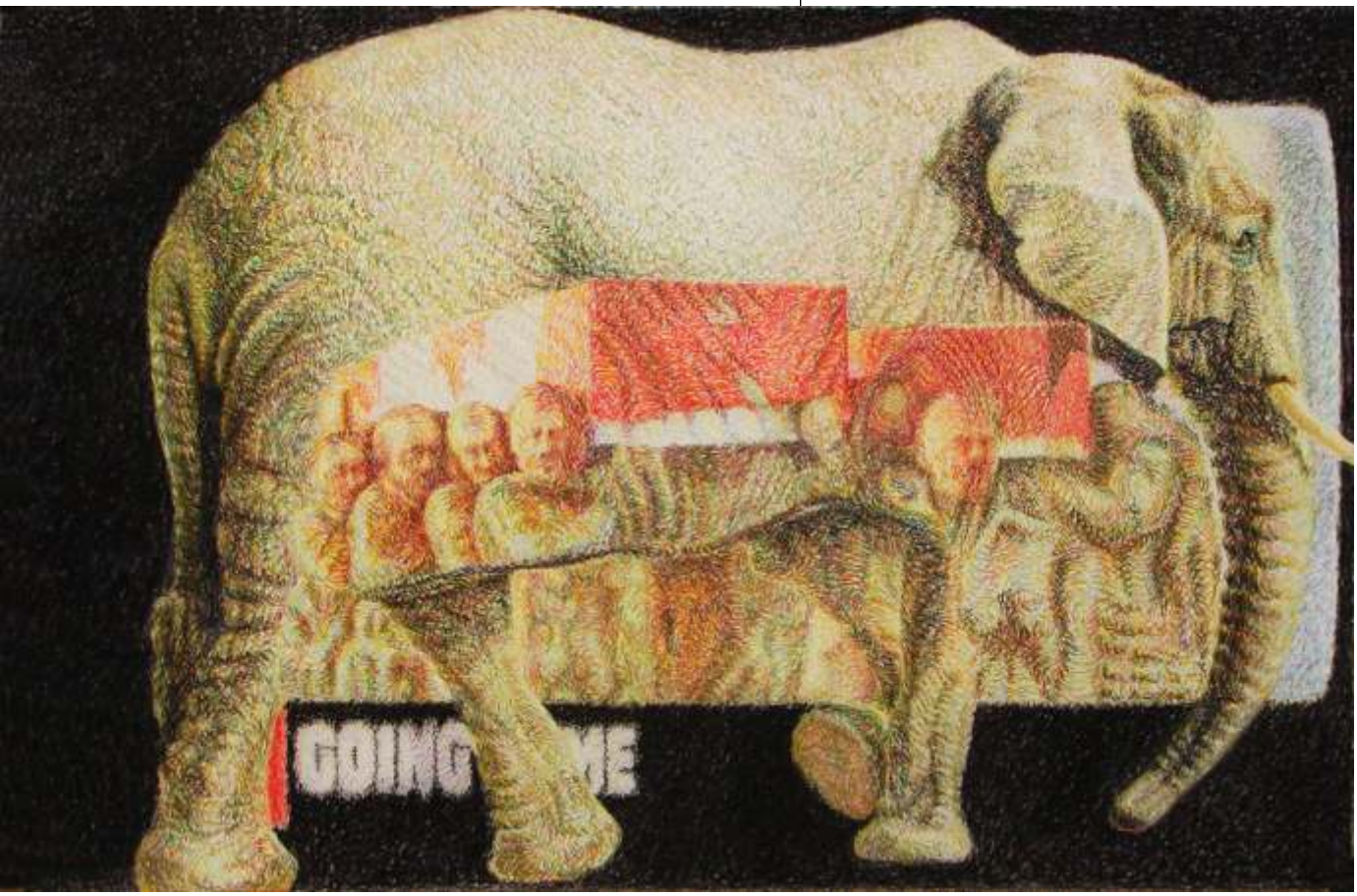
Wildebeest Woman - 2001,Acrylic on paper, 42 x 38 inches

ASHLEY JOHNSON

BROWSER

"Going Home" and the triptych "Browser" dip into the steady stream of media-driven imagery that defines Canada at the moment. The Browser triptych is basically a portrait of the artist as a giraffe or browser. The giraffe is an awkward animal from Africa, which is my homeland. It is a very apt metaphor of my immigrant experience, struggling to fit into a society whose mores I don't quite understand.

