

# frieze

## Sarah Anne Johnson Takes Us on a 'Trip' to Utopian Woodlands

At Yossi Milo gallery, New York, the artist's manipulated photographs of Manitoba forests cut through the optimism of the hippie dream

BY JOSEPH R. WOLIN IN **REVIEWS** | 23 DEC 20



Sarah Anne Johnson, *NTNC3*, 2020, pigment print with acrylic paint, 100.5 × 151 cm. Courtesy: © Sarah Anne Johnson and Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

Born and raised in the geographically isolated Canadian city of Winnipeg, Sarah Anne Johnson comes honestly by her love of the natural world and the communitarian alternative lifestyles it inspires. Her 2020 series of photos, titled 'Woodland', featured in her latest outing at Yossi Milo Gallery, pictures Manitoba forests. Most of the images portray dense stands of scrubby trees, their ordinariness countered by bright colours filling interstices between the twigs and branches. The effect conjures stained glass or, at times, fluttering Tibetan prayer flags. Created with a range of means – from Photoshop to applied oil and acrylic paint, photo-retouching ink, metallic leaf and collaged holographic foil – the artist's manipulations appear various and inventive as they evoke the kitsch of children's craft projects.

Hung around the gallery's back room, a dozen large photographs trace the four seasons in the forest: from blossoming trees to snow-covered boughs. The leaves turning golden brown in one autumnal scene (*EBJF*, all works 2020) seem to belong to poison ivy. The artist's interventions, transparent or clunky as they may be, transform the woods into magical glades, each of slightly differing character.

Johnson's conception of the North American landscape imbued with quasi-spiritual potential has a long history, from the Hudson River School of the mid-19th-century to Canada's Theosophist-inspired Group of Seven in the 1920s, who, like their New York predecessors, became standard-bearers of national identity. Fellow travellers of the Group of Seven included women who chose solitary lives close to nature to elaborate their visionary practices – Emily Carr in the forests of British Columbia, for instance, or Agnes Pelton in the California desert. Johnson descends from mavericks like these.

In *NTNC3*, two naked women are canoeing on a lake, their boat painted like a fighter plane with a snarling fanged mouth. A Rorschach test of candy-coloured blobs overlays the image creating a doubling effect, a misregistration that reads as a perceptual jitter. The work feels like an excerpt from a movie combining radical ecofeminism, hallucinogenics and survivalism. Johnson envisions a hippie Eden, animated by protective spirits or mind-altering substances. But utopias, like acid trips, often turn bad. The world quietly intrudes upon Johnson's idyll as an undercurrent of ambivalence.

Sarah Anne Johnson's 'Woodland' at Yossi Milo Gallery, New York, is on view through 9 January 2021.



Sarah Anne Johnson, *EBJF*, 2020, pigment print with oil paint and gold leaf, 155 × 103 cm. Courtesy: © Sarah Anne Johnson and Yossi Milo Gallery, New York