

STEFAN STUX GALLERY

PRESS RELEASE

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DION JOHNSON

New Paintings

Opening Thursday, April 29 from 6-8:30 pm through May 29, 2004
Tuesday – Saturday 10-6

The pictures in Dion Johnson's paintings are so clear and distinct that dogs and cats could understand them. That's one reason why critics who like their art to be obscure and difficult (all the better to flaunt their brainy ability to translate it) have so little to say about works like these, in which simple things are presented in such a straightforward manner that you'd have to be doofus to miss the point. This tells us two things about Johnson's paintings:

1.) They have consequences. Looking at them is risky business because they remove the safety net provided by the illusion of detached observation. They also eliminate the bet-hedging relativism that accompanies standard ideas about art's identity as an incomplete entity in need of interpretation - the more complicated and multi-layered the better. Johnson's profoundly superficial works are not codes to be cracked nor signs to be deciphered nor texts to be analyzed. Public utterances, they are concrete (and fairly sophisticated) instances of civilized sociability. As such, they take decorum seriously. Refusing to separate matters of taste from larger questions of manners, they do not concern themselves with private sentiments or unbecoming intimacies. Instead, they invite one-on-one interactions, inciting viewers to behave in a variety of ways. Whether you love them or hate them you have some kind of reaction; even middle-of-the-road responses stand apart from the distant, uncommitted analyses often elicited by works of contemporary art - and monotonously delivered by commentators of a conceptual (i.e., contemplative) bent. In every case, Johnson's unguarded yet well-heeled paintings hit us where we live. Throwing their lot in with all types of social events, from casual encounters to highly formalized exchanges (and everything in between), they traverse the fully visible world. Rather than conveying neat morsels of meaning, Johnson's works lay all of their elements out on beautifully crafted surfaces so that everything is visible all at once. Their immediately recognizable images and vivid painterly incidents don't force viewers to dig out secret tidbits of significance (in the manner of painstaking archaeologists). Nor do they presume that looking at art has anything to do with uncovering emotionally loaded symbols (in the manner of tenacious psychoanalysts). Likewise, they eschew the idea that art gets us to re-live momentous, life-defining traumas (as if art-viewing were some sort of therapy and viewers were patients in need of healing). On the contrary, Johnson's levelheaded works simply set your eyes in motion. Gliding across variously applied swoops, swishes, and smears of paint, your optical organs gain speed, momentum, and energy as you rediscover what it's like to see the ordinary stuff of everyday life anew - with the fresh-eyed enthusiasm of the first time.

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2.) Specialists and professionals are in no better position to respond to Johnson's user-friendly works than is anyone else. (In fact, approaching these simple but far from simplistic pictures encumbered with the idea that meaning is an inert, passively transmitted entity puts one at a distinct disadvantage.) Being curious about one's surroundings and the relationships that take shape among their myriad components is all that Johnson's acrylics on canvas and plexiglass demand. In the end, this turns out to be quite a lot. The shamelessly playful appearance of these unpretentious paintings doesn't prevent them from making deeply serious, quasi-philosophical propositions. Before them, it becomes clear that meaning does not originate from above (in some transcendent realm of Timeless Ideals) and then trickle-down to earth-bound viewers. Instead, it springs up from below, percolating through life's imperfections to brew more timely truths. Most important, Johnson's paintings make this proposition by showing rather than telling: They change a viewer's relationship to highfalutin ideas by locating such ordinarily ungraspable abstractions in the present, however unglamorous and incomplete it may be. Never appealing to the authority of historical precedents or to the ideas out of which they grew, these humble works appeal only to the responses they generate. In them, everyday scenarios, recognizable objects, and easy-assembly diagrams appear alongside a pretty thorough cataloging of the various ways paint can be applied to a flat surface: brushed, combed, squirted, and squeegeed - even sculpted, cut, and collaged. Viewers are thus compelled to participate in the unscripted stories that unfold before them. Bringing grand aspirations and wild ambitions down to earth by emphasizing just how extraordinary ordinary things can be, Johnson's refreshingly accessible pictures put the Pop back into populist. Imagine an old TV on the fritz and you'll have an idea of the out-of-sync scrolling flow that occurs when you look at these works. Then imagine that your set is picking up about a dozen channels simultaneously - that, as the out-of-frame images jitter and roll across the screen, they also flip from one program to another. This will give you an idea of how clunky and plodding ordinary channel surfing is when compared to what takes place before Johnson's animated paintings. Here, worlds do not collide as much as they momentarily frame one another, gracefully segueing from one to the next. As your glance drifts across the smartly edited surfaces of these pictures, elements that are the stars of some scenes become the supporting casts in others. Things shift position with impressive equanimity. Plastic ants, coloring-book kids, and the daring men of the flying trapeze have plenty of room to maneuver - and leave plenty of room for viewers. The sweet appeal of Johnson's candy-colored palette and PG subject matter goes hand-in-hand with the desire to draw viewers into open-ended dramas that begin with benign banalities but whose outcomes are neither. Behaving as if nothing were more scintillating than the little fugitive pleasures we sometimes steal from the jam-packed schedules that make up our lives of constant, multi-tasking busyness, these paintings make room for aimless play. Surreptitiously sneaking into the gaps between tasks and duties, commitments and obligations, they redeem lost moments by giving form to time spent doing nothing in particular, when unformed notions drift in and out of focus, sometimes giving birth to full-blown thoughts and at other times providing more mysterious satisfactions. Johnson's endearing images bring innocence back into the picture not by traveling back in time but by making space, in the present, for daydreams whose pleasures are as intangible as they are undeniable.

-- David Pagel

Originally from Bellaire, Ohio, Dion Johnson received his BA from Ohio State University and MA from Claremont University. The artist lives and works in Los Angeles.