My African life was fraught with anxiety and guilt, as one battled to try and make a worthwhile artistic statement in the face of overwhelming indifference. The society has an unemployment level of 45 percent coupled with an abject degree of poverty since there is no social security



Going Home - 2007, Acrylic on paper, 26 x 40 inches

whatever. The economically privileged few often earn at a competitive global level so are very wealthy. Yet, there is little inclination to support art.

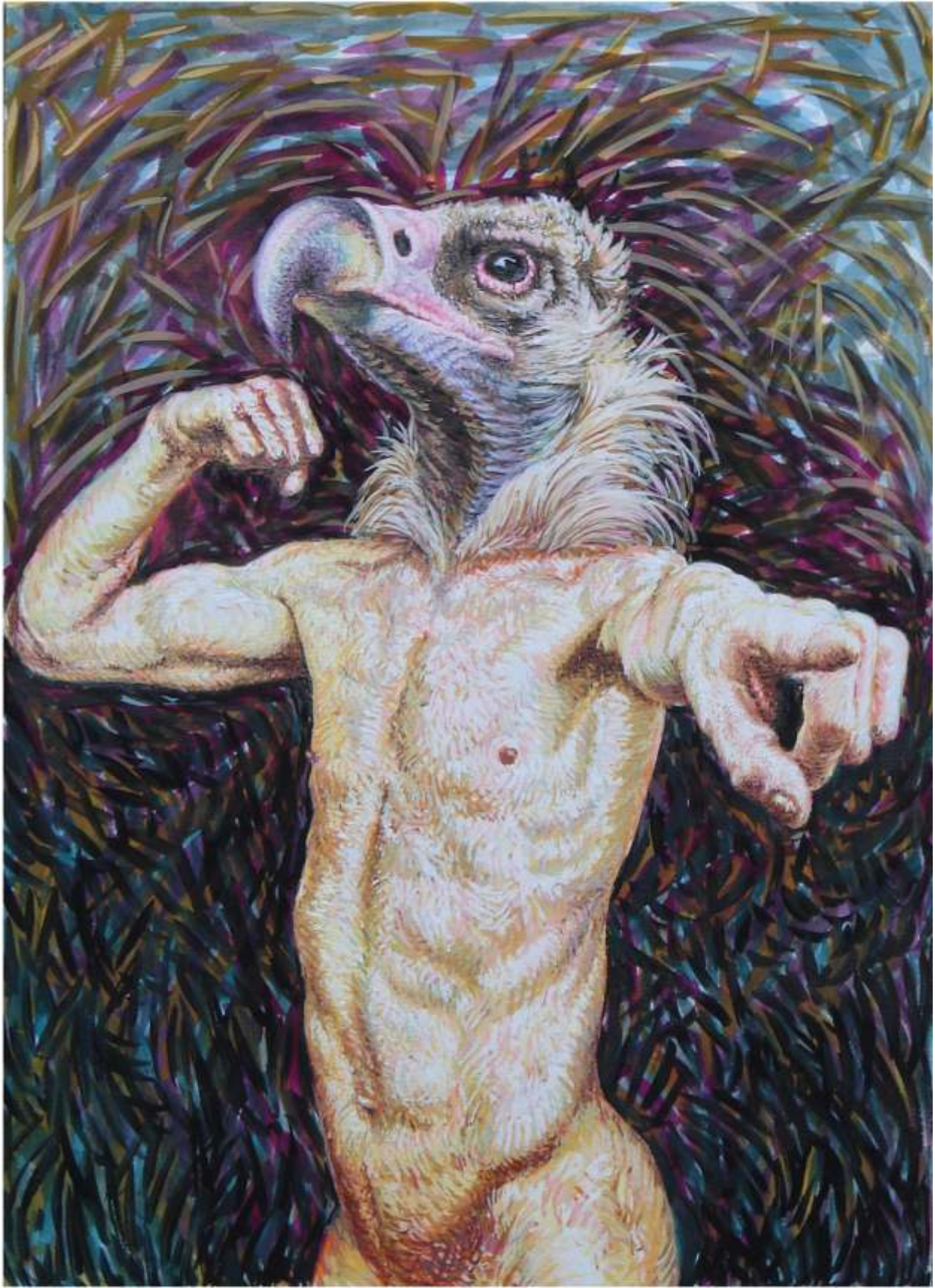
The CBC newscasts of Canadian military adventures in Afghanistan loom large in my mind. There are so many unanswered questions and cultural ignorance of how to resolve this matter. It seems to me that both Western and Eastern cultures have to re-invent themselves. The CN tower is an emblem of Canadian pride, and yet what emanates in terms of broadcasts are fuel to the fire.

