

James W Johnson – Extended Bio

I, James W Johnson, was born in the village of Endicott, NY, in January 1954. My father was a tool designer and my mother was a secretary. We lived in 2 suburban towns among the woods, hills, gray skies, and hard winters of Upstate NY during my formative years. After high school, at 18, I went with a friend to Europe to spend a month wandering around France and Spain, where I went to my first art museum, The Louvre. That early jaw-dropping exposure to art later changed what would become my life.

Having been raised by wonderfully practical parents, and having little natural talent for the arts, I entered college at S.U.N.Y at Oswego in 1973 as a chemistry major. After a year of that, and being on the verge of flunking out, I took an Art Appreciation elective that led to a studio course in drawing. I was fortunate that that drawing teacher was Thom Seawell, a nationally recognized printmaker, who made making art sound like the most important and worthwhile way to spend one's time and energy. After learning that "making Art" can be learned, I changed my major to Art, developed a love for Art History, and decided that I was going to make art for the rest of my life, no matter what. I have never regretted or doubted that decision for a minute.

In my senior year at Oswego, Thom Seawell brought Lynwood Kreneck to town to give us a talk and a workshop in silk screen printing. I really liked him, his art, and his sense of humor. He showed lovely photos of blue skies over a picturesque Texas Tech University campus. So, when I was later applying to graduate schools to get an MFA, I applied there. During that year an article appeared in a national magazine about the vitality of the "Texas Art Scene" that mentioned, among others, former Lubbockites Terry Allen and George Green. Between that article, Lynwood's offer of a \$100 per semester scholarship and in-state tuition (\$4 a credit hour at the time!), and thinking of warm weather and blue skies, I decided to come to Lubbock.

In the summer of 1978, I came to Lubbock to find an apartment in the old "Tech Ghetto". When I got off the plane, it was 112 degrees and the town looked completely deserted. My first few months contained some painful times and none of the Art Faculty seemed to like my work. I began to question the wisdom of my decision to attend TTU. But by Thanksgiving I was beginning to adapt and met my future wife, Future Akins, who was an artist with roots in Lubbock. We married in 1979 and she helped me develop an appreciation for West Texas, its culture, and its people. In graduate school, I majored in printmaking, where Lynwood and Terry Morrow provided excellent guidance, and minored in painting until Hugh Gibbons, the only graduate painting professor at the time, decided I wasn't good enough to minor in painting. I switched my minor to drawing (in color, of course) and received my MFA in 1981. The most valuable things I learned in the process were how to spend 70 hours a week making art, how to see my art more objectively (as in what others see), and how to talk about it. And Hugh later became very supportive of my work.

As a young adult, I worked in construction, landscaping, a box factory, a hinge factory, at bartending, and eventually as a housepainter. In grad school, I worked for a year designing posters for TTU University Programs and 2 years as a Teaching Assistant. So naturally, after becoming a “Master of Fine Arts”, I went back to housepainting for a living, often working with fellow Lubbock artist John Chinn. Future and I applied unsuccessfully for numerous professorial jobs but after a year of surviving on part-time work and making more art than ever, we decided to forget about that. I also went back to painting with oils on canvas and we concentrated on making more and better art, showing it whenever and wherever we could. (I couldn’t even guess how many slide portfolios, postcards, and booklets we sent out.) Our persistence began to slowly pay off. A wise, experienced art guy by the name of Ron Gleason once told me in grad school that no one in the “Art World” would take anyone seriously until 10 years after receiving an MFA. I’m not sure about the truth of that statement but I was prepared to wait.

I began to exhibit my work while attending Texas Tech and was included in some juried competitions. I remember being very excited about my first 3-person exhibition that took place in 1979 at Odessa College with Future and a friend. I think 4 people came to the opening. 2 were Future’s relatives, 1 was my friend’s girlfriend, and the other was the professor who invited us to show there. Three years later, I drove about 30 paintings and prints to San Francisco to be in a month-long show called “The First International Armory Show – Paintings of Power and Beauty”. Billed as “50 artists and 5,000 works of Art” in a building at Fort Mason it was a very interesting experience, a couple thousand people came to the opening and more came over the course of the month that I spent hanging around there. While not being profitable, I made some good artist friends. With one of those friends, Doug Sutherland, I spent a whole day watching him paint in his studio. I learned as much about painting in that one day as I did in all my college painting courses combined.

Also around 1982, Lubbock Lights Art Gallery, here in Lubbock, went from being a commercial contemporary art gallery to being a co-op. Of course, Future and I joined, and we exhibited with about 15 other artists, some of whom are still artists and friends. One year before the co-op dissolved, we put on a 4th of July art show/event and about 500 people came. Not exactly attendance like the First Friday Art Trails of 2024 but that was impressive in 1982, proving the doubters wrong that Lubbock was ready for a contemporary art scene.

