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Kissing Gold, 2013, chromogenic print with gold leaf, 14 x 22"

SARAH ANNE JOHNSON: FROM THE ARCTIC TO THE EROTIC

Sarah Anne Johnson is an artist who likes to scratch, burn, and draw all over her exquisitely composed photographs. Previously, she took pictures of boreal landscapes in the Arctic Circle, sublime images that she altered in a way to convey mankind's impact on nature. Johnson's new series, **Wonderlust**, turns the focus from the environmental to the intimate, capturing people having sex. She adjusts the images in a way to expose the romantic, boring and sometimes comedic aspects of carnality, in order to show what sex "really looks and feels like."

We caught up with the Canadian-born photographer to talk about her new series, now on view at the Julie Saul Gallery in New York.

WHITEWALL: How long have you been altering your photographs in this way?

SARAH ANNE JOHNSON: I started painting and scratching on my prints in graduate school, but never showed anyone. Then a few years ago, I made a body of work titled "House on Fire," about my grandmother who was an unknowing test subject for CIA funded MK-ULTRA experiments. For that work, I painted on enlarged family photographs to illustrate what she had been through. The straight photographs alone showed a happy family doing happy family-type things— but I wanted to show what lay under the surface.

In "Arctic Wonderland," my last body of work, I painted on images I'd taken while visiting the Arctic Circle. Once again the images alone didn't convey my feelings. I had to paint, scratch, silk screen, emboss, and Photoshop my fears and hopes for the future of that place.

WW: How did you find and choose the people in your “Wonderlust” series?

SAJ: I let it be known through friends and family that I was looking for couples and individuals (the latter are much easier to find), to pose nude or mostly nude for my camera. I did some traveling to get the shots. If there were interested couples in say, Toronto for example, I would go there for a week of photo shoots.

WW: Did you direct or counsel them on their poses?

SAJ: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It depended on the couple. Some wanted to put on a show and others were shy and wanted full direction.

WW: Your previous series “Arctic Wonderland” dealt with environmental issues of mankind’s impact on nature. What made you transition to the setting of strangers’ bedrooms?

SAJ: My frustration with photography is that it only shows the surface. It can show what something looks like, but the surface doesn’t begin to tell the whole story. In “Arctic Wonderland,” I painted on the images to illustrate my fears and hope for the future of that space. I wanted to explore further the idea of making a feeling visible.

Intimacy is the perfect subject for that exploration because it looks different than it feels and it feels different than it looks, (how it really looks – not how porn makes it look). Wonderlust is an attempt to show what intimacy feels both physically and psychologically.

Also, I kind of burnt myself out on landscape art for now. I needed a break. All the research I was doing about global warming was depressing the shit out of me. Then, I read a book called Sex at Dawn, by Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha that blew my mind. I began researching artists who make work about it. I didn’t find much work that really spoke to me.

Once I realized I wanted to tackle that subject, I tried talking myself out of it. But I made the switch. I did it for artistic reasons and for personal reasons, and the personal reasons are personal.

WW: What is your intent for the viewer?

SAJ: Depends on which image they are standing in front of. With some, I want them to feel awkward and uncomfortable. With others, I want them to feel tingles and get flushed in the cheeks.

WW: Many of your photographs incorporate classical elements. What were your influences for this series?

SJ: When taking photographs of nudes, female nudes especially, there will be ties to art history. You can’t get around it even if you wanted too. I’m aware of those ties, but I actually don’t think about it too much while shooting.

For this work I studied Laura Letinski’s Venus Inferred, Wangechi Mutu, George Condo, Janet Werner, Willem de Kooning, Roger Ballen, Shary Boyle. Also, erotic art throughout history and from around the world. I’m mostly interested in artists who are trying to convey a psychological state. I also read a lot of psychology on intimacy and sexuality and some erotica.

WW: Though the subject of “Wonderlust” series is erotic, the tone is often comic or bizarre. Do you consider your art to be erotica?

SJ: There is a layer of eroticism in it of course; it’s naked couples cuddling and sometimes fucking. But the main purpose of erotic art is to arouse and that is not my sole purpose. This work is an exploration of intimacy issues. It’s about feeling connected or disconnected, about romance and ecstasy, but also boredom and dissatisfaction. It is a mix of visual psychology and poetry, self help books, romance novels, personal diary, and lastly, yes, erotica.

WW: What are you working on now?

SJ: I will be showing the “Wonderlust” series in Toronto at Stephen Bulger Gallery in March. I will soon have to begin planning for a survey of my work at the CAM Raleigh in North Carolina in 2015.

As for the art making, I have tons to do— too many ideas and too little time!

“Wonderlust” will be on view at the Julie Saul Gallery through December 21.