

ANN JOHNSON

CONVERSE: REAL TALK



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

MAY 7 - AUGUST 19, 2016

AUSTIN, TEXAS



Humming Bird Tree detail, intaglio, found objects, dimensions vary

Cover Panel: *Learning Tree detail* (Shelley), 2015, intaglio, found objects, 7" x 7"

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CONVERSE: REAL TALK

Houston artist Ann Johnson has hit on something unique. She's managed to take a traditional art-making discipline, printmaking, and infuse new life into it with a very contemporary presentation. What's interesting about her process is that it contradicts what one would expect of someone contemporizing a centuries old process in that the natural assumption is that the artist would go digital. Johnson sticks with the traditional intaglio process but instead of using paper, she chooses unlikely printing surfaces like feathers, leaves, and found objects, keeping the process rooted in tradition but taking the presentation and product in a very nontraditional direction.

The art of printmaking has long been a medium used to investigate political issues by artists as far back as 16th century Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 18th century William Hogarth, and more contemporarily, the Mexican artists/activists of the late 19th and 20th centuries along with the late Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White, both African American artists/activists influenced by the Mexicans. So Johnson is in solid company in her use of her chosen medium to address the political issues of today. What sets her apart from her predecessors however, is her presentation and the manner in which she engages the viewer. By using what on first glance appear to be very genteel materials like feathers and leaves, materials that suggest certain fragility and vulnerability, Johnson creates a very inviting environment for the gallery visitor, drawing them into the works with sheer beauty as the temptress. Once the viewer is enticed in, the subtle and often disturbing messages begin to reveal themselves, but by then you're too intrigued by her beautiful creations to turn away from the often sledgehammer issues. Her mastery of the

intaglio printing process makes her imagery exquisitely crisp even though the surfaces she chooses to print on often provide their own textural challenges.

Ann Johnson's site-specific installation "*Converse: Real Talk*" is a very ambitious work. Although she has had a long time attraction to the intricacies of human communication, that attraction has most often led to Johnson exploring human isolation in the digital age. Her series "*Nesting*" delved into the mainly current phenomenon of people holding conversations via texting, even when in close proximity to each other. She uses the nest as a metaphor for this new-age self-imposed isolation that has so many disconnecting from "real" interaction in favor of cyber-interaction. Johnson includes images and items within circular nests that portend some very serious issues but somehow the fact that they are nestled in a delicate nest reassures the viewer of their manageability.

In "*Converse: Real Talk*", we find Johnson continuing her exploration of communication, isolation and the current state of Black America but this time she shifts her focus from imagined discourse to creating a space where real conversation can occur. Johnson uses the spacious Women & Their Work gallery to create a park-like environment; the seating is arranged so that people are forced to face each other which is one of the tools she employs to encourage interaction. The various tree forms are adhered to the wall and sport an assortment of leaves and tags that are designed to invoke/provoke conversation based on trigger words and imagery; they are the backdrop for the seating areas. Johnson has named the trees with titles that suggest the type of dialog she's hoping will occur; names such as *The Learning Tree*, *The Reflective Tree* and *The Converse Tree*, all of which hold images or text that refer to topics like immigration, racial strife in America, the Black Lives Matter movement, and other pertinent issues plaguing Black America. The concept of the park as the setting for



Learning Tree detail, 2016, intaglio, gilding, found objects, dimensions vary

this installation actually is an appropriate one given the way many parks have been utilized by city dwellers. The park as a meeting place for a romantic interlude, or just a serious conversation or even the idea of the park as it was used by civil rights activists to convene in prior to staging a protest, suggests that Johnson's installation has deeper connotations than one might initially think. She deftly exploits the multifaceted possibilities for usage that a park presents as she creates both a safe space for conversation while simultaneously instigating the direction of that conversation with the imagery and trigger tags she camouflages in the trees.

The pristine nature of Ann Johnson's installation also seems contradictory to the weighty topics weaving throughout the various sculptures. In her retablo-like "vertical nests" that flank a church window entitled, *We Must Protect This House* we find young black girls and boys, one of which sports a target on his head, and contents that are items of both hope and despair,

underscoring the tentative position in which black children find themselves in America. A work entitled *Mama's Boy* has a print on a feather of a teenaged black boy staring out at the viewer in a semi-defiant manner while his mother stands behind him in the background; one assumes she is anxious about what awaits him as he prepares to enter adulthood and the world. In this same group of "nests", also printed on a feather is a historical image of a black "mammy" tending a white baby, a reference to how in generations past, black mothers were often deprived of the luxury of tending to their own children due to enslavement. In creating these "nests" that embody so much black female angst, Johnson somehow manages to soften the harshness of this historical horror simply by her adroit choice of materials. The softness of the feathers, the grass and cotton that lines the nests make the visual conversation of such a difficult topic slightly more palatable.

