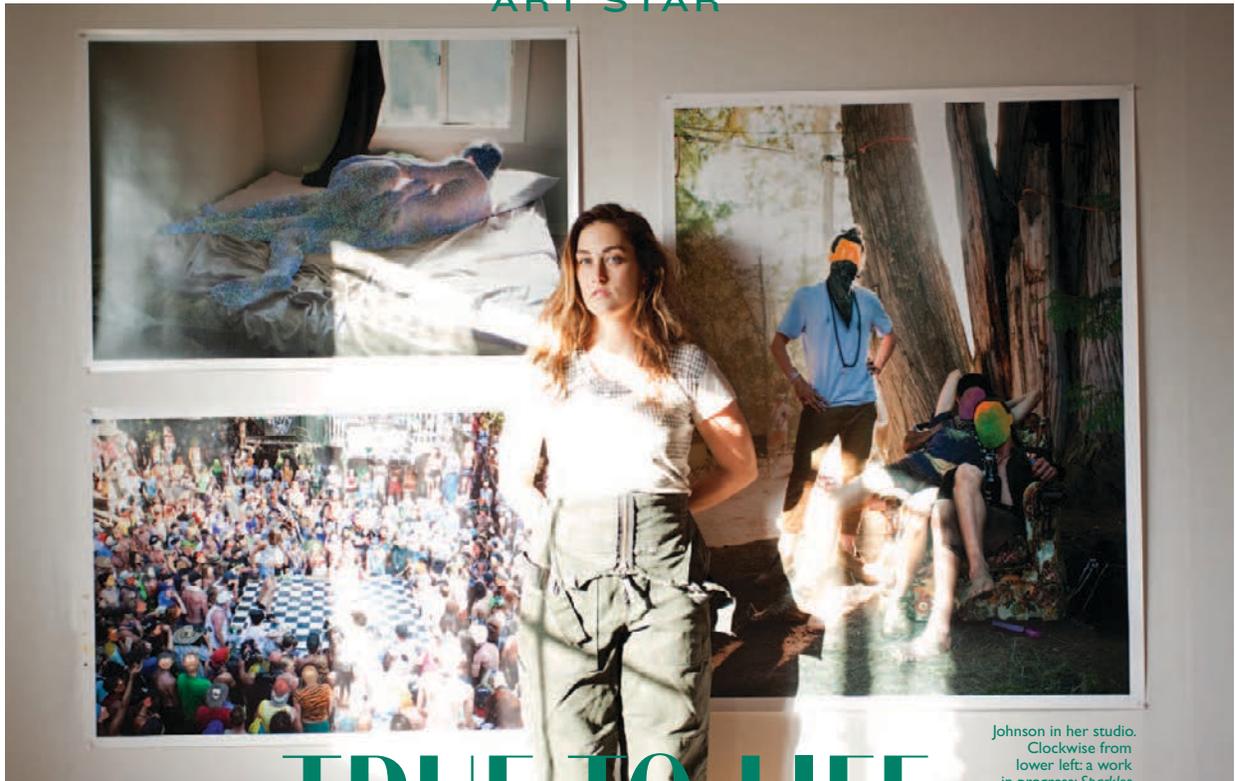


ART STAR



Johnson in her studio. Clockwise from lower left: a work in progress; *Sparkles*, from the *Wonderlust* series; *Three Wise Guys* for Louis Vuitton's Canadian flagship

TRUE TO LIFE

She's pushing photography to new heights, but as collectors flock and her latest piece goes up at Louis Vuitton, SARAH ANNE JOHNSON'S feet are firmly on the ground
 BY ALISON GILLMOR

Morning Meeting (2003)



WINNIPEG ARTIST SARAH ANNE JOHNSON IS BUSY.

We're trying to set up a meeting, working around her packed schedule as she prepares for overlapping exhibitions. Finally, Johnson makes the Hemingway-like suggestion that we get together at her boxing class. "I've been doing yoga for years, but there's nothing like punching stuff," she confides.

The next day I head to Pan Am Boxing in Winnipeg's Exchange District, feeling a little *Fight Club*-ish. Shadowing the fluid Johnson, who's at home in classic grey sweats and comes across as taller than her five-five frame, I struggle through an hour-long class, inept, gasping and getting nostalgic for old-time observer journalism. Johnson, meanwhile, encourages me with a series of self-deprecating asides. ("I couldn't do that at all my first time," she assures me as I screw up the jump-roping. "Don't worry, I just do them slower than everyone else," she says as we suffer through squat thrusts.)

