

Sarah Anne Johnson: "Tree Planting" at Julie Saul Gallery

Sarah Anne Johnson's first solo exhibition presents photographs of young Canadians planting trees in deforested areas. Playing with the line between documentation and fantasy, Johnson mixes photos of actual people shot on site with photos of her small



Sarah Anne Johnson, *Bearded Man*, C-print (40 x 30 in.), 2003–04. Courtesy Julie Saul Gallery, New York.

art on paper

sculpted figures posed in constructed forest tableaux. Roughly modeled in pigmented clay, the latter seem as active and expressive as their live counterparts.

These young volunteers, in their attempt to counteract man's destruction of nature, don't exactly leave their attachments to civilization behind. They drink, smoke, play board games, travel by helicopter and S.U.V., sport tattoos and piercings, and are inextricably bound to the type of consumption they resist. This consumer waste threatens them as well; in one cautionary photo, a sculpted figure of a woman, blissfully skinny-dipping, is poised to step on a broken bottle littering the lake's floor.

Despite signs of human incursion, unspoiled beauty abounds in images of dappled flowers, spectacular sunsets, and lush woods. Johnson's photo of a spotted fawn sleeping peacefully in a clearing manages to be enchanting rather than sappy.

The combination of the real and the constructed mirrors the many dualities of the situation: idealistic individuals vs. corporate giants; grassroots gestures vs. colossal machinations; focused labor vs. reckless celebration; enduring commitment vs. temporary distraction. Despite these complexities, we root for the young adults who we associate with the tender young trees and who simultaneously face great prospects and daunting odds. We cannot help but remember the beliefs and desires of people that age, which are so effectively captured and composed by Johnson.

—Lauren Ross