

WASHBURN

BOMB

Free Spirits: JoAnne Carson Interviewed by David Shapiro

July 7, 2022



Sunny, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 50 in.

JoAnne Carson's body of work lives uncomfortably in the fault lines of painting and sculpture, which is just where she wants it. Asked to make a Sophie's choice, JoAnne will answer: hermaphrodite. In the early 1980s, I was her student. We became colleagues and friends over the next four decades. Her works in the 1985 Whitney Biennial featured objects attached to canvas. Stand in front, see a painting. Step to the side, a sculpture pops out. JoAnne has long since gone off the wall and come back again. Whether creating and disrupting illusions or planting a garden to paint it indoors, she sets up formal problems to solve organically and vice versa. Honest yet elusive, nothing is what it seems. Everything is right before your eyes: her Midas touch, broken rules, parricide, and homage. A genuinely nurturing artist in a sea of narcissists, her positivity is neither feigned nor Pollyanna. We spoke shortly before her [solo exhibition](#) at Washburn Gallery. — David Shapiro

David Shapiro You grew up with paintings that changed your life.

JoAnne Carson My mother was Mark Rothko's first wife. She owned several of his paintings from the period of their marriage, the early 1940s. Seeing them every day, I was intensely affected. Our house was full of my mother's work which was wildly diverse; she sought to master every "style," from Impressionism to Photorealism. Her paintings were hung chock-a-block throughout our home. But when I looked at the Rothko's in the family room, I crossed over into a profoundly different world—at once quiet, mysterious, disturbing, and calm. Growing up with them gave me a vision for how to have an imaginative life. It's one of the main reasons I am an artist today. Forty years later, I realized that one of my works, *Tree of Desire* (1993), closely resembled Rothko's *Crucifix* (1941–42). It gave me goose bumps to see Rothko's ghost. He's like my artistic father—I can't seem to kill him.

DS As a painter, did you set out to disrupt illusions or, at the very least, to acknowledge apparatuses? Or does that happen despite attempts to conceal them?

JC I am like a marathon runner who, just before the race, puts stones in my shoes. I can't resist making trouble for myself; it creates a dynamic arena that makes problem solving into subject matter. In my early work I made large assemblages that contained gutted TVs, chairs, plastic fruit, shutters, etc. I painted over these "disruptions" as if they weren't there. Everything dimensional is temporarily camouflaged, subsumed within the painted image. Disrupting illusion is in my blood.

WASHBURN GALLERY

Lindsay & Thomas Inc., 177 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 (212) 397-6780 Fax (212) 397-4853
jwashburn@earthlink.net www.washburngallery.com

WASHBURN

DS The 3-D paintings featured in the 1985 Biennial were almost goading you to let the apples roll off the table. Now you are making standing trees. When you first went off the wall, did you feel like you cut off the branch you were sitting on?

JC No, I felt free. But it took me years to figure out how to get the work off the wall. To make my first in-the-round sculpture, I took the wall with me by translating a photograph into three dimensions. Rocks in my shoes. Sculpture didn't make sense to me until I did that. Once I made the transition, I found my voice in sculpture without having to continue reinventing a flat work. Now, I take the skin off my sculptures to make straight-ahead paintings. Sculpturally, I have a good understanding of how to invent flora. The advantage of painting is that I can represent a larger imagined world.



JoAnne Carson, The Broken Pitcher, 1983, 78 x 96 x 23 in.

DS How did you navigate the art world of the last half century? Its naked sexism. Are you—were you—angry? Resigned? Hopeful?

JC My early years were spent in Chicago. I loved being a young artist there. Moving to NYC at thirty-two was, socially, disappointing. Artists were guarded, professional. They had “studio visits.” In Chicago, people just came over for dinner, hung out. We traded that in for a “practice.” This was 1985. You know the rest. The art world was becoming a big business. The beginning of the end.

Honestly, I am rather blind to how sexism has negatively affected my career. Early on, I was lucky—a Prix de Rome, two solo museum shows, a Whitney Biennial—all before turning thirty-five. During the next half of my career, a challenge has sometimes been the lack of acceptance for work that uses materials and approaches associated with domestic craft—in other words, things traditionally associated with being female. The prop-like quality of my sculpture was called “glittery, junky sculpture” by Hilton Kramer in *New York Observer* in 2004, and “difficult to take seriously as a work of art” by David Brickman in *Metroland* in 2005. I take myself both seriously and playfully, so screw those guys.

Women artists have been a huge influence and source of encouragement in my early career: Lee Bontecou, Elizabeth Murray, Judy Pfaff are all bedrock to my development.

DS I hear and see in your work Cubist conversations, but more so American echoes: Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe. And in the post-Philip Guston wake, a measure of Hanna-Barbera and Chuck Jones, maybe a tab of acid or two, playfulness and color.

JC An artist needs to navigate the past with an eye to making room for herself in the present. I think of this as an Oedipal battle in which you pay homage to past masters but insert yourself into the conversation as a disrupter, like upending the seriousness of Cubist paintings by making them into pop-up constructions, as in my work of the ‘80s. You’ve got to kill the father and marry the mother—an

WASHBURN GALLERY

Lindsay & Thomas Inc., 177 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 (212) 397-6780 Fax (212) 397-4853
jwashburn@earthlink.net www.washburngallery.com

WASHBURN

Oedipal rule. Once you kill the father, there's lots of room to have other relatives—ranging from American landscape artists to cartoonists. I love Hanna-Barbera and Chuck Jones because they took the language of mid-century modernism and made it into a playground for crazily elastic creatures that could be flattened one minute or have their eyes popping out the next and then instantly resume their “normal” selves. Wow, that's a powerful representation of form and a rollicking free spirit I aspire to.



*Installation view of JoAnne Carson, Bouquet and Yellow Rose, 2001.
Academy of Arts and Letters.*

DS You survived a brain trauma and surgery. How did that change your process, timeline, expectations, and your work?

JC I had brain surgery three years ago to remove a non-malignant tumor. The great thing about brain surgery is that it trumps everyone else's complaints; in competitive illness comparisons, brain surgery is at the top of the food chain. Other than that, it's a drag. The long recovery gave me a chance to renew my emotional relationship to my work which had been stuck in the “bad boyfriend” dilemma: always very exciting, but you could be dumped and left stranded wondering what to do next. I had a revelation about how to make my studio life less fraught, more like having a steady partner instead of a bad boyfriend. I realized I was too attached to the drama of problem solving, the not knowing. I could swap that out with resourcefulness. I could solve some of the problems I was having while preserving the problem. I think every artist has a problem they work with. They aren't trying to *solve* the problem but to illuminate it, make it bigger, more significant.

DS I know and see you and your work through a unique prism. You were my painting teacher as an undergrad in the '80s, and we have taught grad school together this century. The common thread I see is remarkable curiosity and generosity.

JC You and I have a unique relationship that has evolved. I treasure that. I just retired from teaching after thirty-seven years. Curiosity and generosity as a teacher comes out of my respect for being an artist. Teaching demands careful listening. I boil it down to: What do students say their work is doing versus what does the work want to do? I believe our artistic sensibilities are hardwired. Ask an artist to recall their first aesthetic memory and you will find a road map for what they are doing now. My first visual memory was of a Bob's Big Boy sculpture: a painted sculpture of an improbable creature. Sound familiar?

WASHBURN GALLERY

Lindsay & Thomas Inc., 177 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 (212) 397-6780 Fax (212) 397-4853
jwashburn@earthlink.net www.washburngallery.com

WASHBURN



Night Blossoms, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 58 in.

DS I love the idea that you planted a garden to go inside the house and look at it through your window; in other words, a frame.

JC When my husband, Jim Butler, and I first saw the house, the main attraction for him—or any normal person—was the magnificent front view of the Green Mountains. For me, it was the view out the back, from the kitchen window; all you could see was dirt, a rectangle of brown. A blank canvas! For the next two summers, I was possessed by landscaping—just the area seen from the window—in an effort to conjure up a three-dimensional, living painting. I went at gardening full tilt. It began to feel as if the plants were the puppet master and I was a zombie with a shovel under their direction. My garden has topiaries, fruit trees, and perennials. So now do the works in my studio.

DS I see the tree paintings as a scaffold upon which you hang ideas and illusions about love, loss, history, your works. Branches hold dreams, a range of feeling, memories, hope, ghosts, worlds.

JC The trees of my paintings represent a new nature in which hybrid plant-animal characters radiate a grow-or-die ethos. I think of these invented worlds as portals into a universe of alternative biology and psychological spectacle. They reflect the instability of life, its changeability in a widening world, and serve as a testament to the belief that, despite the decline of our environment, life continues, often with exuberance.

DS Sophie's choice: garden or art?

JC Unless I can hire a crew of gardeners, like Claude Monet, I want to sell the house so I can move away from the garden! But until that happens, I'll look at the garden—through my window—as an inspiration for my next work.

[JoAnne Carson: Recent Paintings](#) is on view at Washburn in New York City until July 29.

WASHBURN GALLERY

Lindsay & Thomas Inc., 177 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 (212) 397-6780 Fax (212) 397-4853
jwashburn@earthlink.net www.washburngallery.com