I have chosen to use drawing media like charcoal and pastel to complete this work because they are almost therapeutic in their laborious application. Each stroke is a minute contribution to this a picture of consumption, that universal pastime.

Browser - 2006, Acrylic on paper, 78 x 40 inches (triptych)

VULTURE MAN II

Vultureman II: Imperialist - 2008, gouache on paper, 18 x 13 inches



ASHLEY JOHNSON

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Journey Into The Dark Heart of Art

I was born and educated in South Africa, a country that is on the frontier between colonizing European cultures seeking to expand influence, and indigenous African populations that wish to assert their own cultural values. The first European settlers arrived in the 1600's from the Netherlands, establishing a station for sea trade. Together with Black pastoral tribes descending from the North, they set about eradicating the original inhabitants, human and animal. An artist friend, CJ Morkel, relates that his ancestors were two brothers specifically employed to hunt down nomadic Bushmen. As late as 1965, the list of game one could legally hunt included the Bushmen. Not that anyone did since only a few thousand still survive.

The Colonial forces, which by now included Britain because South Africa is rich in diamonds and gold, were afraid of being swamped by the overwhelming numbers of indigenous people. Accordingly they denied African people the right to vote. In time, the political landscape changed so by 1948, the National Party, right wing Afrikaner farmers from Dutch stock, defeated the more liberal South African Party. They set up the repressive regime of Apartheid which entrenched racial differences and created the conditions for inequality in education. To maintain control they developed a secret organization called The Broederbond, which is a bit like the Freemasons. Members of this organization were deployed throughout the system to manipulate and make sure no dissent was permitted.

My first real encounter with art was at university. I was bored by my subjects in the BA program and switched to a BAFA. It surprised me that I was accepted without even showing a drawing and I entered a system where the main aim was to process as many students as possible without regard to the number of work opportunities available. I learnt that only the very top students were re-employed at these institutions and many professors clung to their jobs long after their expiry date. To make matters worse, I and several friends challenged the decisions of the department head, who we suspected was Broederbond. The system used an external examiner who took precedence over the internal professors. In our final assessment the external examiner simply downgraded all of us so that we only just passed. They didn't want us coming back. In addition, I was banned from returning to the department at all. Thus studying towards a Masters degree became a closed option.

I should mention that at this point the universities were segregated so we only had one African student although

sometimes African artists would use the printing facilities. There were separate universities for African and Asian artists and we had very little contact with each other. Support for these institutions was minimal.

The type of education I received was classical, based on the English model at places like the Royal College of Art, only we were a couple of decades out of step. Magazines like Artforum kept us informed about contemporary art and colonized our minds with "Americanese". It took awhile to realize that we were being hoodwinked by the dominant culture. Articles that exposed the link between Abstract Expressionism and the CIA helped.

Leaving university meant having to fulfill military obligations since the country had conscription. One was obliged to complete two years and then one endured 3 month camps for the equivalent of another two years. I ended up doing officer training because I had done a teaching diploma in a vain attempt to stave off the military moment. By a strange stroke of fate, another artist, Michael Matthews, was in the next bed. When he showed me his work I realized it was the same art that I had had to hang in a joint exhibition between different institutions. It had clashed with my work. Together we faced many obstacles in the army. Afterward we showed together and formed Dasart a vehicle for socialist art.

Matthews is a unique individual and I can relate a story from the period he spent on the border which was the war zone. Apparently a soldier under his command had become mentally unstable. They used to take "mal pitte" or mad pips with other drugs. He had left the soldier on the back of the truck with his rifle while they stopped and searched a "shebeen" or tavern. The soldier blew his own head off. Aside from the trauma, Matthews recalls this as the moment when he began making body casts of corpses. This involved getting unauthorized access to the morgue, manipulating the body into position and finally making the cast with plaster soaked bandages. He set up the resulting art sculptures around the army base's swimming pool. Years later he met a traveling salesman who had kept one of these and he said the stench of death was still on it.