The combination of items Johnson uses to create "*Converse: Real Talk*" also bears mentioning because although together they form an engaging installation, they could function as separate works given how

well they all are conceived. The Plexiglas encased eyeglasses are strong visual elements that Johnson uses to reference our ability to see what's happening clearly in our society while also diminishing the weight of the problems in order to maintain our equilibrium. One side of the glasses sports a lens with an image of a person whose image is reduced on the other side. On one pair the words *It Keeps Happening* are superimposed on the larger image, the possible implication being that the problem may be a big one that we can't find a solution to so we minimize it in our vision. Another has the words *You Blind Baby* on the encasement that holds a pair of gold glasses printed with an image of a woman that on one lens appears unaffected and on the other, her smaller image looks as though she's received an electric shock, her hair standing on edge. Perhaps here Johnson refers to our propensity to shield ourselves from the horrors of a given situation by being "blind" to them. But even though we turn a blind eye, the severity cannot be shut away, often causing the psyche to be shocked into reality. Then there are



What I Can See, 2015, Transfer and Reflective Print, 8" x 4"

Johnson's hanging nests suspended in the space like thoughts, each one holding an individual scenario that supports her contention about our isolation within society, a situation due in large part to our total embrace of digital technology. But her choice of materials for these nests, thin woven branches, defies the notion that she feels all is lost since accessibility is possible through the woven spaces and subsequently, a human connection can be made. The feathered images may look out from their nests with seeming unaffectedness, or they may be self-absorbed, but they are all accessible and therefore salvageable.

With *Converse: Real Talk*, Ann Johnson urges us to reconsider our connectedness in the digital age to embrace the humanness that this age threatens to obliterate. The installation creates a physical space in which conversations can occur that center on real issues that we face in America and that unaddressed will be our undoing. To be sure, there is hope in the premise of this beautiful installation but there is also a clear warning.

-Vicki Meek is a retired arts manager, a practicing artist and activist splitting her time between Dallas & Costa Rica. She writes a blog *Art & Racenotes* and a monthly column *ART-iculate* for *TheaterJones.com*, both exploring issues around race, politics and the arts.



Nesting, 2016, intaglio, found objects, dimensions vary

ANN JOHNSON

EDUCATION

- 2008 MFA, Printmaking, Academy of Art University, San Francisco, CA
- 1994 MA, Humanities, University of Houston-Clear Lake, Houston, TX
- 1991 BS, Home Economics, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX
- 1988 AAA, Fashion Merchandising, Bauder Fashion College, Arlington, TX

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

- 2015 Tougaloo Art Colony, Jackson, MS (Invited Instructor)
- 2011 Tougaloo Art Colony, Jackson, MS
- 2009 Tougaloo Art Colony, Jackson, MS
- 2004 Project Row Houses, Round 12, Houston, TX
- 1998 Project Row Houses, Round 8, Houston, TX

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 Converse: Real Talk, Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX
- 2015 Hoop Dreamin, Hooks Epstein Galleries, Houston, TX
- 2014 Preservation, Longview Museum of Fine Arts, Longview, TX
- 2013 I'll Fly Away, Hooks Epstein Galleries, Houston, TX
- 2010 Solefolio, John B Coleman Library, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX
- 2008 It Is The Not Known That Burns My Soul, John B Coleman Library, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX
- Object Lesson, Craft in America Study Center, Los Angeles, CA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (SELECTION)

- 2017 Race and Language, Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse, NY
- 2016 Genocide: Man's Inhumanity to Man, Houston Holocaust Museum, Houston, TX
- Tribute: Women of the African Diaspora, Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston, TX
- Truth To Power, Democratic National Convention, Houston, TX
- Unapologetic, Community Artists' Collective, Houston, TX
- Hearts Hands & Heritage, Community Artists' Collective, Houston, TX
- Allow Me: Facing Identity, Southwestern University, Georgetown, TX

- 2015 COAL, University Museum, Texas Southern University, Houston, TX
- Redefining Print: Contemporary Printmaking from Women of the African Diaspora, Community Artists' Collective, Houston, TX
- RESPOND, Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- Power.Protest.Resistence, Skylight Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- PRINTS IN PECULIAR PLACES, Southern Graphics Council Conference, Knoxville, TN
- P3+BR NOTES UPRIVER, Community Artists' Collective, Houston, TX
- 2014 NESTING, South Dallas Cultural Center, Dallas, TX
- SUGA, Blue Orange Contemporary Gallery, Houston, TX
- Her America, Carver Community Cultural Center, San Antonio, TX
- Print Perspectives, Hooks Epstein Galleries, Houston, TX
- POINT OF VIEW: Contemporary African American Art from the Elliot and Kimberly Perry Collection, Charles Wright Museum, Flint, MI
- COLOR UP/COLOR DOWN, Russ Pittman Park, Houston, TX
- 2013 Texas Biennial, San Antonio, TX
- New Artist Group Show, Hooks Epstein Galleries, Houston, TX
- bas, Art League of Houston, Houston, TX
- PRINTTX, Museum of Printing History, Houston, TX
- Black Women During Reconstruction, Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA
- 2012 STIR, Gallery M Squared, Houston, TX
- MOJO, 4th Floor Gallery, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX
- Journeys, Passages, and Transitions, King Tisdale Beach Institute, Savannah, GA
- 24th Annual Carroll Simms National Art Competition, African American Museum of Life & Culture, Dallas, TX
- 2011 ROUX, Houston Museum of African American Culture, Houston, TX
- Gallery III, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR
- IndiVisible, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
- What's The New News, Community Artists' Collective, Houston, TX



Coverse: *Real Talk*, 2016, gallery view, dimensions vary

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 38th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,889 artists in 302 visual art exhibitions, 124 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 28 literary readings and spoken word performances, and 584 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, the *New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 650 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
their work

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