It turns out Johnson is compulsively modest, and not just when she's in workout mode. The 37-year-old is one of Canada's must-see art stars, but you're not going to hear that from her. Johnson's career started with a jolt in 2004, when the Guggenheim Museum in New York acquired *Tree Planting*, the 65-piece project she created for her Yale master's thesis. Going on to solo shows in Winnipeg, Toronto and New York and winning the inaugural Grange Prize, worth \$50,000, in 2008, Johnson became a recognizable name and her work >

PHOTOGRAPHY: SARAH ANNE JOHNSON (SELF-PORTRAIT), © SARAH ANNE JOHNSON, COURTESY OF STEPHEN BULLGER GALLERY, TORONTO, AND JULIE SAUL GALLERY, NEW YORK. (MORNING MEETING), EDITOR: MIRANDA PURVES.

ART STAR



Fireworks (2010), a hand-painted print from the Arctic Wonderland series. "This ground-breaking work will go down as extremely important to photography, and a nuanced way to deal with images and issues of the North," says curator Pamela Meredith

a *Canadian Art* cover. It's now snapped up by public galleries and private collectors, and on Oct. 26 she'll be premiering a piece at Toronto's Louis Vuitton flagship store.

Marc Jacobs, Vuitton's creative head, is an avid contemporary art collector whose now-famous collaborations with Takashi Murakami and Richard Prince are cool confirmation of his power to turn art-world successes into pop-culture names. To be chosen is an honour and an anointment of sorts, but art and commerce is a tricky relationship. The art needs to be tough enough to stand up to fashion's demands. Johnson's work is ambitious, mixing media and exploring big ideas with passion, intelligence and an unrelenting testing of limits. In contrast, her persona is almost comically hype-repelling. She has no idea what she's going to wear to the Vuitton opening. She can't quite believe she's had to hire two studio assistants. ("I know. It's crazy, right?" she says, rolling her eyes.) And she doesn't have a website, she admits sheepishly. Partly because she's just too busy making art to set one up.

As Johnson runs through her fall and winter travelling schedule, I can see what she means. She's heading up a residency at the Banff Centre, then flying east to install a show at New York's Julie Saul Gallery. There's a quick side trip to Art Toronto—Johnson has created a limited-edition chromogenic print for this year's Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art benefit—followed by the opening at Vuitton. (She's taking basic workwear to Banff along with a small "glamour suitcase" for New York and Toronto, but she doesn't know what's going in the glamour suitcase.) Back to Banff, followed by a brief sojourn in Winnipeg, and then she's packing for Vancouver and a four-month teaching gig at Emily Carr University. Talking about her

round of high-profile professional commitments, Johnson sounds slightly surprised. It's almost as if the nervous young art student she used to be—the one who hated public speaking and called her mom the night before grad-school critiques—woke up and found herself in the middle of a brilliant career.

It's a Canadian characteristic to distrust big talkers and high flyers, and that tendency is even more pronounced in Johnson's hometown. "It's a real Winnipeg thing," she confirms. The mid-continental city may be getting a reputation as a cultural hot spot, but the default response of its artists

remains deadpan self-deprecation, from prairie-gothic filmmaker Guy Maddin to the notoriously shy members of the now-defunct Royal Art Lodge, where the much-collected painter Marcel Dzama got his start. There's also an emphasis on communal achievement over individual swagger, as with *My Winnipeg*, a 2011 mega-group show that stormed Paris's La Maison Rouge with works by 70 artists.

This low-key vibe suits Johnson just fine, mostly because it reflects her own ambivalence about competition, success and fame. "I think that's part of why I wanted to move back to Winnipeg. It's very grounded here," explains Johnson, who returned home from New Haven in 2004 and again after a brief teaching stint at Yale. "I can focus. There's stuff happening elsewhere, but I don't need to know about it."

Johnson is known for art that starts with photography and then heads off in unexpected directions. By working with stumpy little figures modelled from clay polymer or adding materials like paint, gold leaf and sparkles, she challenges the veracity of her straight-up photos and suggests a bigger, messier truth about the world. This attracted Pamela Meredith, senior art curator at the TD Bank Group, who's purchased her work for the bank's respected collection. "I like the idea that she's recreating something that she didn't capture with her camera at the time of documenting the tree planting experience," Meredith explains. "She makes it in the studio, photographs it, and presents it all together. It disrupts and complicates memory."

