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Exhibition Review: Rosy Fingered Dawn

by Ilana Jael



Pink Wind & Sky, 2018

Sarah Anne Johnson’s current exhibition at Julie Saul Galleries, *Rosy Fingered Dawn*, is her eighth to be shown there, and it is obvious that the artist feels right at home. In fact, she was so comfortable that she felt free to turn the whole space into her installation. The pastel colors we see in her photographs seem to bleed out like watercolor paints onto the heretofore white gallery walls, viscerally immersing us in her strange, serene vision. And this is just the beginning of Johnson’s challenging of the boundaries between photography and reality, between the world as it is versus as presented and perceived.

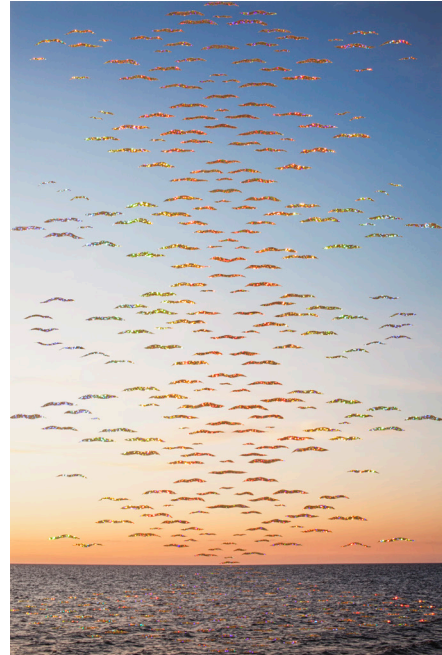
Photography, more than most other arts, must often contend with its reputation for representing the world as it actually is. But any such assumption is fundamentally misleading. In every picture taken,

subjects have been selected and angles chosen; some elements highlighted, and others left off-frame. And that’s before even accounting for choices made during the development and printing process, or the fact that in this day and age, more images have been digitally altered than not.

Johnson’s natural landscapes too have been through their fair share of photoshop, but these are the least apparent of the artist’s alterations. Any subtle improvements that may have been made to *Sunset #2 (Bedazzled)* are entirely eclipsed by Johnson’s liberal application of eye popping, iridescent holographic tape. In *Signal #2*, that same holographic tape joins heavily applied epoxy, oil paint, and a glowing cylinder of neon light to create an abstract 5-pronged intrusive object that dominates the valley we find it in. In *Signal #1*, a similar neon wire snakes outward from one of three strange greyscale circles. We may not know what we are looking at or what to make of these peculiar creations, but we know without a doubt that we have long departed from the realm of the “real”.

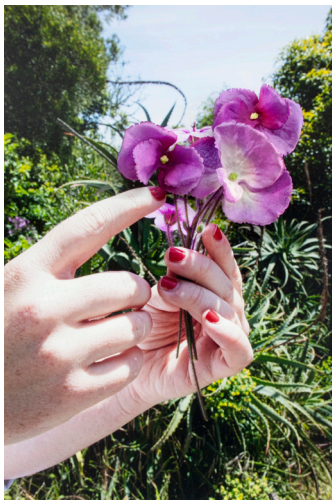
In other images, Johnson's additions are more explicitly representative as the artist makes her own "wind" and "birds" with yet more holographic tape, her own smudgy "dust" out of acrylic and her own "snow" out of epoxy. A hand grasps a Plastic Bouquet that transcends its frame with Johnson's enhancing touch of attached artificial flowers. More such flowers can be found next to Johnson's Rock Pile, which also features clouds made from cotton balls. The textured, three dimensional products that result awaken in us a combination of a childlike wonder at Johnson's audacity and our own childlike mischievousness. As viewers, we must fight the impulse to run our fingers over her textured scenscape, or to pick that pansy for ourselves.

Though the use of such unconventional materials may at first seem kitschy, a more nuanced view might



Yellow Glow Sunset, 2018

understand them as deliberately ironic, intended to humorously "mock" our "traditional sense of beauty and high art" with a craft-like approach. It's also an approach that allows Johnson to engage with the current, threatened state of the environment. While other artists idealize nature, she instead dares to treat it as flippantly as does the society around us. Because as playful as they are, Johnson's works aren't all sunshine and rainbows, and their greater social implications can not be ignored. In Sun (Bump), an epoxy black sun radiates a dark halo, highlighting the exhibition's ominous undertones. Gorgeous as they are, Johnson's concoctions are also uncanny ones, utterly unsettling in their departure from what could



Plastic Bouquet, 2018

be; any real-life sky as slick and shimmering as Johnson's sunsets would be a terrifying one. The title of eerie Apocalypse makes the sinister implications of this unreality explicit; such a breakdown of normality in which the actual horizon could compare to Johnson's glittery distortions would only be possible if the world was something we had destroyed.

Luckily for us all, Johnson seems to be content with pictures and painting and doesn't look to be reaching for an atom bomb. But at least within the confines of her gallery playroom, she has fully taken nature into her own hands, and it's surprisingly difficult to say that her frightening innovations aren't an improvement.