



SARAH ANNE JOHNSON

Nothing Impersonal: The Work of Sarah Anne Johnson

TIM DAVIS

I once drove to Nova Scotia. Coming across the Isthmus of Chignecto from New Brunswick, on a turnout off Highway 104, there is a Visitor Information Centre operated by very fresh faced teenagers all wearing the province's sky blue, bismuth green and tawny tartan. I mentioned to the very freshest face that I was going to be passing through the town of Tatamagouche, and whether she knew what might recommend it. "There was a giantess from Tatamagouche," she chirped at me, and continued to smile on, finished with her disquisition. I remember being struck by the roadblock of that "was." History had never seemed so remote. How untouchable Tatamagouche's gigantic past seemed to a man heading north in an imported pickup, a man without a guidebook, here only to avoid trouble south of the border. "How can you tell?" I asked her. She pondered: "There's a figurine."

I backed out of that benign, carpeted, government building, and ran for the truck. A GIANTESS FIGURINE! A tiny statue representing an enormous woman. A present placeholder for a past all out of scale. Paul the Deacon, the 8th Century Benedictine historian insisted that the word "scale" comes from the balance between drinking cups made of human skulls. Scale/skull. Past/Present. A Giantess Figurine. And somehow, I took a wrong turn at Upper Pugwash,

and missed Tatamagouche and its statue of the end of human scale altogether.

North Americans took to photography more hungrily than its European inventors. In a letter to his fiancée, written two months after Samuel Morse made the first American photograph, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, "I wish there was something in the intellectual world analagous [sic] to the Daguerreotype (is that the name of it?) in the visible...something which should print off our deepest, and subtlest, and delicatest thoughts and feelings, as minutely as the above-mentioned instrument paints the various aspects of Nature." Lacking history, North Americans NEEDED the immediacy of photography—to add emulsion to the shuffling card trick of the present; to record an outer world constructed on this continent to outpace the inner.

See Robert Cornelius' self portrait, the first Daguerreotype self portrait we have. Cornelius was a handsome young Philadelphia metallurgist with gumption and ambition, but his self portrait describes one thing above all: a man looking at his camera to make sure it's working properly. Compare Cornelius' picture with Hippolyte Bayard's famous "Self Portrait as a Drowned Man," made just months later, and you'll see two crisscrossing photographic avenues toward representing an inner life. Bayard was tricked into postponing the announcement of his own direct positive photographic process, and was trumped by Daguerre. In response, he photographed himself as a corpse with an accompanying text:

The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you. As far as I know this indefatigable experimenter has been occupied for about three years with his discovery. The Government which has been only

too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself. Oh the vagaries of human life....!

Bayard's picture is staged, pointed, political, European, and symbolic. It is an illustration of an inner state—a photographic *You'll be sorry one day*—but its coded outer artifice ends up avoiding anything inward. It is a picture of an idea. Cornelius, just desperate to record any human body on his polished silver plate, ends up with a complex, rich, accidentally emotional picture. It is a picture of desire.

So much of photographic staging and restaging bows to the “Self Portrait as a Drowned Man” legacy. Staging tends to appear at the peaks of the sine wave of self consciously “artistic” photographic practice—Photo-Secessionism, Surrealism, high Postmodernism—and from Gertrude Kasebier to Jeff Wall, is typically content to illustrate an idea rather than embody a fleeting feeling.

What makes Sarah Ann Johnson's photographic and sculptural practice so memorable and so strange is how it stays true to the immediacy of documentary photography while staging its elaborate chess match of the past. In her photographic investigations, “Tree Planting” and “Galapagos,” Johnson began with uninflected square snapshots of the tide of feral youth drawn to environmental work. These are scruffy pictures of scruffy people, baby Edward Abbeys preparing for a life of burning down billboards, content to roll through mud or stare into the camera as unselfconsciously as Robert Cornelius. Then, using techniques she learned building waterfalls in malls (awfully far from Galapagos), Johnson would restage and reconfigure essences of her working memories into idealized dream sets of barely significant moments she might've imagined in these ferals' diaries.

These pictures are the inverse of earthworks. More Grant Wood than Robert Smithson, they are images of the inner effects of working and studying the land. They distill a sense of significance into sets less than a meter square. And unlike many miniatures, they seem to distill rather than reduce.

There must be some peculiar clairvoyance to Johnson's figuration. When looking at these stiff little artificial worlds so suffused with personal feeling, I screw up like Marcello Mastroianni confronted by the mind reader in Fellini's *8 1/2*. Once the hotel guests have been sufficiently entertained by the blindfolded lady on the dais, Mastroianni, playing a film director, turns to the soothsayer's assistant and asks, "How do you transmit...Can you transmit anything?" It is the essential problem for the photographic arts: How can a medium so thoroughly committed to surface convey an inner life? For Johnson, scale is the secret. An artist for whom nothing is impersonal, Sarah Anne Johnson has forced her social world into endlessly complicating scale, epic into miniature and back out again, like a poet looking for syntactic friction by scraping up against the limitations of meter. She's like a love-smitten cartoon character with telescoping eyes, and now those deranging peepers have been trained on her own past. She writes:

This [new] work is about my grandmother, Val Orlikow. While seeking treatment for postpartum depression in the 1950s, she was an unknowing participant in CIA-funded mind-control experimentation at the Allen Memorial Institute in Montreal. Years later, when my family discovered the truth, my grandmother instigated a class action lawsuit against the CIA, suing for damages and recognition of the suffering she and others experienced. This settled out-of-court. Of significant importance is the fact that it was the first time in history of the CIA that

damages were paid for actions which occurred outside of the United States. By settling there was tacit acknowledgement that their actions were wrong.

About half of the world's artists have something personal to make art *about*. Art doesn't always spring easily from the personal, and heretofore, Johnson's projects have emerged from social connections and tactile methods, rather than some deep need to tell a story. The emergence of HISTORY into an artist's vocabulary can be stifling. Autobiography is the murkiest well artists can go to. Hans Christian Andersen called his memoir, "the fairy tale of my life without fiction." But Emerson, in his *Historic Notes of Life and Letters in Massachusetts*, written in 1867 and hearkening back to the time of his friend and rival Hawthorne's aspirations for mental Daguerreotypy, wrote, "The young men were born with knives in their brain, a tendency to introversion, self-dissection, anatomizing of motives." We remember more artists lives by the work they made (Courbet, Duchamp, Warhol, Smithson) than we remember art about artists' lives.

Photography, so slavish to the immediate present, deals very awkwardly with the past. The Enlightenment art theorists who established hierarchies of propriety for the subject matter of paintings—with History at the top descending down through Epic Portraiture, Religion, Mythology, Landscape, Genre and finally Still Life—never anticipated the omnivorous friction of the photographic camera as it raises up any old thing in front of it. Photographers in the presence of dire continua of history inevitably leave behind sad, flat, monocular diminishment. The camera can't tell the difference between Abu Ghraib and a bag of grapes. I have seen dozens of photography students attempt to take on the legacy of their own historical archive of family snapshots, with almost universal

exhaustion and failure, through projections, reenactments, collages, digital insertions, still lives. Perhaps because our memories are often made from the snapshots we have, there is something irreducibly powerful about the snapshots themselves, that makes them almost uninterpretable. Johnson has sensed this problem and skirted it by beginning the project without photography. Her small bronzes of her grandmother are totemic. They stand for her confusion and suffering and her abuse at the hands of forces outside her control.

Once again, Johnson has used scale to knead sentiment into the fissures of representation. This woman, whose story is so straightforwardly epic, has been forced *up* into a terrifying, hooded, three dimensional presence, and *down* to the size of a garden gnome. She is simple and folksy, something you can hold. She is heavy and complex, a doorstopper that sings Wagner. A woman with the head of an atom bomb. She is a giantess figurine.

Carrying these leaden totems, Johnson proceeds into the contested territory of her family's photographic history like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, who can move through the deadly significant delusional climate of "The Zone" only by throwing a handkerchief filled with bolts ahead of him. In Tarkovsky's Zone, the weather has gone wrong: In *Stalker* it snows in the summer (and according to Vladimir Shurin, the film's recording engineer, the flakes were actually toxic fallout from a nearby chemical plant). In *Mirror*, a barn burns in the rain. It snows inside a cathedral in *Nostalghia*. and rains inside a childhood home at the end of *Solaris*. In Johnson's autobiographical Zone, it snows in the tropics and while a little house burns. A birthday cake has become into a camp fire, at which a woman with the head of chipmunk warms her hands. Maybe looking at the past naturally makes the weather change. For an artist as sincere and skillful as Sarah Ann Johnson, these meteorological chimeras do feel natural. She has worked so thoroughly to skew our sense of scale, that to

mark up the inviolable membrane of the photographic surface with awkward flurries feels earned and almost prudent.

We live in a climate where novelists' editors are begging them to write personal memoirs; where artists paint pastorals and abstractions all day in their studios while listening to the 24-hour news. We have an unslakeable thirst for truth-telling, even while our philosophies assure us the truth is a cultural construct. Johnson's work looks back to a time when novelists coerced the truth into thinly-veiled semi-autobiographical fiction, when the quality of the story told mattered more than its veracity. Her life, her grandmother's life, her HISTORY, are raw material, transformed here into a potent set of 2- and 3-D images, as strange and awkward as a waterfall in a mall, as vivid and reified as an urn of ashes on a mantle.

Tim Davis studied photography and graduated with a BA from Bard College (1991) and an MFA from Yale University (2001). He has exhibited widely with solo shows in Brussels, Geneva and Milan, at White Cube (London) and Brent Sikkema Gallery and The Bohlen Foundation (New York City). His work is in the collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, the Guggenheim Museum and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. He has contributed critical texts to various publications including *Artforum*, *Art on Paper*, *Blind Spot* and *Metropolis*. He currently lectures in photography at Yale University.