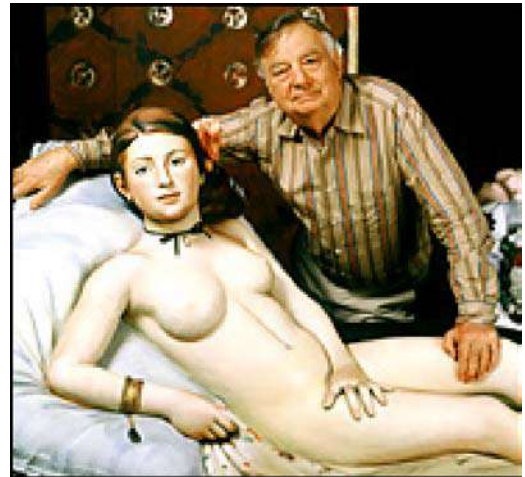


June 15, 2003

Come Step Inside My Monet (or Renoir, or Manet)

By JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN



HAMILTON, N.J.

J. SEWARD JOHNSON JR., an heir to the Johnson & Johnson pharmaceutical fortune, has been making life-size metal sculptures for four decades. His subjects, drawn from everyday life, include a man reading the newspaper, a policeman writing a ticket and teenagers playing Frisbee. A book about his art is aptly titled "Celebrating the Familiar." Though hundreds of his works can be found in public spaces across the country, the best known is the bronze businessman who for years sat on a bench in Liberty Plaza, sorting through the contents of his open briefcase, half a block from the World Trade Center. After Sept. 11, the photographer Susan Meiselas came across the sculpture unscathed amid the wreckage of the Twin Towers and captured the dust-covered survivor on film, an emblem of fortitude in the face of catastrophe. Mr. Johnson hopes to rededicate the piece as a memorial someday.

But now, at 73, Mr. Johnson is into a new phase of his career, creating three-dimensional sculptural versions of famous Impressionist paintings. A few are on view at Grounds for Sculpture, a 22-acre public park he created in Hamilton, N.J., about halfway between Princeton and Trenton. Strolling the gravel walkways on a sunny day in late May, I came across a lakeside veranda where, to my astonishment, Renoir's entire "Luncheon of the Boating Party" unfolded in a life-size painted-bronze tableau. An opening in a hedge revealed statues of two clothed men and a naked woman seated on the grass and, in the distance, another woman wading in a stream. "Déjeuner Déjà Vu," Mr. Johnson calls his three-dimensional version of Manet's iconoclastic masterpiece. On Sept. 14 these and a dozen more works from Mr. Johnson's Impressionist series will get star treatment at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington.

Because Mr. Johnson is an artist critics and museums have categorically rejected, the Corcoran show represents a major breakthrough. It's also a risky venture for the museum, but then, David C. Levy, the Corcoran's populist director, likes to tweak the high-art establishment every chance he gets. Mr. Levy blames "the art world's inexcusable, anti-vox populi snobbery and social-class 'reverse profiling' " for depriving Mr. Johnson's work of the attention it deserves. "We all know," he says, "that in the upper stratosphere of the art scene, being popular among the common folk is a big no-no." Moreover, he adds, the fabulously wealthy Mr. Johnson "fails to meet at least one standard established for entry-level artists, which is to be a former middle-class kid, now living at the poverty line on New York's Lower East Side, hanging rocks and road kill from the ceiling to express man's inhumanity to man." What's more, Mr. Levy says, people haven't seen the new work.

Well, they will. The Corcoran is devoting its entire second floor to the show, and in front of its Beaux-Arts landmark building, the museum is installing two 20-foot-tall dancers based on Renoir's "Dance at Bougival." The giant couple, created by Mr. Johnson's workshop, will preside

over the heavily trafficked corner of New York Avenue and 17th Street N.W., a block from the White House. Yet even Mr. Levy seems a bit uncertain of the show's aesthetic bona fides, admitting that when he first became aware of Mr. Johnson's work, he found it "simultaneously fascinating and vaguely repellent." He's still ambivalent about the early "street sculptures," which many critics deem facile in conception and pedestrian in execution. But Mr. Levy has been won over by the new body of Impressionist-inspired work, which he says "provides a compelling and accessible introduction to great masterpieces of art for young and old alike" and does so "with a balance of seriousness and playfulness which is the hallmark of a mature artist."

When I first saw Mr. Johnson's walk-in Impressionists in a brick warehouse in Hamilton, I was prepared to dismiss the entire enterprise as ridiculous. But my mind changed the minute I entered a shadowy bedchamber where a voluptuous young woman lay stretched out before me wearing only a black choker and a single slipper. She stared me in the eye, and I stared right back, a smile spreading across my face. "Olympia," I muttered, and began checking the accuracy of other details in Manet's famed composition — the maid standing behind the bed holding a bouquet of flowers, the cat arching its back next to the nude's feet. I had visited Manet's defiant temptress many times in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, not to mention countless rendezvous in art-history books, but never before had I felt physically so fully in her presence.

