

AARON JOHNSON

Liberty Chomp

11.5.2012 – 9.6.2012

AARON IS BACK!



"GENOCIDE MACHINE"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/101,5 X 81 CM/2012

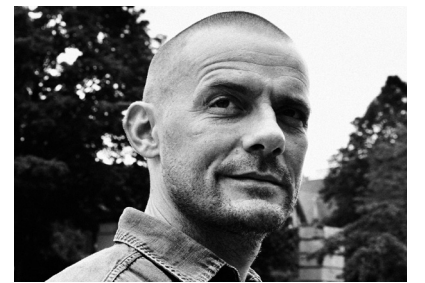
In 1957 the gentleman-gallerist Leo Castelli visited the young Bob Rauschenberg's studio on Pearl Street, Manhattan. Rauschenberg offered Castelli a drink but had to go to his neighbor's flat to get ice - when Castelli heard the name of the guy next door, Jasper Johns, he quickly followed. In his flat, Castelli was blown away by Jasper John's paintings of flags, red, white and blue. It was love at first sight, and Leo Castelli forgot all about Rauschenberg. More than 50 years later, in 2010, I had an experience that's in some ways similar. I was in Brooklyn to visit an artist's studio - when I left I peeked into the next door-studio. The artist wasn't there - and I was totally fascinated by the huge, colorful painting that met my eyes: The Statue of Liberty and Christ having intercourse with the American flag as background. The artist was of course the brilliant Aaron Johnson. I brought the painting, titled Star-Crossed, to Copenhagen and showed it at Art Copenhagen in 2010. When I opened my gallery in Kødbyen, the meatpacker district, my first show "The Irascible Assholes" contained two Aaron Johnson-works and in the fall of 2010 I had the privilege to present his first solo-show in Gallery Poulsen, "Scars and Stripes".

Now Aaron Johnson is back with a new awesome series of paintings. Why? Simply, because I find him to be one of the most interesting artists around today. And he even gets better and better and better. His art touches the DNA of Gallery Poulsen: Dealing with the American myth his art is glowing with energy, power, will and vitalism. He pushes you and makes you think! Furthermore, the paintings are made with an extremely fascinating and entirely original technique, which requires skill; the complex motifs are done in one take, can't be corrected.

If somebody argues that there's a lot of death on his works, I'd answer that despite the rough motifs there's an intense optimism on life. Probably, because he knows instinctively how to balance good and evil, life and death, beauty and beast, spontaneity and knowledge.

Welcome,

Morten Poulsen, 2012



Morten Poulsen

**'I NEED TO SOMETIMES
TURN INWARD, TO MAKE
THESE PAINTINGS THAT ARE
WEIRDLY TWISTED
LOVE SONGS, NATURE
POEMS, LOVE LETTERS TO
THE BEAUTY OF LIFE ITSELF'**

AARON JOHNSON, 2012

AARON JOHNSON / MAY 2012 / PAGE 4/5



"HEART WRENCH"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/71 X 56 CM/2012



"LIBERTY CHOMP" / ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH / 163 X 183 CM / 2012

**'WITH PERVERTED VERSIONS
OF CHRIST, UNCLE SAM,
STATUE OF LIBERTY AND
AMERICAN SUPERHEROES,
AARON JOHNSON EXPLORES
THE DIRTY CORNERS
OF THE AMERICAN DREAM'**

AARON JOHNSON / MAY 2012 / PAGE 8/9



"HE HAS RISEN"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/71 X 56 CM/2012



"LOVE BITE" / ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH / 220 X 243.5 CM / 2012

Interview with Aaron Johnson

By Tom Hermansen

Life Grows In A Cesspool of Darkness

Aaron Johnson's paintings are colorful scenes from a black comedy. The protagonists are apocalyptic demons, wild animals with foam in their mouths, human beings in pain or ecstasy. But despite the morbid content, his work offers a surprisingly exuberant and humorous gesture.

>>I hope my paintings inspire the viewer to find laughter despite the darkness of this tumultuous era of humanity,<< says Aaron Johnson.