Also in 1982, I had etchings in printmaking shows in Holland and the DeCordova Museum in Massachusetts, a solo exhibition at Texas A&M University that was censorially removed after it was hung, and I was “introduced” in a commercial gallery in Houston. For the next 6 years as I continued to make etching and my painting developed, I was in dozens of exhibitions in commercial and non-commercial galleries in across Texas, Oklahoma, California, Arizona, New York, Florida, Hawaii, Sante Fe, Seattle, Chicago, Kansas City, Holland, and Brazil, while

continuing to show in various venues around Lubbock. During the 80's, Future and I began staging "pop-up" art shows in unrented commercial spaces in Lubbock, something I kept pursuing in the 90's.

In 1988, Future and I separated before I was included in a large 3-person exhibition of paintings and sculptures at the Blue Star Art Space in San Antonio with prestigious Lubbock-born artist James Drake and a Dallas sculptor named Chase Yarbrough. The show was titled "Horoscopes for the Damned" and was curated by Jim Edwards, the Curator of Contemporary Art at the San Antonio Museum of Art. He became a good friend who included my paintings in other exhibitions. He also introduced me to his wife and 3 daughters and I give their family credit for saving my sanity, and possibly my existence, during a difficult time. Later that year, after an amicable divorce, I began a relationship with Lubbock artist Lahib Jaddo which opened a new chapter in my life.

In 1989, a collector of my work, Jack Bourdelais, and a rare book dealer, Jim Lorson, from California began a project as Greybeard Press with myself and Charles Bukowski. They commissioned me to design and print a series of 11 etchings, some hand-colored, to accompany Bukowski's short story "Not Quite Bernadette". The large-format, limited edition book was typeset and assembled by a renowned California book artist named Joseph D'Ambrosio and signed by Bukowski and me. The etchings took me 6 months to complete (printing 160 of each image on a press I bought after grad school) and most of the bound copies ended up in public and private collections around the country. With the help of that project, and the other sales of my work that followed, I never had to paint houses to survive again. I have since made a living as a working studio artist who resides in Lubbock.

In the late 1980's and early 90's, I was showing regularly at commercial galleries in Houston, Austin, San Antonio, and Fullerton, CA. I was in invitational and competitive exhibitions in around Texas, in museums in California, New Mexico, Idaho, North Carolina, Mississippi, and North Dakota. Locally, I was showing at the old "Lubbock Fine Arts Center" in various solo and group exhibitions including "Stories from the Storm Cellar", a complex collaborative event involving about 20 local artists and musicians. A new commercial gallery called Rodman's also popped up on Lubbock' north side where Lahib and I would exhibit.

In 1994, I had 3 large paintings accepted into the Lubbock Arts Festival's Competition Gallery where the juror, an artist from NYC gave my work 2 top awards. This caused a local stir among a vocal group of Lubbockites who claimed my work was pornographic and/or satanic. The following year, the Arts Festival decided to not have a juried competitive gallery, thus eliminating that opportunity for local contemporary artists. In response, Lahib and I and some friends organized the "Salon of the Ignored" in a large vacant building downtown that was open at the same time as the Arts Festival. Using an open call approach, around 100 local artists, poets, and musicians (from age 13 to 83) participated in the weekend event and around 2,000 people came to enjoy the

Arts. In 1996, we were planning another similar event in a different space when the Arts Festival organizers contacted me to see if we could work together. We did and called our new event “Salon of the Included”. Just before our show opened, someone reported my new paintings to the Lubbock police. Some vice squad officers showed up while we were installing and threatened to impound a year’s worth of my paintings and give me a citation. Luckily, after some negotiation, they allowed me to install curtains around my work and put up a parental warning sign. Of course, after that, most attendees were inclined to go inside. The weekend exhibition went as planned, and participation and attendance were even better than the previous year. In 1997, the Lubbock Arts Festival returned to having a juried gallery option for local artists.

Also in the early 1990’s, a friend of Jim Edwards in San Antonio, named Marynell Maloney, began buying paintings from me. She and I became close friends for the next 15 years and she bought dozens of paintings from me. Beginning in 1994, she and her husband were renovating a Chateau in central France and they commissioned me to design and paint a complex mural in oils on the walls of the Chateau’s entryway. They also commissioned me to design and build some large, sculptural painted wood beds and tables. In the following years, Lahib, her children, and I spent many weeks in France working on art and hanging out with our friend and her family.

Here in Lubbock during the mid 90’s, Carlton Godbold began buying paintings from Lahib and I and he later opened the Godbold Cultural Center. We became very involved there for several years and installed various exhibitions of our work along with Carlton’s personal collection. We welcomed Carlton’s concept of creating a privately owned arts venue that believed in freedom of expression and involved many artists and musicians. At the Cultural Center, I painted a large mural on the outdoor entryway façade, a complex, neck-breaking mural on the lobby ceiling, and even installed a “Spook House” installation one Halloween with my sculptures and some local spookers.

