

# Close Up

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In his famous 1953 essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," Isaiah Berlin divided human beings into two types, based on an ancient Greek parable: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Hedgehogs, he suggested, understand the world in terms of a single, central vision, while foxes are fascinated by an infinite variety of things.

Berlin drew his examples from literature and philosophy (Dante was a hedgehog, Shakespeare a fox), but you can have hours of fun applying his neat dichotomy to photographers, past and present. Ansel Adams? Hedgehog! Alfred Stieglitz? Fox. Thomas Demand? Hedgehog. Thomas Ruff? Fox. I could go on, but I want to save some space for the real subject of this column, the young Canadian photographer Sarah Anne Johnson, who got me thinking about foxes and hedgehogs in the first place.

Johnson, who made an impressive debut at the Julie Saul Gallery earlier this year, is definitely a fox. Her color photographs, pinned to a long, curving wall at the gallery, recounted her experiences planting trees in northern Manitoba, an activity she describes as "a rite of passage for a lot of Canadian kids." Some of the photographs were "loosely directed" shots of her fellow tree planters, covered in mud, sweat, and bug bites, working, playing, and communing with nature. Scattered among these "real-life" photographs were set-up shots of dioramas populated by doll-like figures that Johnson crafted from Sculpy, paint, and fabric. As a whole, the installation combined the immediacy of documentary "lifestyle" photography, like that of Nan Goldin and Ryan McGinley, with the savvy artifice of postmodernists like Laurie Simmons.

Johnson began documenting her experiences using these two different modes during a six-month trip to Europe that she took when she was in college in Winnipeg. Her art professors agreed to grant her course credit if she continued making work while she traveled. For her sculpture class, she constructed tiny dioramas in empty Band Aid boxes and mailed them back to Canada; she also took hundreds of photographs.

"I've always been kind of a jack of all trades, master of none," Johnson said, "and I always thought that eventually I would have to grow up and specialize in one area, but I never wanted to do that." A few years later, enrolled in the photography program at the Yale School of Art, she began photographing the dioramas, as well as the real-life events they were based on.

"At one point, one of my teachers told me: You have to choose," she said. But with a fox-like unwillingness to limit herself to a single, monolithic vision, she ignored her professor's advice and began showing the two kinds of images together. "I use the dioramas to recreate certain scenes that I missed with the camera," she explained, "to capture memories or experiences that would seem too posed or didactic if I used real people to act them out. With the dolls, it's easier to create a suspension of disbelief."

For her next project, Johnson, now 28, is heading off to the Galapagos Islands, where she will spend several months doing volunteer field work—maintaining trails, working with local farmers, counting and marking turtle eggs—and of course, making pictures that capture the complexity and variety of her experience there. □