

Joanne Jackson Johnson



Metaphors Metamorphs & Just Pictures

Gallery 1.1.1
School of Art, University of Manitoba
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&
Just Pictures

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Introduction

I have known the photographs of Joanne Jackson Johnson for fourteen years. In that time, one of the constants I have observed in her work, one that I have most admired and that seems deeply authentic, is her physical stance in relation to what she photographs. She positions herself always at mid-distance, far enough away to include within the frame a larger context against which the visual events of her photographs take place, yet close enough to establish that she, too, is participant. In her earlier work, this stance and the mixture of the moment, the mundane and the environment brought to mind the paintings of Bruegel, particularly *The Fall of Icarus*, in which life continues its rhythm — fields are plowed, sheep herded, ships set sail — while in the lower right corner of the painting, almost unseen, Icarus plunges into the sea. As with Bruegel, in these earlier photographs there is often a note of irony. In a series of playgrounds, the pieces of play equipment stand like isolated, alien creatures on the land. In this work, Johnson's sensitivity to formal relationships, the repetition of color and shape, the visual ordering of the environment within the frame of the photograph create a strong structural overlay. From the interplay of subject and this visual structure, we are to infer the metaphysical structure, the sense of continuity.

The work for this exhibit — *Metaphors, Metamorphs and Just Pictures* — consists of three series; *Field*, *Jeffers Petroglyphs/Lake Winnipeg Beaches* and a series of her daughter Molly. In all three, the vision, stance and sense of con-

tinuity remain, but the sense of where structure is to come from and how it is to be expressed has changed radically.

The *Field* series includes twelve square format color photographs of a field in Winnipeg's Kildonan Park which is directly across the street from Johnson's house and which she photographed at intervals for eight months in 1983. She brings to these photographs a familiarity with the subject but also a curiosity to know more — to know what the camera will see, what the cumulative knowledge of this record-keeping will divulge. Her knowledge of the place is more intimate than John Berger's is of the field he describes in the final essay in *About Looking*,¹ but her field serves the same function: it is the microcosm, the metaphor that startles us into awareness.

The subject is clearly the field, across which we see seasons, weather and events move. The visual events in these photographs are small, subtle. To see them we need to be attentive and reflective. As Robert Adams says in his essay, "Truth and Landscape," landscape photography is not only reportage — there is always a subjective aspect.² In Joanne Jackson Johnson's photographs, though her vision is investigative and unsentimental, there is no pretense to the mechanically systematic in her method or content. The camera is hand held. Though she is always looking *into* the field, she moves around it. We discover the subjectivity of the photographer in subtle ways: in different photographs the height of the horizon changes slightly to emphasize the sky or

the field, the photographer's eye having been drawn to visual events in one or the other. We become aware of the subjectivity of the camera through the flattened depth of field of the fifth photograph in the series; the low light having forced a choice between a sharply focussed foreground and the parade in the background.

In the midst of the process, in the midst of art recording life, life dramatically interposed. On a Saturday in May, Joanne's husband Leon and her daughter Molly went across the street to play baseball and discovered the whole field studded, sown with fragments of broken glass. Outraged, they called the newspaper, a reporter and press photographer came, Molly and Leon's photograph appeared on the front page of the *Winnipeg Sun* for May 22, and Johnson photographed the glass collection lying on Leon's shirt in the field as part of the series. In the ensuing investigation it was revealed that topsoil spread on the field by park maintenance the previous autumn had been unsifted landfill. Whether its use was to be attributed to negligence or to a more culpable motive was not determined. Looking back later at an earlier photograph in the series, Johnson found the previously unseen glass clearly visible.

