

HARRIS JOHNSON

QUEASY AND UNSURE, HAPPY AND AFRAID
INTERVIEW BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

I first met Harris Johnson in 2013 at a solo exhibition of his work in Cleveland. The paintings were colorful, punchy, and slapstick; landscapes, still lifes, and tools of the trade. Many came across as jokes. Together, they could be read like a stand up comedian's monologue, a heady blend of confidence and desperation. At a studio visit soon after, I saw how intense and quizzical Johnson's practice is, how his interrogation of painting, and struggle with and against style, were enmeshed with apprehensions of self, presentness, history, and inadequacy. Over the next couple of years, as Johnson pursued his MFA, his practice expanded, becoming less canvas-centric, more open-ended, and stylistically diverse. The paintings retained the personality of the earlier work, articulating it with greater nuance. I sat down with Johnson on June 9, 2015, a few days before the opening of *How to Remain Human*, to discuss his work over drinks.



RB

I was trying to think of a way to describe your sense of humor. I kept circling around words like sarcastic or wry or smart-alecky. Daffy comes close. But the word that kept rising to the top was "dumb." It's the dumbness of your work that makes it so funny and pathetic and powerful all at once.

HJ

Yes! It is definitely dumb. Part of that is about futility. A painting can't change anything but it offers an experience. Like with the faux rock painting--I just wanted to paint a rock. Sure, it brings up notions of stage setting, artificiality, realness, existential questions. But it's also just a stupid little trompe l'oeil thing.

RB

The paintings that you were making before going to grad school were quite different than the ones you're making now. They were more graphic and comically-styled. What was the first painting that made you know that you were doing something really different? What was the break for you?

HJ

There were a few breaks. One was a painting of a desert, a sort of imaginary landscape I did after I got back from LA. I feel like that was the first time I really *struggled* through a painting. Before that I feel like I was doing... maybe illustration or something? Like a frame-by-frame story of my life here. The other painting was of a dead soldier. From Iraq or Vietnam, with his brains blown out. I felt like, "Woah... What the fuck?" I got out of genre painting, got out of the idea of still life painting as a habit. The previous

work was about me, it had aspects of my life, true stuff and fake shit, everything was a “Harris Johnson painting” but it seemed disingenuous at a certain point, like I was copying myself. And I wanted to make paintings that meant something more.

RB

So your paintings now, to what degree are they autobiographical? When you make a painted text piece like *American Ramble*, is that your experience, or is it meant to speak to more of a generalized consciousness, a broader, shared experience?

HJ

I hope it’s effective in a general sense, in a broader picture. I don’t want to be specific in a politic; I don’t want to be specific in a statement. I don’t want to tell people what I think, or what they should think. I want people to feel, ideally, kind of queasy and unsure, happy and afraid. Going through oscillations of feeling, really comfortable and then terrified. This is really bleak... like the dumbness thing. People might ask, “Is this guy an idiot? Or, is he really on to something? Does he really care about the world and what’s going on?” And I do. I do. That gesture, scribbling on a wall, is a very teen angsty, spazzy thing. But it’s also expressive, and I believe in that communicative directness. That’s probably what I retain from my earlier paintings, the idea of intuition being really, really important, along with improvisation. “MacGyver-ing” it and winging it on the fly is really, really important. People see that in a work and they might think, “Oh, there’s no planning.” But there’s also no hesitation, there’s no doubt. There’s mistakes, there’s bad moves, but there’s good moves, too. Maybe.

RB

When I was reading *American Ramble* I was struck by all of the dated

references: JonBenét Ramsey, OJ Simpson. Is that because those things are related to the development of your psyche as a child of the 80s?

HJ

That’s one way of looking at it. But also, you can think about Rodney King--which I don’t really remember, I wasn’t tuned in at that moment-- and then think about today and all of the police brutality. The ramble piece is a really frustrated piece, because I don’t know what the fuck to say. I don’t know what to say, and I don’t know how to say it, but I know I’m mad about something, and that I can’t articulate it. Something is so fucked up, something is so wrong, and nothing has really changed. It’s not really that different. The way that the news is structured, commercials or whatever, there’s a cut sequence between a 12-year-old girl being raped and murdered to a special interest story to a commercial to a bunch of dudes chilling out... Dodge, Dodge, rock hard cock, American man. That shit is really disturbing to me. And it’s hard to express how disturbing it is.