This is Aaron Johnson's third solo show in Copenhagen, and this time around the Danish audience will notice new movements in his art. We are reacquainted with his well-known list of characters: Christ, Uncle Sam, the Statue of Liberty, American superheroes. But in several of his new paintings, Aaron Johnson explores motifs that are less political.

>>Sometimes I need to turn away from the dark horrible political content in my work because it gets very depressing to perpetually be thinking about the fucked-up contemporary world. I need to sometimes turn inward, to make these paintings that are weirdly twisted love-songs, nature poems, love letters to the beauty of life itself.<<

One of these less political paintings is the large "Love Bite". A work Aaron Johnson refers to as "psychotic erotic".

>>On this painting I depict two lovers that are splayed across the composition, their bodies being ripped apart by wild animals. These bodies lay in the wide open jaws of a hippopotamus at the center of the composition, its gaping mouth about to snap shut and devour their flesh. A roaring tiger sprawls across the lower portion of the painting, ripping legs of the lovers' bodies with its teeth and claws. An enormous American eagle swoops through the sky, yanking off his foot with his talons, slurping up her heart with his pointed tongue. And a small monkey nibbles on her extruded guts that spew out of her torn open abdomen. Both of the lovers are in a catastrophic state of dismemberment, but their faces reveal erotic ecstasy even in this moment of death. The focal point of this painting shows the man's head having inserted itself deep into the womb of

his lover, a return to the womb reference, an ultimate moment of erotic union simultaneous with death.<<

Beauty In Our Demise

Aaron Johnson explains that there's tons of human suffering on the planet, but in all this agony beauty grows and prevails.

>>Human beings have turned this planet into a seething toxic dump, and we just consume and pollute and kill each other in never-ending wars. Some of my paintings reflect on that truth. At the same time, life is beautiful! Would it be nice if humanity would develop a consciousness and reverence for nature and a compassion for all living things and reverse this crisis? Yes! But at the same time I think there is beauty somehow in our own demise. Death is only natural, and our species also must face its own mortality, and I do see beauty in that as well...<<

Confronted with existential elements that are beyond our control, such as wild nature, sorrow, and death, philosophers have through the ages written about the sublime; a quality of greatness beyond all possibility of calculation and measurement. Aaron Johnson is interested in the concept of the sublime.

>>My experience of the sublime is moments where I am acutely aware of my own mortality. These moments can happen in nature, in sex, and in crisis. The new paintings "Love Bite" and "Rabid Fox" are poetic works to me, musings on Eros and Thanatos, erotic nature daydreams. They depict bodies in dismemberment and bliss, overwhelmed by nature. To me, there is beauty in death, creation and destruction are interlinked, and in my eyes that is beauty and that is also the sublime.<<

America's Genocide

Many of Aaron Johnson's characters are essentially American - but it's not exactly a heroic vision of his homeland, which, for instance, is obvious in the new painting "Liberty Chomp".

>>In "Liberty Chomp" we see the Statue of Liberty being screwed in every possible orifice by demonic tanks and psychotic uncle Sams and Christs; as if to say that the all-American heroic ideal of Liberty and Democracy has been completely fucked. It's the final gasp for Liberty. The military industrial machine has fucked her over relentlessly and she is about to be finally swallowed into oblivion. Ghosts fly in the murky apocalyptic sky above.<<

Aaron Johnson continues:

>>In fact in that piece Lady Liberty is about to be swallowed whole by a giant demon, and a similar scenario occurs in "Super Supper" where our hero Superman and our heroine Wonder Woman are also being eaten alive; reflecting on the death of "The American Dream", which is and always was a corrupt and amoral concept disguised as the pursuit of happiness and liberty. "Genocide Machine" is a painting with a multi-headed troll-like monster, whose heads do include the most murderous and evil world leaders such as Hitler and George Bush. I am not trying to equate them, as they are very different in their evils. I do however suspect that history will show that those in power in America, those that condone conspicuous capitalist consumption and greed, waging wars to maintain our superpower status, destroying the environment in order to sustain our completely unsustainable way of life, and perpetuating soul-crushing corporate slavery for the masses so that the very few may live lives of abject excess, will one day be viewed as criminal leaders who committed atrocities and brainwashing against humanity.<<

