

# SCOTT JOHNSON ARCHETYPES OF THE MOMENT

SCOTT JOHNSON CAPTURES IN PAINT  
THE BEAUTY OF RANDOMNESS

BY DAMIEN JAMES



Public

There are certain scenes that appear before your eyes with a kind of monolithic presence, scenes that look familiar, though you can't remember from where. They're haunting, frozen moments like snapshots of disaster in which bodies collide, things break, lives change. We carry these images with us and they become defining moments that inform our every choice from that point on. These defining moments are what painter Scott David Johnson delivers with uncanny and elegant simplicity.

Johnson's truest gift may be that he's able to reduce the human body to a few brush strokes while still retaining all the expressiveness of a Chinese alphabet character. His sophisticated use of space is equally stunning; glyphs one might expect to see while speeding along on an elevated train, sparse and blurred in the landscape, each emptiness and pause pregnant with energy.

He's been painting for 20 years, though it's only in the last five that Johnson feels it's clicked for him. "I think I'm a slow developer," he says, "and it has taken me some time to really find and refine a style I could call my own. It was with the *Public* series that I really stumbled onto a style I thought was personal and immediate."

The *Public* series takes a look at people out in the world, moving, talking, and being, but often disjointed, even missing pieces of themselves. "Public 5" examines a man and woman walking hand in hand, the man's head painted away in a thick downward stroke of maize color, while his companion is barely there at all. Some pieces in this series have a texture reminiscent of Goya's later works, though Johnson's "public" exists in the light of day, or rather, partially exists.

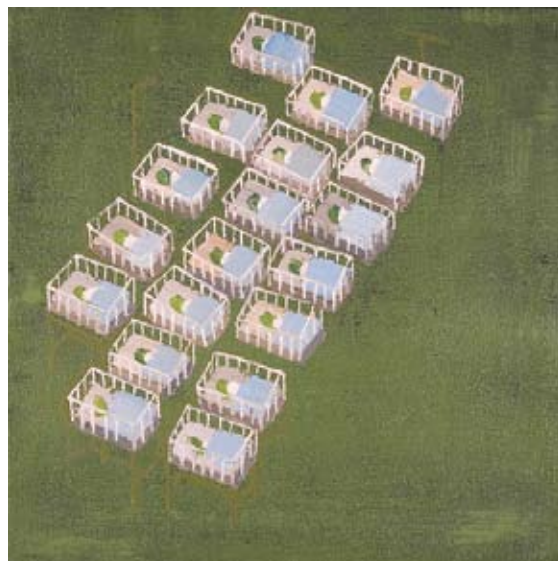
"I want to create images that look and feel completely spontaneous and random, yet beautifully ordered and precise at the same time," Johnson says. "I've come to realize that in painting, for me at least, precision is beauty. Reality is spontaneous and random. I'd like to take reality and make it beautiful through precision. However, the precision is only in the rendering, not the subject matter. My subjects and messages are not to be nailed down with precise meanings."

In the *Urban Development* se-

ries, Johnson's precision is masterful. Large crowds are rendered with countable brush strokes, with police in riot gear with batons that seem to be laid on the canvas once—and once only, as if there were no hesitations. Every stroke is the first and final, but each tiny body is perfect in its movement, clearly striking or about to strike. The figures are clearly human, yet, in this scale and group dynamic, are also like ants scurrying to the bottom corner of the painting to attack some foreign body in the colony.

Pieces such as "Category 5" or "Last Judgment 3," which both look like the aftermath of a hurricane—with bodies being lifted at the armpits and feet, carried to stretchers or makeshift coffins—beg to be nailed down with precise meanings. Johnson, however, resists such specificity. "I like seeing groupings of things, piles of things, or crowds of people. I enjoy observing the intricate colors and shapes, and the way bits and pieces add up to equal something more than the sum of its parts," he says.