Matthews and I have exhibited together since 1989. I have never done a conventional solo exhibition, mainly because there didn't seem to be much point. South Africa had about ten contemporary art galleries then and a tiny, uninformed art market. The galleries were usually owned by wealthy people to whom art was a hobby. Our first show was at one of these. The lady went on holiday at an exclusive resort when she should have been marketing the show. The costs of the show are borne by the artist, so we forked out for wine and snacks, media releases, rental of space, printing invites, mailing in addition to framing and transportation costs. This practice continues today and a top gallery even charged the salaries of the waiters and staff to the bill of a friend, who had to pay

around R30 000 or $5000 for a 3 week show. Artists have to accept the treatment because there isn't an alternative. To even get accepted for a show at this particular gallery, which counts William Kentridge in its stable, is an achievement.

There were no art magazines although several attempts were made to start these. The only media coverage an artist could get was through the newspaper. Not all of these even covered art shows, because they were selling advertising space in the papers and their clients had no interest in art. Gallery owners would wine and dine journalists to ensure their shows got coverage. Some journalists would do a round up of several shows in one column so artists only got a sentence or two on their work.

Two strategies emerged to deal with this. Some power groups within certain important universities began to extend a web of influence. They became known as the art mafia. If you were connected with them you were promoted, if not people would not even attend your opening. The second strategy was art competitions. There were only a couple of these like the Cape Town Triennial which took place every three years. After a while it was obvious that the same artists were getting in every time and one could see the value of being connected to the art mafia.

We realized after failing to enter for several years that we had to find an alternative. Matthews' submission for one competition was even thrown away with the garbage. We celebrated because they had to pay him out the insurance value.

It was obvious that we had to get our work shown in other countries. Our first experiment was in Amsterdam and we had a successful joint exhibition. The Russian dissident artists were big news but we also made it into the press. The Dutch company, Telkom wanted to buy Matthews' entire selection, which dealt with communication and telephone booths. However, they realized we were white South African artists so because of sanctions against apartheid they cancelled the deal. Later this show traveled to Germany and was shown at the South African Embassy. This was quite brave of them since my work dealt specifically with the violence taking place at home.

At this point we decided to create Dasart. It could be an identifiable organism comprised of a number of artists and hopefully get more attention. We had noticed that there were some beautiful spaces in museums across the country. These institutions did not have big budgets but they had some money. University galleries were also looking for big shows and we no longer had to pay for invites or exhibition costs.

The first couple of Dasart shows used a fixed group of artists and did not have a common theme. In trying to expand the membership I unwittingly included someone with a neo-Nazi outlook and a freedom fighter that had just spent 5 years in jail for killing a policeman. This was an explosive combination and Dasart had to change form. The first Johannesburg Biennale was on and we showed at a fringe venue.

Two people showed up at the opening. One of them was an old lady who smuggles ball point pens for school kids into Mozambique, a neighbouring country.

We began to construct an installation that contrasted the beginning of the Industrial Revolution with the end of the century. Dasart work was made from industrial debris and we used electricity and motors which we contrasted with Victorian paintings of the period. We created essays and books to go with the show. The first incarnation was called Dasart/Victoria I but it became a traveling show and at each venue we added or subtracted art.

After this show, which took a couple of years to complete, we tried to get it into the second Johannesburg Biennale which international curator Okwui Enwezor was directing. He had a theme of Trade Routes which was close to our theme. Unfortunately the art mafia had him pretty much sewn up so I suspect he was only shown certain artists' work.

After this Dasart changed form again. I began to use it as a curatorial tool, inviting a range of artists to become part of an exchange with artists in Los Angeles and Tijuana. I created a book to go along with the show. This was important because it sets out the idea and remains as an artifact after the event. The sculptures that were to make the trip were huge and one artist wanted to send several life size wildebeest, carved out prison release papers. They were to come storming out of the white gallery wall like the Serengeti Wildebeest migration. I was expecting to assemble parts onsite but when he arrived he had packed them complete into wooden boxes. He thought I would have a forklift handy to load them into the container.