And according to Aaron Johnson the American Dream was a problematic concept from the very beginning:

>>I relate it to the notion of Manifest Destiny, that this nation was founded on the idea that we are God's chosen people. With "God on our side" America was founded by committing genocide against that Native Americans. America was built up by stealing human beings from Africa to use as slaves, our recent wars have shamelessly killed masses of civilians and caused complete upheaval of other nations so that we may protect our oil, our way of life. The American Dream was always about a severe imbalance, that We will take and have a life of extreme privilege, while They will pay the price.<<

Reverse Painting

This current, dark world-situation inspires Aaron Johnson to work hard - every day. And doing these paintings takes time, since his technique is extremely demanding:

>>I paint my paintings in reverse on plastic sheeting, accumulating layers in reverse, which ultimately gets peeled off the plastic sheeting and adhered on to a polyester net. I do loose sketches, and I work intuitively, generally on one or two works at a time. My ideas come from current events, out of the current state of crisis facing humanity. At other times my ideas come from turning away from the

ugliness of all that, searching intuitively inside myself for dream-like poetic often erotic images, as an antidote to the darkness of the politics.<<

Aaron Johnson developed his remarkable method through years of experimentation:

>I came from a Molecular Cellular Biology degree before I became an artist. No one ever taught me how to paint, so I had to find my own way, and my mad-scientist approach was natural due to my background working in molecular chemistry labs. When I first moved to New York in 1998 I had a tiny little bedroom in the Lower East Side where I painted with plastic protecting the floor. I was making some really terrible Jackson Pollock inspired drip paintings with squirly acrylics. I learned quickly that the drips that spilled onto the plastic on the floor could be peeled away and treated as a material in itself, which was a thrilling discovery because it seemed like a new way to work with such an ancient and over-worked classical medium, a way to reinvent painting. Years later through continued experimentation I have arrived bit by bit at my current method which I call reverse-painted-acrylic-polymer-peel painting.<<

Aaron Johnson, 2012



"RABID FOX"/ ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/81 X 101.5 CM/2012

**'CREATION AND
BEAUTY
ARE CLOSELY
LINKED.
MAN MUST
REALIZE HIS
MORTALITY.
DEATH ALSO HAS
BEAUTY'**

AARON JOHNSON, 2012



"SUPER SUPPER"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/45.5 X 45.5 CM/2012



"GOBBLER"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/45.5 X 45.5 CM/2012

**'MY EXPERIENCE
OF THE SUBLIME
IS MOMENTS
WHERE I AM
ACUTELY AWARE
OF MY OWN
MORTALITY'**

AARON JOHNSON, 2012



"DEATH MACHINE"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/89 X 106.5 CM/2012

**'I HOPE MY PAINTINGS
INSPIRE THE VIEWER
TO FIND LAUGHTER
DESPITE THE
DARKNESS OF THIS
TUMULTUOUS
ERA OF HUMANITY'**

AARON JOHNSON, 2012

AARON JOHNSON / MAY 2012 / PAGE 20/21



"BIRD FIENDER"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/71 X 56 CM/2011



"BATTLEFIELD"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/71 X 142 CM/2011

**'HUMAN BEINGS HAVE
TURNED THIS PLANET INTO A
SEETHING TOXIC DUMP,
AND WE JUST CONSUME
AND POLLUTE AND
KILL EACH OTHER IN
NEVERENDING WARS.
SOME OF MY PAINTINGS
REFLECT ON THAT TRUTH'**

AARON JOHNSON, 2012

AARON JOHNSON / MAY 2012 / PAGE 24/25



"MERMAID"/ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/101.5 X 81 CM/2011

THERE'S BEAUTY IN DESTRUCTION

PRESS RELEASE

In Aaron Johnson's paintings, death always sticks its face forward. A loving couple in erotic ecstasy is ripped apart by wild animals, and a fox with a foaming mouth bites the heart out of your chest on the naked woman he mounts.

