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The Art of J. Seward Johnson

JOY WILLIAMS

IF, AS DON DELILLO WROTE, the future belongs to crowds, the art of Seward Johnson will find itself in solid participation. His lifelike life-sized bronzes of people working or relaxing in public landscapes have figured in countless parks and plazas, startling, cheering and amusing to those too preoccupied for art. Indeed, these sculptures are less art objects than fellow travelers caught in the anxious dream of life. Men play cards or pet dogs. They hail cabs (with all the plaintive tested dignity that gesture involves); they doze in armchairs. Women garden, jog, search in purses, tie the shoelaces of a child. In many of these early works, done in the 10's and 80's, the subjects are reading a book or a newspaper, caught in a private involvement, finding their space in our space, our increasingly crowded space. But there's always room to lounge or linger with them, catch our breath, have a sandwich, perhaps check that everything is as it should be in our laptop, in our briefcase, beside the figure of the businessman on the bench, anxiously studying his own portfolio.

"Double Check" is the title of the sculpture cast by Johnson in 1982 and placed in a park called Liberty, catercorner from the World Trade Center. Eerily, preposterously, it survived the devastation of 9/11 intact. Initial rescue workers thought for one impossible moment (and which moment isn't impossible in its darkest heart) that the figure, covered in ash and debris, was real, frozen by shock. In the days of chaos afterward, people made something of a shrine of "Double Check," adorning him with flowers and flags, hard hats and fire hoses, crucifixes and messages. A bronze everyman had become its own icon.

"Who could imagine," the curator of the Twin Towers artworks—all obliterated, of course, along with any reputation they might have had to relevance—"who could imagine," the curator said with little grace, "that such a forgettable piece would end up being so poignant."

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Though, really, how could it have been otherwise. "Double Check," like many of the works Johnson created in his realistic period, depicted modern civilized man, pitiable and dear, ceaselessly striving to be, if not perfect, good, if not heroic, honorable. Prepared.

In the context of 9/11 it's hard to imagine a towering abstraction, flavor du jour for long years now, being poignant. All whose sculptures, pronged, curled, spired, angled, twisted, spliced, reaching skyward, would touch us emotionally not at all. (The fragment of a staircase from one of the towers is a perfect work of "art" in our terrorist age, but its future may be less bright than "Double Check," now returned to its site. The stairs, only a few of them, down which so many fled, and which so many didn't, are apparently in the way of something planned for the reconstruction of the real estate which is ground zero.)

Johnson has never been a darling of the critics. Maybe he's too cheerful or too rich. With artistically suspect carefree exuberance, he has cast Jesus on his path to the Cross (it was rejected by the church which commissioned it, their argument being that stainless steel was for cutlery, not Christ). Marilyn Monroe; a stupa complete with water bubble, of course, the Buddhistic symbol of the hollowness of this world; the Holy Family (three figures, mule and accessories); a marvelously shingled aluminum King Lear which makes that great figure look like a mournfully plated armadillo. "The Awakening," a giant emerging piecemeal from the earth in a Washington, D.C. park.

In 1994, Johnson purchased 35 acres of former state fairgrounds land in Hamilton, New Jersey, and transformed it into a stunning parkland of ponds and streams, bosks and woods. Named "Grounds for Sculpture," it includes the work of a hundred sculptors. Johnson uses the opportunity of his own concept to seed the space not with realistic contemporary figures but with dozens of tableaus of classic French Impressionist paintings. In this created American countryside, a Jersey countryside, no less, these old girls gain fresh affect. A turn in a path exposes those naughty picnickers of Manet's "Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe." Their careless lunch is scattered on real grass, the inexplicably isolated figure in the background putters about in real water. The student drones on still, the nude stares saucily out at us, but they're outside the frame, participating in our day. It's a kick, more fun than standing behind a velvet rope.

On the terrace of the Park's restaurant is Manet's "At Pere

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Lathville's" (older woman, vulpine young dude) complete with disapproving waiter hovering nearby. On the floor above the restaurant, as if some surrealistic B&B establishment, is Van Gogh's bedroom, all atilt the way its original occupant perceived it. On an open gallery by a lake, Monet's "Terrace at Sainte-Adrese" is reproduced—another seduction in process, with Johnson this time, imagining the expressions of the older couple witnessing it. Such pasticcios appear throughout the Park—Renoir's entire Boating Party! Rousseau's jungly Dream. Cassat's lovely girl in white with her griffon dog.

In all, a brashly pleasant experience, this conniving with considered masterpieces. When brought indoors to the Corcoran in 2003, the sculptures were met with hostility (those critics again; even the Impressionists, particularly the Impressionists, had those) but they were popular with crowds. Perhaps, Johnson's work can be said to offer most reference to Gustave Courbet and his "democratic art," with its weight and solidity, its density of content and form. Then, as now, material concerns, material progress, material values were triumphant.

These days, Johnson is going monumental. His enormous "Unconditional Surrender," depicting the famous kiss between the sailor and the nurse in Times Square at the end of World War II is 26 ft. high. He couldn't get the rights to the Alfred Eisenstadt photograph so he found another photo of the same ardent, lengthy kiss, shot by an amateur, a Lt. Victor Jorgensen, and based his "inspiration" on that. The original was made of bronze but a traveling kiss is carved from foam which is then colored with aircraft paint and covered with protective resin. When it was shown with the other exhibitors at the sculpture show on the Sarasota, Florida bayfront in 2006, it caused the accompanying sculptures to appear not only Lilliputian but pretentious. One piece entitled "Zen" was described by its maker on an accompanying plaque as "representing the suffering and ecstasy of Buddha's soul."

"Too much of this stuff, they do it for themselves," one viewer said, frowning at "Zen," "but the Johnson work, that's done for everybody. You can't help but like it."

"Unconditional Surrender" is not only immense, witty and nostalgic, it represents the way—against all common sense and reality—we wish to be seen. We want to be lean, young and

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jubilant, winners of just battles. Instead, our masters have given us this time of endless war. We are as cartoons beneath the immensity of it. Having no idea what the present holds, we magnify the past to purify it.

We know we're good.
We know we mean well.
You can't help but like us.

Seward Johnson's art is more poignant than some think.

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