Many of Johnson's deceptively minimal works are the products of a collage technique with individual elements taken from source photos. "I enjoy working from some kind of template. Lately I've been painting complicated machinery like oil rigs. I've always been fascinated with machinery, especially outdated machinery, and oil rigs will someday be antiques. Sometimes I'll paint directly from a source photo without



Baby

changing the composition too much, but I prefer the source photo to be really obscure, a throwaway. The painting that eventually comes out of it has to have some interpretation that will be unique to the painting itself. It's even more rewarding when I put a composition together on the canvas that worked in my head, but looks really dull, and I have to bend it and shape it until it's compelling." The oil rigs are currently at Tinlark Gallery in Los Angeles.

Scott Johnson is among the fortunate few who had an art teacher who made a positive impact, though to what degree she may never know. In third grade, it was the "tough and scary drag-on lady's" response (gasps, whoops, bulging eyes) to a drawing he made of the Golden Gate Bridge that first made him think that he might be good at something. He admits that maybe he's been "wanting to repeat that response in people ever since." Long after that, especially in college, he discovered art history and was "completely hooked and humbled, knowing how far I had yet to go."

"The more I've been living as an artist, the more the artistic lifestyle has been demystified for me, which is a good thing," he adds. "After graduating college, [University of Wisconsin, 1991] I was just starting out, not sure of how to earn money making art, not sure where the doorways and avenues were. I'm sure the clichéd image of an alcoholic and desperately lonely Nick Nolte painting with a garbage can palette in New York Stories was inspiring for some people, but I'll have to admit it scared me. I have since found that there are many ways to earn a living, full or partial, as a working artist, and there are many nice and sane people out there working as artists. I've had uncomfortable moments with some gallery owners and collectors, but overall, I've been incredibly lucky. But it's like jobs or friendships or relationships, there are bad ones and good ones. You try to stick with the good ones."

Being an artist feeds Johnson's sense of accomplishment. It keeps his mind engaged, occupied, calm and grounded. "It's quiet contemplation, and it's also mechanical and routine. Sometimes when I'm working, my head will be completely empty and I can be thinking of nothing at all and it will be marvelous fun. Of course there are bad days when I feel worthless and I can't stand doing it anymore, but then when the sun rises on the next painting day, I'm still ready for more." It's something he can't stop and can't imagine living without.

"I'm not a jack-of-all-trades kind of guy. I don't generally hop from one career to another. I'm not going to come over and fix your refrigerator, then volunteer for the Peace Corps, and then study to become your tax consultant. I think I'm really good

at only a few things, and one of them is draftsmanship. The other is an appreciation of the absurd."

Johnson finds a great deal of inspiration from other artists. "For the last few years I've taken inspiration from filmmakers, such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien from Taiwan, or Robert Bresson. There is something very stately, austere and simple in their work that makes me want to strip away all of the fluff and paint very basic things. On the other hand, Asian art from the past always puts me in a good mood. There's always a lot to look at in old Chinese and Japanese paintings and prints, and there is no center of attention. Even though I love Caravaggio and his centralized subject matter, there is something more wondrous about Eastern painting and its mosaic of events within the landscape. Brueghel also has this multiplicity of angles and events. There's a painting he did of Christ carrying his cross, but you can barely see him, with all of the other life activity going on around him. I feel that's how my life is. I rarely, if ever, in fact never, directly witness extraordinary world events, but I can see world events reflected in the faces around me."

Johnson appears to keep it all in perspective. "I think as one gets older, their wild ambitions become more and more tempered, and the realities of one's tiny place in the universe becomes clearer and clearer. I find that the less I try to make 'great art,' the better my paintings get."

Looking at his paintings, one can easily see Scott Johnson's humility, in the distance between viewer and what is viewed, and in the smallness of the subject, which may mirror the smallness of the place of the artist in the universe, but certainly does not detract from his relevance or necessity. One can also see the aspiration of Johnson's art, the way it slowly unfolds before you like an

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Category



Urban

ancient Chinese scroll painting, a story that continually opens.

"One should never arrive at the finish line. Once you've achieved a level of success with your work and go on doing the same thing, repeating the same success, then you're probably on the road to being a craftsman, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But an artist shouldn't repeat. You must keep an open mind and not get too comfortable. It's like when Pablo Cruise sang that song back in 1978...when you keep your heart open, love will find a way."