In Aaron Johnson's pictorial universe, vitality and death, beauty and destruction, rapture and grief are not opposites but intertwined, mutually dependent conditions of existence. >>Creation and destruction are closely linked. Man must realize his mortality. Death also has beauty.<< says Aaron Johnson.

The exhibition Liberty Chomp at Gallery Poulsen presents 13 new Aaron Johnson paintings. In several of his new works Aaron Johnson moves away from a specific American context and focuses on the human animal's existential life-struggle. But we are also reunited with his baroque motifs of anti-heroes who give the United States a critical treatment. With perverted versions of Christ, Uncle Sam, Statue of Liberty and American superheroes, Aaron Johnson explores the dirty corners of the American dream.

All the new paintings are created with Aaron Johnson's unique, time-consuming technique, which he calls "reverse-painted acrylic polymer peel paintings." With his background in molecular biology, Aaron Johnson developed this method, in which he paints his motifs in reverse on plastic sheeting - layer upon layer upon layer, after which he pills the motifs off and adhere them on to a polyester net.

This original technique coupled with his distinctive, colorful designs have secured Aaron Johnson numerous exhibitions - this is his third in Copenhagen. His exhibitions have been reviewed in many publications including Art News, Beautiful Decay, Kunst International, The Art Newspaper, The Village Voice, and The New York Times. His work is in the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, where his work is currently on view in the exhibition Exquisite Corpse.

Aaron Johnson, born 1975 in Minnesota, received his MFA from Hunter College, NY in 2005, and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He is a recent recipient of the prestigious MacDowell Colony Fellowship.



"IT AINT ME BABE"/ ACRYLIC ON POLYESTER KNIT MESH/132 X 183 CM/2011

CV AND EXHIBITIONS

AARON JOHNSON

Born 1975, St. Paul, Minnesota
Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

EDUCATION

2005

Master of Fine Arts, Hunter College, New York, NY.

1999

Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY.

1998

National Academy of Design, New York, NY.

1997

Bachelor of Science, Molecular and Cellular Biology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012

Liberty Chomp, Gallery Poulsen, Contemporary Fine Arts Copenhagen

2011

Freedom from Want, Stux Gallery, New York, NY

2010

Scars & Stribes, Gallery Poulsen, Contemporary Fine Arts Copenhagen

Don't Be Scared, You're Supposed to Be, with Barnaby Whitfield, Irvine Contemporary, Washington DC.

2008

Star-Crossed, Stux Gallery, New York, NY.

Where the Buffalo Roam, Mogadishni, Copenhagen, Denmark.

2007

Love Songs for Demons, Mogadishni, Aarhus, Denmark.

Hellhound Rodeo, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York, NY.

2005

Fiend Club Lounge, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York, NY.

2004

Bubblin' Crude, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, Brooklyn, NY.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012

Drawn to You - Works on Paper from New York, Gallery Poulsen, Copenhagen, Denmark

2011

You Are Free, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, WUK Werkstaetten und Kulturhaus, Vienna, Austria.

Facemaker, Royal T, Los Angeles, CA. Curated by Kathy Grayson.

Sick!, Misc. Project, New York, NY.

Bitches Brew, Gallery Poulsen, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Volta New York, represented by Galeria Mito, New York, NY.

Desires, Nightmares, Dreams 2. Running Horse Contemporary Art Space, Beirut, Lebanon.

2010

Dawn Frasch, Aaron Johnson, Wes Lang, Galleri Brandstrup, Oslo, Norway.

The Irrascible Assholes, Gallery Poulsen.

Copenhagen, Denmark.

Bushwick Schlacht, Fortress to Solitude, Brooklyn, New York.

You Are Free, The Tape Club, Berlin, Germany.

Inflection, The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY.

The Antidote, Claire Oliver Gallery, New York, NY.

The Rise and Fall of Excess Culture, Stux Gallery, New York, NY.

2009

Ridykeulouse Hits Bottom, Leo Koenig Projekte, New York, NY.

Desires, Nightmares, Dreams. The Running Horse Contemporary Art Space, Beirut, Lebanon.

Low Blow: and Other Species of Confusion, Stux Gallery, New York, NY.

Octo Pusses, New Image Art, Los Angeles, CA.

