

Sarah Anne Johnson *Either Side of Eden*

Notions of “paradise” provide perpetual fuel for the imagination, spawning grand dreams and hedonistic visions that rarely find earthly equivalence. Instead, they seem to congregate under the archetypal umbrella of *Eden*: a utopian abstract where life began (according to the Christian tradition), and an iconography spanning sacred and secular traditions was borne. In this airy realm the Galapagos Islands have arguably come closest to realizing Eden’s physical presence – their tropical climate, lush greenery, and exotic wildlife playing host to Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, National Geographic’s enduring gaze, and a full-scale economy of tourist resorts. Yet for the majority “The Galapagos Islands” live solely in the mind’s eye, providing a fanciful site for dream-like projection that makes the Islands’ poor, less-than-perfect physical existence not only unnecessary, but *inconvenient*. Taking this perceptual schism as her starting point, artist Sarah Anne Johnson travelled to the Islands as part of an agricultural rehabilitation mission – living and working here for just under a month with a crew looking to rejuvenate both the land and their lives through volunteer labour. In so doing, Johnson renewed the intentions of her previous agricultural project in northern Manitoba, where she proclaimed, “Through the medium of photography I explore the benefits of physical labour and personal struggle to find a balance between community and the landscape. Adventure, spiritual fulfilment and giving back to nature are key elements of my work.” However, where the ensuing *Tree Planting* series confirmed these hopes and coalesced fond memories into physical form, her voyage to the Galapagos was a journey into uncertain, and potentially traumatic territory. With little reference outside the abstract mythology surrounding the Islands, she traveled with a map woven from speculation, mediated ideals, and fragile anticipation. Here, between the imaginary and the unknown, Johnson put her aims to the test via a medium spanning – and blurring – the substance of believability.

In the *Galapagos* series Johnson’s political and anthropological aspirations collide with fantastic dimensions of her, and the tourist industry’s making – creating a series of dichotomies that circulate throughout the work. This dualism begins in her signature mix of photographs that continue *Tree Planting*’s tapestry of straight, documentary-style shots with those of playfully con-

structured tableaux. In this particular context, Johnson straddles both sides of the Galapagos “ideal” as her documentary photos subvert romanticized myths that her dioramas simultaneously perpetuate and extend – rendering physical possibility inadequate by inhabiting the imaginary. In the overlap, photos that reveal the Islands to be dense with parasitic vegetation, poverty, and insect-laden toil mingle with dream-like images of natural beauty, aesthetic staging, and sculptural embellishment. Scenes of hothouse growth, agricultural engineering, and other human intervention upon the land are especially prevalent, calling attention to the *unnatural* processes that have, and continue to take place here. The consequently hybridized atmosphere recalls Meeka Walsh’s prescient observations of *Tree Planting*, where she stated, “It’s not Eden that [Johnson] presents; instead it’s a recognition of Nature’s current status – compromised, altered, assaulted but ultimately resilient and reconfigured.” The social landscape of this artist’s sojourn is cast under a similarly ambivalent light, where the eyes and body language of her subjects belie aspirations of communal camaraderie with the presence of conflicts and cliques. The classical and palpably self-conscious posing of these soiled figures also points to the paradoxical dramatization of their “coming of age” escape – conjuring a fantasy camp full of (temporary) toil and characterization bordering on caricature. The ensuing corrosion of clear-cut, uniform categories – in both human and environmental terms – breaks down illusory homogeneity, as well as the borders between Johnson’s binary visual language. In the ensuing exchange, as both her photojournalism and set construction are made porous by the presence of the “other,” scenes of fantasy are dragged down and debunked by reportage that is equally jeopardized by the proximity of subjective construction. Across the narrowing divide, the absence of mediating reality is filled with a canvas-like “common ground” where crossover becomes the catalyst of invention, reflection, and hope.

In the intersection between actuality and abstraction, Johnson smoothes the seams of her photographic patchwork – borrowing equal parts of this medium’s documentary history and malleable future to construct a personalized vision of the Galapagos. Between the raw aesthetic of field photography and immaculately composed works reminiscent of the Renaissance tradition, she skillfully manipulates the legitimizing stare of the camera lens to assert the “reality” of her world. Her extension into the performance and presentation of sister media such as painting, drawing, sculp-

ture, and installation collect the many elements of this constructed vision into a foil of “objectivity” – spreading a tangible sense of *weight* across her disciplinary spectrum. The activity within this expansion points to the reifying ritual of process that compels her to *build* this vision rather than digitally manipulating her photos – lending material presence to memories and dreams by (re)living them in real-time; feeling her imagination take shape in the tactile flow of clay, paint, and pencil crayon. Unlike Thomas Demand or James Casebere, Johnson cobbles a humble kaleidoscope of moments, places, and people from everyday materials that imbue her visions with an unfocused, but endearing sense of warmth. Like ex-voto items held closely to the heart, her delicately modelled “dolls,” modest paintings of fellow workers, brightly toned drawings of native species, and a scale model of the hut she inhabited collectively manifest fleeting experiences into the foundation of a story. In the following narrative time breaks down as the immediacy of these frozen moments travel through the filters of memory, fashioning a mosaic of recollections and projections that reflect not place, but the *vision* of place.

Standing alongside the crowd that gathers on the Galapagos beachfront – staring up at that which escapes the visible frame – she, like all the others, confronts the abstract presence of ideals and expectations. Yet while every individual’s vision is animated and unique, their specificity is filtered through the lens of a single eye as Johnson orchestrates people, places, and experiences into a multiplied, but subjective travelogue. Like a visual version of historical fiction, this introspective representation of exterior reality employs lived experience as a lyrical vehicle – standing upon the tentative sands of “truth” to reach aesthetic goals, activist aspirations, and enduring optimism. Employing her background in theatrical direction, scene painting, and set construction, we grow lost in the spell of Johnson’s cross-disciplinary theatre as experience bleeds into performance and personal beliefs become collective concerns. Her amphitheatre takes shape around the seamless embrace of a curved wall – animated by a cast of salon-style photos – merging multiplicity into a continuous, non-linear narrative of diary-like declaration. Looking upon the many entries that made up *Tree Planting*, Walsh characterized Johnson’s collection as a maze of “surrogate self-portraits,” uniting divergent material through the singularity of perspective. In *Galapagos* this process is taken one

step further, merging the reconstruction of nature and activist projections of utopia with the production of a place that lives *across* either side of Eden, in the mind of an artist.

-Steven Matijcio, Curator, Plug In, 2006