A project like this costs a lot of money and so we looked for grants. This was a tricky procedure and one ended up doing so much paperwork to satisfy their requirements. It was mostly a waste of time. You had to know people in the system and also express approved political sentiments. I have a treasured rejection letter sent from the official art funding body. The director of this National Arts Council had made an error and signed their working document which had rude and racist comments scrawled across it. I exhibited it as part of the documentation of the traveling show. This was under the post apartheid regime which had come to power after 1994.

I did find one governmental funding body that was helpful. This was the Department of Trade and Industry. They would pay back some of the costs of overseas exhibitions. In this manner, along with some sponsorship from private companies, I took a traveling Dasart show called Transmigrations, to Los Angeles and Tijuana where it was nominated for a cultural award. Having this history, the show was warmly received at home and it went on a national tour. It was a financial disaster for me personally though and underlined the chances one has to take as an artist. The most valuable aspect of it was that Canada accepted my application

for permanent residence on the basis of the project.

Doing the organizing of this show meant I stopped making my own art. I have been working on an installation for ten years now about the early 20th century colonial holocaust that took place in the Congo. They estimate 20 million people were killed over a thirty year period. The motor car tire had just been invented and they did not have rubber plantations yet. The Belgian king annexed the Congo to promote Christianity but in reality to tap the wild rubber vines. He used a Cannibal army to collect these rubber taxes and the soldiers were not allowed to waste bullets on animals so they had to account for every bullet with human hands. Thus a soldier was designated the Keeper of the Hands and he carried the basket of severed limbs. The money from the rubber went into the King's architectural projects in Belgium.

At the same time the Kodak camera was invented and Protestant missionaries used it to take images of the atrocities, trying to get the world to stop it. Many of these images would have been part of my installation, by courtesy of Anti-Slavery International.

Shortly before leaving South Africa for Canada, I succeeded in getting this installation accepted into a prestigious local competition. This was the only means I had of getting it shown. As a final irony, the patron of the competition, who had many enemies, was assassinated in his car. His motives for creating the competition may not have been love of art but more with improving his public image. In any event, the competition folded as they could not find anyone willing to continue it.

So, here I am, in Canada.

Ashley Johnson
Toronto
2008

ASHLEY JOHNSON (B.A.F.A.) (H.D.E.)

Personal Exhibitions

1991 SA Embassy, Bonn, Germany
1990 Galerie Binnenland, Amsterdam, Netherlands.
1989 Karen McKerron Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa (SA).
1992 Co-founded Dasart artists' collective

Dasart Exhibitions

2002 “Transmigrations: Rituals and Items” Pretoria Art Museum, SA
2002 “Transmigrations: Rituals and Items” Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, SA
2002 “Transmigrations: Rituals and Items” Ann Bryant Gallery, East London, SA
2000 “Transmigrations: Rituals and Items” Angels Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro, CA, USA
1999 “Transmigrations: Rituals and Items” University of Baja California, Tijuana, Mexico
1999 “Transmigrations: Rituals and Items” ArtShare Gallery, Los Angeles, USA
1999 “Transmigrations: Rituals and Items” Civic Theatre Gallery, Johannesburg, SA
1998 "Dasart draws the Line" Gallery 111, Johannesburg, SA
1997 Dasart at the Second Johannesburg Biennale, Carfax, Johannesburg,
1996 "Dasart Victoria II: Colonial Mutations" Durban Art Gallery, Durban, SA
1996 "Dasart Colonial Mutations" Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, SA
1995 Mega Music, First Johannesburg Biennale, SA
1995 "Dasart Victoria I" Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, SA
1995 "Dasart Hugging Itself Twice" Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, SA
1994 University of South Africa (UNISA) Art Gallery, Pretoria, SA
1993 Natal Technikon, Durban, SA
1993 Institute of Contemporary Art, (ICA) Johannesburg, SA
1992 Jack Heath Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, SA