Tales of Wonder and Woe, Castle Gallery, New Rochelle, NY.

2008

Grotesque Histories, Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, NY.

From Head to Toe, Stux Gallery, New York, NY.

Summer Exhibition, Marlborough Chelsea, New York, NY.

2007

Size Matters Part One: XS- Recent Small Scale

Paintings, Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY;(2008) Knoxville Museum of Contemporary Art, Knoxville TN

Size Matters Part Two: XXL- Recent Large Scale Paintings, Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY.

Irrational Exuberance, Maddox Art, London, England.

2006

Summer Group Show, Marlborough Gallery, New York, NY.

Six Degrees of Separation, Stux Gallery, New York, NY.

2005

New Art, New York: Reflections on the Human Condition, Trierenberg Holding AG, Traun, Austria.

Kiss Me Long and Hard, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York, NY.

Go Figure! JET Art Works, Washington DC.

MFA Thesis Exhibition XXV, Hunter College Times Square Gallery, New York, NY.

Group Show, Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

2004

On-Site - A Site-Specific Group Show, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, Brooklyn, NY.

New American Talent- The 19th Exhibition, Art House Texas, Austin, TX, curated by Jerry Saltz. Surface Tension, Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York, NY.

A Sense of Place, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, CO.

2003

Tits and Art 3, GV-AS Gallery, Brooklyn, NY.

Dirty Old Toy Box, Fluxcore Art Space, Brooklyn, NY.

Love, Art, and War, Altman Gallery, New York, NY. 2002

Launch, Fluxcore Art Space, Brooklyn, NY.

Memetics, Meme Project, New York, NY.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Inflection, exhibition catalog, Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 2010

Beautiful/Decay book 2. 2010.

Indrisek, Scott, "Aaron Johnson." Whitewall Magazine, issue 13, pg 64-65, 2009.

Smith, Roberta, "Art In Review." The New York Times. 10/17/08.

Gladstone, Valerie. "Reviews: New York." ARTnews, pg 168, 11/08.

Pedersen, Anja Moller. "Bonnie og Clyde i Farver." Aarhus.Nu, 12/07.

Sumpter, Helen. "Irrational Exuberance." Time Out London, 11/5/07.

Chambers, Christopher Hart. "Grilling Up the Hellhound Rodeo." dArt International, v.10.#2, 2007.

Amir, Yaelle. Exhibition Review. Beautiful/Decay, Issue T. 8/07.

Baker, R.C. "Best in Show." The Village Voice. 6/5/07.

Dressler, Christiane. "New York Kitzely Heraus, Was Du In Dir Hast." Welt, 10/13/07.

Smith, Roberta. "Art in Review." The New York Times. 11/4/05.

Baker, R.C. "Voice Choices." The Village Voice. 10/26/05.

Exhibition Catalog: New Art. New York: Reflections on the Human Condition. Published by Trierenberg Holding AG, Traun, Austria. 2005.

Animal Magazine. Issue 6: Instincts. Fall 2005.

New American Paintings, 55th edition. The Open Studios Press. 2005.

Buck, Louisa. "The Other Fairs." The Art Newspaper, Art Basel/Miami Beach Daily. 12/2/04.

Polgar, Robi. "New American Talent - The 19th Exhibition." The Austin Chronicle. 8/6/04.

Van Ryzin, J. C. "Curator Weaves New Craftiness into 'New American Talent'." Austin 360, 7/1/04.

Cotter, Holland. "Politics that Makes Peace with the Beauty of Objects." New York Times, 6/18/04

Levin, Kim. "Voice Choices." The Village Voice. 6/15/04.

Exhibition catalog: New American Talent - The 19th Exhibition, Arthouse Texas. 04.

Pratt Publications: "Two Years After." Gateway, Volume 13, Number 12. 2/17/03.

AWARDS

2006

The Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation, The Space Program.

Chashama Studio Grant

William F. Graf Grant

COLLECTIONS

Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation

Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY



GALLERY POULSEN

Flæsketorvet 24 - København V
+45 40 15 55 88 / +45 33 33 93 96
info@gallerypoulsen.com / www.gallerypoulsen.com