The series continued, including images of park workers — in hardhats — gathering glass in the field; spring green trees in moist air; Molly and two friends returning across the field from their investigation of street paving machines. If the subject of these photographs is the field, the content again is con-

tinuity. These photographs, in their insistently simple composition, their repeated format, the scale of human event seen in relation to the field and sky, raise questions about our stewardship of the land. This content, I believe, is clearly in the photographs in a way not tied to a specific place or time. Where earlier in her work Johnson was ironic, here there is no irony. Where earlier she imposed a structure, here the structure is inherent. By implication we are dealing in these photographs not only with the stewardship of this little field, of our land, but also with the future of the planet.

Again in "Truth and Landscape," Robert Adams says, "Landscape pictures can offer us, I think, three verities — geography, autobiography, and metaphor...taken together...the three kinds of information strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact — an affection for life."³ In this work, Joanne Jackson Johnson honors all three. In the second series, which juxtaposes photographs of the petroglyphs in Jeffers, Minnesota with images from Victoria Beach on Lake Winnipeg, Johnson's affection for life is clearly expressed. In this sixteen image series, a photograph of a dragon being drawn in the sand is seen in relation to ancient crosses, grids, animal pictographs marked in the rock. There are elaborate adult-made sand castles, tied clearly to the present by a plastic cup, a green wooden bench; and there are Molly and her friend Evelyn seen small, at the water's edge, having left behind them in the sand the lyrical track of their movements. The images

are connected, across fifty centuries, in their recording of the marks we make on the land to affirm our existence.

Formally, the photographs are linked by color. Johnson has said she is obsessed with the need to find in the darkroom color that is right for each photograph, color that will reveal how it was to be there. The color is not emotional. Rather it is the observant remembering eye acknowledging and attempting to reproduce the experience.

All the work in this exhibit is didactic — including the *Just Pictures* of Molly — in the best sense, the Greek root sense of the word; to be skillful in teaching. The lesson here, set against the long historical perspective; the need for our active vigilance over our world, is deeply embedded in the photographs themselves. These images are manipulated only in the sense that the photographer's vision is always, appropriately, subjective. What Johnson has said she wanted — to come through what photographs are supposed to be, to have internalized the language and form of photography so that the image can become more open, innocent, arising from within — is happening. Thus, to return to John Berger, the *field*, or beach or petroglyph or image of Molly in the atrium at Casa Loma, takes on the proportions of our own lives.

Joyce Lyon
Department of Studio Arts
University of Minnesota
December, 1983

Joyce Lyon is a painter and printmaker, teaches drawing and art history at the University of Minnesota and is a founding member of W.A.R.M. (Women's Art Registry of Minnesota).

Notes

1. John Berger, "Field," in *About Looking*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, pp. 192-98.
2. Robert Adams, "Truth and Landscape," in *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*, Aperture, New York, 1981, p. 15.
3. Adams, p. 14.



Jeffers Petroglyphs (hand image) August 1982



Victoria Beach, August 1981
(original in colour)



Albert Beach, August 1983
(original in colour)



April 1983 (Kildonan Park Field Series)



June 1983 (Kildonan Park Field Series)



Victoria Beach August 1981
(original in colour)



Johnson farm near Borup, Minnesota, March 1981
(original in colour)



Casa Loma, Toronto, Ontario, July 1983



August 1983 (Kildonan Park Field Series)
(original in colour)



November 1983 (Kildonan Park Field Series)
(original in colour)

Works in the Exhibition

#1 Kildonan Park Field Series

- 1.1 April 1983
- 1.2 May 1983
- 1.3 May 1983
- 1.5 June 1983
- 1.6 June 1983
- 1.7 June 1983
- 1.8 August 1983
- 1.9 August 1983
- 1.10 October 1983
- 1.11 November 1983
- 1.12 November 1983