Invited Participant

2008	Ashley Johnson Headbones Gallery, Toronto
2008	Toronto International Art Fair, Headbones Gallery booth
2008	John B Aird Drawing Show
2007	Lights on Bloor, Nuit Blanche, Toronto
2007	Toronto International Art Fair, Headbones Gallery booth
2007	Looking East, Lehmann & Leskiw Fine Art, Toronto
2007	Ethnic Convergence, Headbones Gallery, Toronto
2006	New Canadians Without Borders, Varley Art Gallery, Unionville
2005	Miniature show, Gordart Gallery, Johannesburg
2005	Carfax Collection, Johannesburg
2005	“Porn Again”, Merely Mortal, Johannesburg
2004	The Cube, Celebration of Nine Years Carfax, Johannesburg
2003	The Stuffed Xmas show, Gordart Gallery, Johannesburg
2003	The Cube I IV, Carfax, Johannesburg
2003	Gesondaar, Aardklop Festival, Potchefstroom
2000	Forces of Trauma and Powers of Healing, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria
1998	Sacred Spaces, Carfax, Johannesburg
1998	Nudes and Nakeds, Carfax, Johannesburg
1998	Kempton Park Art Competition, Kempton Park (Top 100 finalist)
1998	Art Objects & Meditations, Gallery 111, Johannesburg
1997	Kempton Park Art Competition, Kempton Park (Top 100 finalist)
1997	Group Spiral Music Production, Carfax, Johannesburg
1997	Euro-virus II-V, Carfax, Johannesburg
1997	A little Big Thing - Erotic Miniatures, Sally Thompson Gallery, Jhb
1997	"No 4" Echos performance production, Old Fort Johannesburg
1996	Little Show of Drawers, Pretoria University.
1996	Invitation Show, Keith Alexander Gallery, Johannesburg
1993	Pretoria Art Museum; Momentum Life Awards Exhibition
1993	Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg, group exhibition.
1986	FUBA Gallery, Johannesburg, group exhibition
1978-82	Various student exhibitions, Pietermaritzburg