Previous to 1997, the content and imagery of my paintings, drawings, etchings, and sculptures were somewhat confrontational, often using nude figures and a few “monsters” that I felt necessary to communicate my thoughts on social and psychological issues (but not without a frequent sense of humor, satire, or irony.) In 1997, I decided it was time for a change and I began to focus more on making paintings that showed the beauty of life and the living. For me, that beauty was primarily found in the faces of children, the landscapes of West Texas, and later in animals. In that year, I began a series of large canvases of (mostly) children’s faces in West Texas landscapes which I called “Human-Nature”. They were featured in a 1998 issue of the national publication “New American Paintings”, some were shown at solo exhibitions at a commercial gallery in Austin, at the Museum of Texas Tech University in 1999 that also featured some landscape paintings, and at commercial galleries in Sante Fe and New Orleans. I ended up painting around 50 canvases in

the “Human-Nature” series and all but 2 are spread around the US in various public and private collections. That concept also led to concurrent “Animal-Nature” and “Masked-Nature” series.

1999 brought more changes in my life beginning with another amicable divorce. Besides painting, I had begun making short videos, usually with computer generated animation. I had been familiar with computers since Marynell gave me one in 1996 and I learned photoshop, began creating my website, and learned how to make interactive CD-Roms of my art (a soon-to-be obsolete technology.) This naturally led to making videos with original soundtracks and over the following 7 or 8 years, I made around 75 shorts that were shown in a couple dozen festivals and broadcast venues. I also worked on some local projects with my friend Chris Caddel, usually as editor and animator. One of our pieces debuted at the new LHUCA building before they even had walls to hang art on. And later, I was a member of the committee that founded the Flatland Film Festival at LHUCA. During those same years, my friend, Marynell, began making independent films that were shot in NYC, France, Costa Rica, and Russia. I worked mainly as art director, set designer and builder, some prop creation, and a token bit-part actor. All those collaborative experiences were invaluable but taught me that I was personally more suited to solo, low-tech artmaking.

One of my animated videos was the culmination of some ideas I had about the absurd creative restrictions that were unspoken in the academic and commercial circles of the art world. The idea that an artist had to have a recognizable “style”, as if people couldn’t find the artist in a more complex body of work. So, in 2002, I wrote the “Anti-Stylist’s Manifesto” and created an animated video to explain the concept. After that I removed all preconceived notions of what my art “should” look like and let the “style” and media be determined by my inspiration. Humans, and artists too, are multi-faceted beings, and sharing an idea or feeling is more important than maintaining an easily recognized style. For me, the joy of creating was revitalized upon reaching that conclusion and keeps me going to this day.

Before 1999, I made art in a spare bedroom in a rented house, then an unheated warehouse on Lubbock’s north side that had a bathroom with black widow spiders, then a commercial building that was livable with heat, AC, a shower that I put in, and a fenced 3-acre concrete yard. When the owner sold the building, I moved my studio to an empty retail space on 34th st. In 1999, I finally bought my own home/studio with only a little rented storage required. In 2001, Erika Pochybova and I were married and a few years later she also became an excellent artist. Most of my 2000’s were spent showing mostly around Lubbock, including at the Charles Adams Gallery, and a few other venues in Texas. I had my first solo show at LHUCA in 2006 and participated in some of the Wheeler Brothers’ “Ulterior Motifs” shows here and in Houston. During those years, there was a lot of filmmaking travel and some time was taken up with looking after my aging mother. Then in 2008, Erika and I had a 2 person show at LHUCA, and in 2009 I had what I think of as a premature

retrospective solo show at LHUCA called “Thirty Arty Years”, since I had then been making art in Lubbock for 30 years. This transplanted Yankee finally felt like a real Lubbockite.

In the 2010’s, I mostly showed in commercial galleries in Tulsa, Houston, and around Lubbock. In 2010, I began working with a web-based company called Fine Arts America/Pixels.com that prints art on various papers, canvas, and in several other formats on different media and items. With them, I’ve had over 5 million visitors and sold thousands of reproductions of my paintings to people around the USA, the UK, and Australia. In 2011, Erika and I were awarded the William D. Kerns Award for the Visual Arts at LHUCA. In 2013, we had another 2-person exhibition there. In 2014, I was a finalist for The Hunting Art Prize in Houston., which had a great opening but no prize for me. 😊 Also in 2014, I was on the founding committee for the Museum Association of Texas Tech University’s Annual fundraising exhibition, “Art on the Llano Estacado”, at the Museum of Texas Tech University. I have participated in and volunteered to help install each successive iteration since then and in June of this year, I will be their Legacy Award Winner. In 2018, I had another solo exhibition at LHUCA of a series I called “Floral Interpretations”. A definite “stylistic” departure from the earlier artist me. The last exhibition where I personally delivered my paintings out of town was in 2020 at Jeff Wheeler’s current gallery, Space 7, in San Antonio. An old friend there, James Cobb, and I were featured during the month that Covid hit. Since then, I have only shipped paintings to exhibitions, and I am reluctant to load my truck with paintings and haul them somewhere for more than a day trip. I will be having a show in Alabama this fall but they are going to pick them up and bring them back when it’s over.

In 2015, I experienced my third and final amicable divorce, and now live in a different studio/home that has enough storage to hold around half of the over 2,000 works of art that I still have from what I have made in the last 50 years. I love the place and am very grateful for having a peaceful, productive life with great friends, kind supporters, warm acquaintances, and living under blue skies around people who are generally nice. As the bumper sticker used to say, “Lucky Me! I live in Lubbock”.

James W Johnson

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