#2 Jeffers Petroglyphs/Lake Winnipeg Beaches Series

- 2.1 Jeffers Petroglyphs site August 1982
- 2.2 Jeffers Petroglyphs site August 1982
- 2.3 Victoria Beach, August 1983
- 2.4 Albert Beach, August 1983
- 2.5 Albert Beach, August 1983
- 2.6 Jeffers Petroglyphs (grid image) August 1982
- 2.7 Victoria Beach, August 1983
- 2.8 Jeffers Petroglyphs (animal image) August 1982
- 2.9 Jeffers Petroglyphs (circle image) August 1982
- 2.10 Victoria Beach, August 1981
- 2.11 Jeffers Petroglyphs site August 1982
- 2.12 Albert Beach, August 1981
- 2.13 Jeffers Petroglyphs (hand image) August 1982
- 2.14 Victoria Beach, August 1983
- 2.15 Jeffers Petroglyphs site August 1982
- 2.16 Victoria Beach, August 1981

#3 Molly Series

- 3.1 Johnson farm near Borup, Minnesota March 1981
- 3.2 Backyard June 1981
- 3.3 First day of Grade 1 September 1981
- 3.4 Mother Caroline (Ma) and Charles (Pa) Ingalls graves, De Smet, South Dakota August 1982
- 3.5 Kildonan Park March 1982
- 3.6 Casa Loma Toronto, Ontario July 1983

All photographs in the exhibition are colour prints with an image size of 23 × 23 cm.

The Jeffers Petroglyphs

The Jeffers Petroglyph site is located in Cottonwood County, southwestern Minnesota. The drawings or carvings are found on flat, rippled pink rock outcroppings. The rocks are quartzite (metamorphosed sandstone) and are the remains of a beach formed by waves breaking on the shore of a Proterozoic lake about 500 million years ago. The parallel grooves which cross the rock were made by advancing glaciers 12,000 - 15,000 years ago. The images or petroglyphs are thought to have been made during two periods: 1. 3000 B.C. - 500 B.C. and 2. 900 A.D. - 1750 A.D. The site is surrounded by a rare remaining example of true tall-grass prairie.

Source: Lothson, G.A. The Jeffers Petroglyphs Site, A Survey and Analysis of the Carvings, Minnesota Historical Society Publication 1976



May 1983 (Kildonan Park Field Series)

Joanne Jackson Johnson

The photographer was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba and grew up in North Winnipeg. She studied Botany and Zoology at the University of Manitoba and began to photograph in 1968 while living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She did graduate studies in film and photography at the University of Minnesota and received a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1972.

Returning to Winnipeg in 1974 she maintained an interest in film and was a founding member of the Winnipeg Film Group. She has taught photography at the School of Art, University of Manitoba since 1977. She is married to film-maker Leon Johnson and they have one daughter, Molly.

Individual Exhibitions

- 1983 *Ungava* Cinema Main National Film Board Winnipeg, Manitoba
- 1983 *Midstream In Mainstreet* Plug-In Art Winnipeg, Manitoba
- 1981 *Sunday Afternoon* Photographers Gallery Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
- 1980 *WARM (Womens' Art Registry of Minnesota)* Invitational Gallery Minneapolis, Minnesota
- 1980 Arthur Street Gallery (Plug In) Winnipeg, Manitoba

Group Exhibitions

- 1982 Manitoba Juried Photography Exhibit Manitoba Archives Winnipeg, Manitoba
- 1978 *Manitoba Saskatchewan Alberta* National Film Board Stills Division Ottawa, Ontario
- 1978 *Developments/7 Photographers* Janis Ian Cameron Gallery University of Manitoba Winnipeg
- 1977 *Photography: Clayton Bailey, Joanne Jackson Johnson David McMillan* Winnipeg Art Gallery Winnipeg, Manitoba
- 1976 Manitoba Juried Photography Exhibit Winnipeg Art Gallery Winnipeg, Manitoba
- 1975 *Exposure* Art Gallery of Ontario Toronto, Ontario
- 1972 *Winnipeg Under Thirty* Winnipeg Art Gallery Winnipeg, Manitoba

The photographer has received grants from the Manitoba Arts Council, including a Major Arts Grant in 1981 and her work is in the collections of the National Film Board in Montreal and Ottawa, the Province of Manitoba and private collectors.

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