Johnson often explores the fraught, fragile relations between humans and the environment, and she's interested in makeshift communities and eccentric subcultures, from Manitoba tree planters to eco-volunteers in the Galapagos to members of Arctic expeditions. And >



Kitty, the artist's companion during the long studio hours

ART STAR

“I have a hard time talking about intimacy, and maybe that’s why I’m making work about it”

even though she made her name as a photographer, Johnson keeps hungrily expanding into other media: installation, bronze sculpture and oil paint, video, performance and dance.

It’s partly about avoiding boredom. “Also, I’m just really excited about seeing what I can do with new subjects, new media,” Johnson observes. “I want to make art about whatever I’m obsessed with at the time, whatever I’m dealing with at the time. It’s just more honest.”

At her studio, which consists of a couple of big, unfinished rooms in an old Winnipeg warehouse, it’s clear that Johnson is currently obsessed with intimacy and sexuality. “I think everybody has issues with intimacy,” she says. “I have a hard time talking about it, and maybe that’s why I’m making work about it. That’s how I deal with my shit.” The photos in *Wonderlust*, her new series, range in size from an expansive 28-by-42 inches to tiny two-by-two-inch peeks. They feature ordinary people in their own homes, engaging in graphic and varied sex acts, but with identifying characteristics strategically blocked out. With their vulnerable human details and oddball comic edge, the effect is the opposite of pornographic. As Johnson explains, “Basically, I let it be known that I was looking for couples or individuals who were willing to get naked with me in the room. And then I left it really open so it could be whatever they wanted it to be.

“It took me a while to get people comfortable because I was so uncomfortable,” she adds with a laugh. Eventually, the trust she developed with her subjects became an important part of the work. Many of the images are explicit, but there’s tact and tenderness in the way Johnson disguises faces with a swirl of paint or some protective, slightly goofy artistic gesture. “People had specific rules about what they would show

and what they wouldn’t,” Johnson notes. “I made them write them down so I wouldn’t forget.”

Johnson has been tinkering with *Wonderlust* while juggling other big projects, but she’s careful not to sound like she’s complaining. “Right now, I’m just

trying to enjoy it all,” she says, and that includes balancing art and life. Johnson’s boyfriend, Graydon Dressel, whom she’s been with since 2004, works as a nurse in northern Manitoba. The couple’s schedules are complex but complementary. “He’ll be there for two weeks and then home for a week or two,” says Johnson. “When he’s home, we play house. And when he leaves, I get to be my crazy artist self for two weeks.”

Lately, some of Johnson’s crazy-artist intensity has been focused on two corporate commissions. *Asleep in the Forest* calls up Bay Street by way of *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. Created for BMO’s Project Room in Toronto’s Financial District, this multimedia piece uses spooky ambiguity to suggest both the lure and the treachery of money. The five-by-four feet photograph for Louis Vuitton references the company’s historic associations with travel and adventure, but adds a decidedly raggedy edge. It depicts three happy young neo-hippies at a music festival in the Kootenays, where she and Dressel have a cabin. Johnson has been attending festivals all over North America since she was 16—she’s been to Burning Man thrice—and for the past few summers she’s followed B.C.’s circuit. She’s fascinated by these self-forming temporary communities, which she views as modest utopias, maybe the only kind available in our dystopian age. “That’s what it’s all about for me. That’s happiness,” Johnson explains, a little self-consciously. “People coming together not just to have a good time but to have the kind of time that changes you.”

The day after the boxing class I’m sore all over, and thinking about Johnson, who turns out to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. She can be nervous and funny, but she’s also fierce and focused, maybe even ready to punch it out. “I’m trying to be ambivalent!” she declares. She’s making fun of her own drive, but her double edge is played out in the work more seriously. We see the hopefulness in a lot of Johnson’s art, but we also sense the shadow. And we’re drawn to it, because we know that even in the beauty of nature or the refuge of our bedrooms, we have a habit of expelling ourselves from paradise. ♦

Asleep in the Forest (2013) is in Toronto until Nov. 2. Call (416) 643-2609 to arrange a viewing



PHOTOGRAPHY: © SARAH ANNE JOHNSON; COURTESY OF STEPHEN BULGER GALLERY, TORONTO, AND JULIE SAUL GALLERY, NEW YORK (ASLEEP IN THE FOREST).