All right, I know the experience sounds risible, more the stuff of amusement parks than sculpture parks or museums. It might well be argued that the whole business is not appropriate for a serious institution dedicated to fine art. But there's an uncanny quality to seeing a familiar painting expanded into real space, and being able to walk through the picture plane is positively weird. It heightens the physicality of the motifs in the composition and thereby underlines the artifice and skill that went into transforming them into a painting. Also, I have to confess, wandering around in the three-dimensional paintings is really a lot of fun. And with no restrictions on photographing or touching the works, who can doubt the show is going to be a riot for grown-ups and an absolute paradise for children?

Mr. Johnson has no formal training in art history, and I wondered what inspired him to create sculptures based on famous paintings. An affable light-hearted man who speaks in halting sentences, he told me he went to a park in Japan where plywood figures were set up like Seurat's "Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte." He loved the effect and decided to give it a whirl, taking his models from Impressionists like Manet who shared his preoccupation with the portrayal of modern life.

What separates his work from Madame Tussaud's? Mr. Johnson says he doesn't just copy, but goes "beyond the frame" to fill in areas hidden in the original image. "It's sort of like a game," he says. "I put up everything that's seen in the painting, then I put in figures and details the painter didn't see. That gives me room for my own expression, and for some fun."

In his sculptural version of Renoir's "Boating Party," for example, the woman in the foreground plays footsie with the man seated next to her, an indiscretion that occurs just outside the frame of the original painting. In the background, Mr. Johnson inserted life-size portraits of himself and three sculptor-friends — Red Grooms, Andrew Pitynski and Bill Barrett. A top-hatted proprietor,

modeled on Phillip Bruno, the director of the Marlborough Gallery in Manhattan, approaches the table to shoo away the interlopers.

In his room-size tableau of Monet's "Garden at Sainte-Adresse," the original of which is in the Metropolitan Museum, Mr. Johnson adds a statue of Monet in the act of painting the scene. "It's sort of like theater: the more it hits you, the more powerful it is," he says. In this respect, the aforementioned bedroom of Manet's "Olympia" is a tour de force.

"Let's go and see what it feels like to be a customer," says Mr. Johnson, holding aside the beaded curtain. Stepping through the doorway, we enter a dimly lighted fantasy of an upscale courtesan's Second Empire boudoir, replete with gold-trimmed velvet curtains, Persian carpets, a crystal chandelier, potted plants, exotic furniture (acquired on e-Bay) and reproductions of nudes by Titian, Goya and Bouguereau — references to Manet's antecedents (the Bouguereau is an anachronism, painted 16 years after "Olympia"). None of these elements appear in the painting, but together they make Mr. Johnson's walk-in rendition an engaging coup de theatre.

He has a liking for bawdy, adults-only details. Take his version of Monet's "La Japonaise," another work from the Metropolitan. In his sculptural version, Mr. Johnson adds an embroidered Samurai on the back of the model's garment, leering right up her thigh. In his version of "Argenteuil," Monet's scene of a couple seated beside the Seine, Mr. Johnson places the man's hand squarely on his date's derriere.

"Sometimes the humor is a little more coarse than at other times," Mr. Johnson concedes. "But it's there to make you open your eyes. It emanates from the need to make contact. I love contact with other people, reaching out and giving a little push to let them know I'm there. Sometimes that requires an edge, and sometimes I go over!"

But Mr. Johnson is serious about his work. Say the word "kitsch" and he bristles the way some art dealers bristle at the mention of money. He considers his works entertaining but not fatuous, affirmative of the everyday but not shallow and vulgar. And when he talks about regular folks getting a kick out of his work, he gets philosophical about the profound need to communicate and stimulate. "If going to a museum is an academic experience, it's deadly," he says. "It must be made a joy of interaction somehow."

Mr. Johnson isn't the only contemporary artist to make sculptural versions of two-dimensional images, but he may be the first to cast them life-size and in metal. "The painter took the three-dimensional and made it two-dimensional," he says. "We're doing it backwards." But rest assured, it's not nearly as simple as it sounds. A team of craftsmen fabricates the works in the Johnson Atelier, a full-service foundry and stone-cutting workshop in Hamilton that Mr. Johnson established two decades ago and where artworks by many other artists, including Kiki Smith and Charles Ray, have been cast. The process involves modeling, casting and painting the statues, positioning them within stagelike settings and creating background dioramas using digital technology. Casting is a technical feat; the "Boating Party" features 19 full-scale figures.

So, with his first museum show on the horizon, what will Mr. Johnson do next? "I am so impressed with the 20-foot dancers, I want to do more work on a large scale," he says, beginning

perhaps with a colossal version of his early sculpture of two older women conversing on a bench. "Little old ladies are thought of as benign, but my idea is to make them 25 feet tall and threatening, then put them near the railroad tracks so people going by at 100 miles an hour will wonder, 'What was that I just saw?' " And the Impressionist series will continue, extending into Post-Impressionism. "Wherever there are two-dimensional icons that I've missed, I'm going to three-dimensionalize them," he promises.

Jason Edward Kaufman is chief United States correspondent for The Art Newspaper.

New York Times, June 15, 2003