The dated references are dated but they’re part of the cultural... blech. JonBenét Ramsey is as much a part of it as John Wayne Gacey, Al Capone, Babe Ruth. I could talk about Desert Storm and it would be the same as Iraq or Iran. ISIS is the same as Contra. That’s why the tone of the piece is just really, really pissed off, it really makes me angry. There’s a lot about the world that I’m unspecifically pissed off about.

RB

Let’s talk about your painting *Black Hole* (2015). I like looking at people look at this work. It has a really beautiful and sharp connection to the individual viewer.

HJ

I was really attentive to that painting, in a really specific way. Not as in paying attention to what was happening inch by inch on the canvas, but just when I was making it, it was like "What the fuck is this going to be?" The canvas is soaked through completely, I'm doing things to it, and then I'm going to come back and I don't know what it's going to look like. When the painting was wet, the stars were perfect, and I was like "That's it!" I would come back the next day and it's dead. And I would have to fix it, make it alive again. It's a painting that is meant for you to spend time with. It's not like a quick glance and "ha ha." It's subtle.

feels gross. Like a design. It works well for some people, but I'm not one of them. I'm definitely clumsy. I'm like a fiddler. John Wesley, Peter Saul, they plan the shit out of what they do. It's amazing, but it's not necessarily painting that jives with me. I'd rather stare at a Frank Auerbach painting for like, a year. There's something about the tactile surface of a painting, about the fact that you're fumbling through it, and you don't really know what you're doing, that I think is really, really important.

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RB

What is on the canvas? What is being devoured? What is out there?

HJ

It depends how you see the painting. I guess I see it as a push/pull. It sucks you in, pushes you away, sucks you in again. I mean, it's a picture of depression. It's a picture of being sad. And me feeling absolutely inside this painting. It's kind of Pollock-y, a little corny, a little spacey, it's a lot of things. The process of the painting--dribbling, dabbing, and all of that stuff--was really nice. The paint is in the canvas. On it, in it, and behind it. It's kind of a weird tactile thing. But it really does depend on how you look at it. It could be a bible picture. There's a light at the end of the tunnel. Congratulations, you're all going to heaven. It could be an apocalyptic picture. You're getting sucked into a black hole; there you are, this little stick figure falling into a vortex. It could be about you being at the center. Or it could be "Stairway to Heaven." There's a little ladder in the picture. The way I work is very... I don't believe in planning things. It doesn't feel right. It



Harris Johnson
Black Hole, 2015
Oil, acrylic and enamel on canvas
84 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the artist

1.



2.

1. Harris Johnson
Tiny World, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
16 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

2. Harris Johnson
Rock, 2014
papier mache, modeling paste, acrylic
13 x 21 x 13 inches
Courtesy of the artist

WAKE UP TURN TV ON PHONE ON CAR ON THINK CRY
COMMERCIAL INTEREST LOW APR. FREE FINANCING FINE
2% 3% LOW BUDGET HEHE CRY INTO YOUR JACKET SLEEVE
COMMERCIAL SIMILAR AND CHECKS AND BALANCES SURVEILLANCE
STATE OF THE UNION A COP PUTS HIS KNEE INTO YOUR BACK
HANDS UP DONT SHOOT THEY ALWAYS SHOOT TAKE A SHOT WHISKY
TOYOTA CAMRY NEW FRESH BETTER THAN EVER MARINES....
NO NO NO THIS IS NOT REAL THIS CANNOT BE REAL
CRASH YOUR CAR GOBS OF BLOOD SPOUT FROM YOUR NECK 42
SKIDDY LABRADOR GOLDEN RETRIEVER PICKET FENCES. OTHER
OPTIONS INCLUDE BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO CRYING SOBBING
FAITH IN OUR SYSTEM HAHHAHAHA WHAT A FUCKING JOKE BUT
BUT WHATS SO FUNNY ABOUT ANYTHING ANYTHING ITS NOT
A NEW ERA FEEL IT IN YOUR BINEC SOMETHING DARK AND
TERRIBLE LIVES IN US ME YOU WE DANIEL PEARL JON BENET
RAMSAY RAMSEY OJ SIMPSON INSTAGRAM TALKING HEADS AND
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CRUSH DESTROY ITS 2015 THIS IS 2015 THIS IS TTT ITS ^o
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Harris Johnson
American Ramble, 2015
Acrylic paint on wall
Dimensions variable
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland