

BORDERCROSSINGS

March | BORDERVIEWS

House Work

Snow Cave, video still from install 2018



The work of Sarah Anne Johnson, the Winnipeg-based photographer, videomaker and performance artist, can be viewed through the language of a Biblical narrative. In the King James version of the New Testament, Jesus attempts to allay the fears his apostles have for their own lives after he has gone. In John 14:2 he reassures them, “My Father’s house has many mansions; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” Johnson is dealing with preparing a house, too, and, while not a mansion, it is a place with many rooms. Since the exhibition of “House on Fire” at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2009, she has made photographs, mixedmedia images and performances that deal with an event that had a profound and damaging effect on her family. “House on Fire” included a surreal dollhouse, bronze sculptures,

family photographs and newspaper clippings on which she drew lines of labyrinthine entanglement, and small figures that gave form to the humiliations suffered by her maternal grandmother.

The treatment was abhorrent. In the mid-’50s Velma Orlikow was suffering from what would now be diagnosed as postpartum depression, and she was sent to the Allan Memorial Institute at McGill University in Montreal. While there, she was subjected to shock therapy, the administration of LSD and medically induced sleep in a CIA-funded series of mind-control experiments under the supervision of Doctor Ewen Cameron. The experiments had damaging consequences for her physical and psychological health. In one form or another, the treatment lasted for over three years. Its effect has been generational.

Sarah Anne is the first member of her family to deal with it through art. She has used the house as the container of the physical pain and psychological trauma suffered by her grandmother. To this point, she has worked through 2 of the 10 rooms she envisions will be necessary to explore the full implications of the treatment and its aftershocks. Her intention is to build large-scale versions of all the rooms from “House on Fire” and then play all the

characters in those spaces.

Hospital Hallway, 2015, took two forms: a performance and an installation. In the latter, viewers walked through a door and entered an octagonal hallway in which they watched screens showing Johnson throwing herself uncontrollably around the space, while wearing a mask depicting her grandmother. The video segments are disturbing to listen to and watch. In the performance version the audience mounts a set of stairs to find themselves in the complicit position of viewing another human being's physical desperation and mental anguish from the vantage point of the panopticon. Johnson's performance was less about physical acting than psychological channeling. It was a devastatingly successful inhabitation.

In *The Kitchen*, 2016, the second of her room performances, she again put on a mask of her grandmother, this time on the back of her head, and set about to execute simple acts of food preparation with her hands behind her back. It was excruciating to watch and painful to perform; because of her inability to see what she was doing, it wasn't only vegetables that were being cut.

Johnson is now involved in building and deciding what will happen in *The Cave*, the third room of the house. In "House on Fire" the snow cave was the centre of a building that was on fire. It was an image of Dantean perversity; the room that should be the warmest, the heart of the home, is a frozen chamber. Johnson sees this occupation as a critical one because of what it tells her about memory and trauma. "Whenever movies are made about something like this, the movie ends with the plaintiffs leaving the courtroom, down the stairs, victorious. But in reality my grandmother had brain damage; there was no getting better; there was just learning to live with it. So there is no feeling of release. No one can say, 'There was a reason and we are better people for it.' It's just this horrible fucking thing that happened to my family and it is frozen in time."

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The Cave will be installed in the Julie Saul Gallery in New York in September of this year and will be activated in two ways. The dancing couple will be sculptures that rotate slowly on a turntable; and in the performance version Johnson will be dressed as the doctor, but viewers will still know it is she. She will slow-dance, holding a life-sized doll of her grandmother. "She is made of soft pink fabric and has a wig on, and we put weights in her head, so that her head flops. It's clear she has passed out." In a rehearsal that we saw in the artist's

studio, the slow dancing and the roll of her head were both heart-wrenching and grotesque.

In addition to *The Cave*, Johnson will also be performing *Hospital Hallway* at Arsenal Contemporary in New York in September, and her photographs will be included in a group exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (She has decided that when the cave leaves her studio, she will construct the dining room in its place; she knows what it will look like, but doesn't know what will happen in it.) Work on and in the house continues.

There is another piece of writing that resonates with the *House of Johnson* story. In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," a poem written only 20-some years before her grandmother began to suffer abuse at the hands of the medical system, WB Yeats wrote about an encounter between Crazy Jane, a figure of abjection, and the Bishop, a figure of authority. From his privileged vantage point, the bishop admonishes Jane about her life in the shadow of encroaching death. "Live in a heavenly mansion," he warns her, "not in some foul sty." Jane may be crazy in his eyes, but experience has taught her to be wary of tidy exclusions like the one contained in the bishop's binary view of the world. "A woman can be proud and stiff / When on love intent," she tells him, adding, "But Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement."

Here, we are back in a house, one that has more in common with Johnson's family domicile than the one promised by evangelists and clerics. But Jane isn't through with the language of power, and she moves to rescue her experience from its embrace. She resolutely instructs her collared adversary, "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent." What her sane woman's view of the world offers may not be redemption, but at least it's an accommodation.

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