Articles & Reviews about Ashley or Dasart

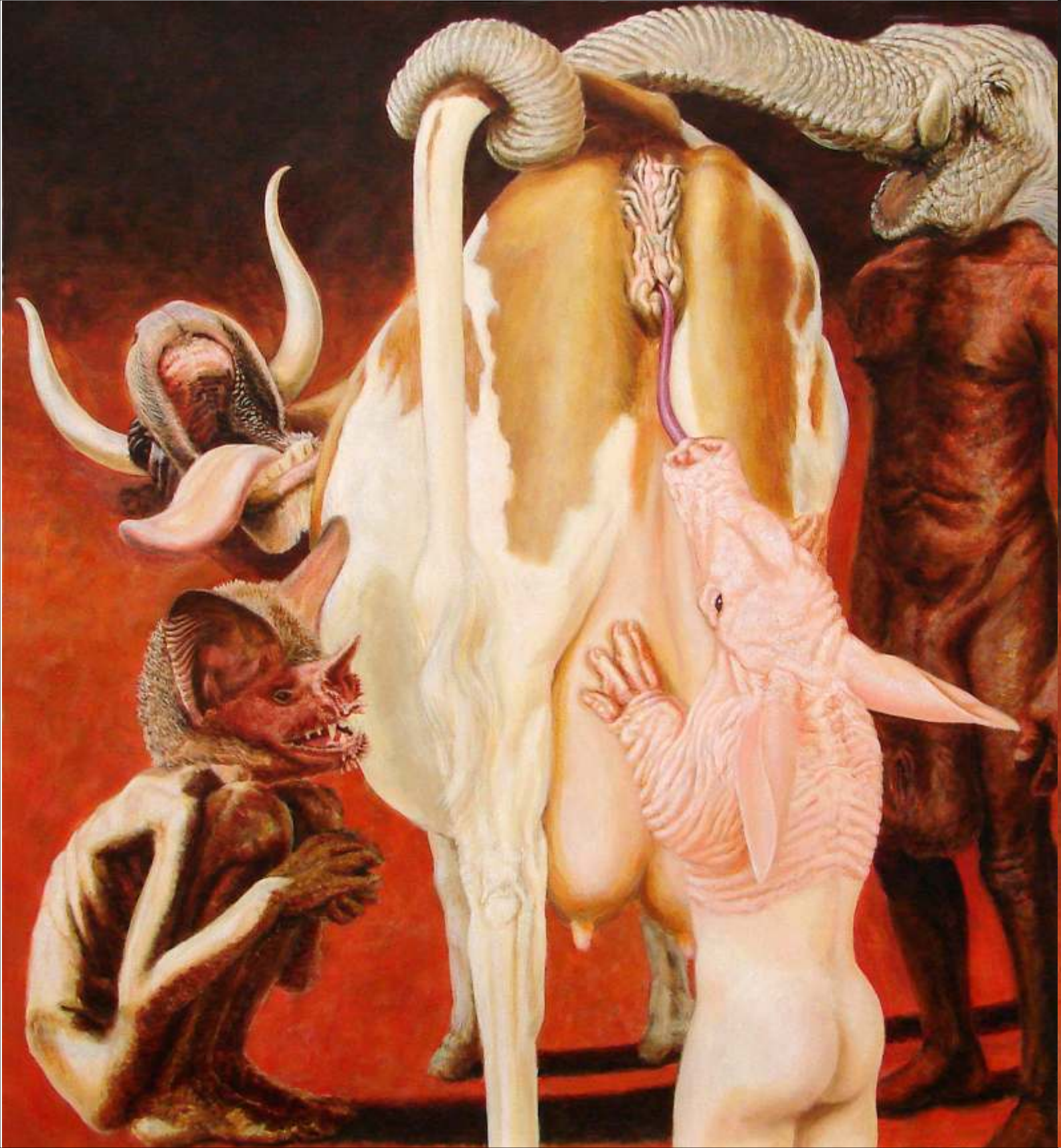
2003 Subjective Sinners, Hans Pienaar, Spat Retensie, Sept 2
2002 Uitstalling steek die grense van verskeie kulture oor, Bloemnuus Sept 13
2002 Transmigrations, Anno IX, Giu/Ago
2002 Take some time to reflect, Lightstrider, Albertus Van Dijk, Saturday Star, April 6
2002 Oorvleuelende kultuur op uitstalling te sien, Volksblad Sept 12
2002 Nuwe Kunsritueel, Transmigration, Andrelise Meiring, Volksblad Sept 23
2002 More than meets the eye, Andrea Jonker-Bryce, Daily Dispatch, Nov 18
2002 Brugbouers, Diek Grobler, Pretoria News, Mei 17
2000 Reviews The Aesthetic, April, 2000
2000 " Transmigraciones" Expone Crosthwaite en LA Mosaico Frontera March 10
2000 " Exhibit of South African Artists" Random Lengths, March 31
1999 Arts and Leisure, Financial Mail, Mar 25
1999 ”Arte contemporáneo en la Sala de Arte de la UABC” Arte y cultura August 27
1999 “Rituele en die wêrelddorp” Die Beeld Kalendar March 23
1999 “Espacio multisciplinario” Mosaico Frontera August 27
1999 “Exposición de Arte Contemporáneo sudarfricano en al UABC” Pintura August 13
1996 Gallery Notes by Marianne Meijer, Mercury, 17 April
1996 "Die kuns laat jou hare rys" by Charles Smith, Volksblad, 5 July
1996 "Dasart Colonial Mutations: EXPRESS takes a peek" Express, 26 June
1996 "Concerns provoked..." by Jeff Chandler, Sunday Tribune 21 April
1996 " We are the New Imperialism" by Ingrid Shevlin, Sunday Tribune, 14 April
1995 "Rich Associations Inform and Test" by Prof. T King, Natal Witness, 24 July
1995 "Raw Art" by Suzy Bell, Daily News, 28 July
1995 "Inside Art" Cover story, The Star, 28 February
1993 "Stimulerende ervaring", Beeld, 18 October
1993 "Dasart show at Natal Tech", Daily News, 16 April
1992 Natal Arts Trust Newsletter, Valerie Leigh editor, Issue 12, December
1991 "Tinten van landschap en ANC" Trouw, Netherlands, 8 August
1990 Time Out, by Michael Coulson, Financial Mail, February

Publications

2007	Ashley Johnson, Ethnic Convergence, Rich Fog Micro Publishing
2000	Dasart Live CD-ROM, MXM Aesthetics
2000	Dasart - Transmigrations (book) Angels Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro
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
1996	"Dasart Colonial Mutations" (book), Dasart Productions
1995	Mega Music Catalogue
1995	Dasart Colonial Mutations Oliewenhuis Museum
1995	"Victoria / Dasart" (book), Brevitas Publishers
1994	UNISA catalogue, Andrew Weldrick editor

Education

Bachelor Arts, Fine Art, (BAFA); University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, SA
Higher Diploma in Education,(HDE);University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, SA (Teaching Diploma)

RICH FOG

Micro Publishing
Toronto Canada