

Interview with Artist JoAnne Carson

“My desire is to upend the gendered notion of a feminized Nature...”



JOANNE CARSON WITH *DAPHNE'S VICTORY* (2018)

JoAnne Carson (joannecarson.com) is a renowned artist who has achieved impressive professional stature for having technical prowess in drawing, painting and sculpture. Her extraordinary artwork is found in numerous public collections including the Brooklyn Museum of Art, The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the Joslyn Art Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Her many accolades and awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, and a Purchase Prize from The American Academy

of Arts and Letters. She has had solo exhibitions at The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and many galleries in New York City. The artist received her MFA degree from the University of Chicago and attended the University of Illinois as an undergraduate student.

Born in New York City, NY, she currently divides her time between Brooklyn, New York and Shoreham, Vermont. I am delighted and honored that JoAnne took time out of her busy schedule, creating art and teaching, to answer a few questions, in concurrence with our ["HerStory" 2019](#) online exhibition of art by women.

"My work is hot and malleable – like a lava lamp. It celebrates the wild female spirit of a burgeoning life force – outsized, opulent, decorative, humorous and erotic."



WISHFUL THINKING, 2019, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 39" X 48"

RP: JoAnne, you have achieved so many major accomplishments and accolades for your amazing artwork that most artists can only dream of having, such as having your art in museum collections, exhibiting at the Whitney Biennial, among many other museums and important galleries, and you've received many other distinctions. You've also had a steady stream of publicity including being featured in *The New York Times*, *Art Forum*, and *Art in America*, to name a few.

Was there a single event in your art career that marked a major turning point for you and how did you react to it?

JC: A lot of my success happened at the very beginning of my career when I was still in my 20's. But that kind of high profile rarely lasts and after a decade my career proceeded in a steadier but less dramatic manner. So getting a Guggenheim award in 2016 felt like a validation of my 40-year career and serves as a bookend to my early success. It gave me great confidence to continue with ambitious projects.

RP: That is quite an achievement. Please describe your current artwork and the inspiration behind it.



NONETHELESS, 2019, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 39" X 48"

JC: My desire is to upend the gendered notion of a feminized Nature that functions as a nurturing comfort. Instead I aim to make images that are unsettling and cautionary, aspiring to restate the world as a dynamic universe of alternative biology and psychological spectacle. My work is hot and malleable – like a lava lamp. It celebrates the wild female spirit of a burgeoning life force – outsized, opulent, decorative, humorous and erotic.

RP: When and where is your next exhibition?

JC: In May of 2020 I will be having a solo exhibition at University of Maine Museum of Art in Orono, for which there will be a catalogue.

RP: That's a wonderful museum. For those who aren't aware, this museum presents diverse contemporary exhibitions and holds a permanent collection focusing on works of art since 1945. JoAnne, in what galleries can we find your artwork?

JC: My work can be seen at BigTown Gallery in Rochester, Vermont. My gallery in New York City closed last year and so I currently do not have representation in the City.



VIEW OF JOANNE CARSON'S GARDEN IN VERMONT

RP: Your garden looks absolutely gorgeous. I can definitely see a robust synergy between it and your art. How does your passion for gardening impact your art?

JC: One of the most dramatic developments in my recent creative practice has been the creation of a large, terraced, sculptural garden in rural Vermont with evergreen topiaries and stone terraces. Making the garden has been very hands on and quite similar to my experience making sculpture. The site now functions as a living, dimensional, landscape painting and I reference it frequently in both my paintings and sculpture. It feels like a living vision of my work and that has been a great joy for me.

RP: Tell us how important drawing is to you and the preparation for your paintings.

JC: Drawing is my most important tool to visualize the world that I am itching to see. It provides a complete platform on which to build my paintings and it is a wonderfully fast and energetic way to envision the drama that I seek in a painting. It's the starting gate.

“I think that is THE role that artists play and always have: to bear witness to their time and the moment within which they live.”



HOLE JUMPER, 2015, CHARCOAL AND PASTEL ON PAPER, 25" X 19"

RP: Do you think artists today have a role to play in shaping society and bringing awareness?

JC: Yes, I think that is THE role that artists play and always have: to bear witness to their time and the moment within which they live. Some artists are political activists; some are studio artists who observe the smaller moments of the world. All are documenting what it is like to be living at this moment and people in future generations will look back at the art of this time and understand something that otherwise would have gone unrecorded.

RP: What is the biggest change you've observed in the art world over the past two decades?

JC: Definitely it is the change that social media has brought to the art world. This is mainly a positive effect and gives individual artists greater access to global audiences. It makes the art world more lateral and less hierarchical. Artists can be in touch with each other directly and that is a great pleasure. The down side of this is the danger that things become homogenous and start to mirror screen technology: smooth flawless painting surfaces is one example that I have seen emerge in recent years.



ART INSTALLATION BY JOANNE CARSON AT THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS EXHIBITION, 2002. CARSON WON A PURCHASE PRIZE FROM THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS

RP: Please share your comments about the Manhattan Arts International [“HerStory” exhibition](#).

JC: This show is such an admirable project, I want to offer my congratulations to you and your team on putting it together! Women in the art world are still very underrepresented and this show addresses that inequality. Much of the work in the exhibition is oriented around feminist issues that pose the question of women’s role in society. In addition, there is an interesting range of emotional spheres that emerge from women’s friendships and children, to body image representations coupled with depictions of isolation and anxiety. I found the show to be refreshingly varied.

RP: Thank you for your positive comments about the exhibition. What is the best comment you have ever received about your art – either verbal or written and by whom?

JC: A friend of mine has a son who at the age of ten said something very observant and startling. He was helping me to think of a title for an artwork that was a companion piece to a sculpture called “Puppet’s Revenge”. His comment was: every puppet has a master. That gave me insight into seeing my work as an emboldened “master” – as a creature rather than a thing. I named the new work “Daphne’s Victory”.

“Artists are a special sort of clan; social media puts you in touch with other members of your team – a sort of collaborative investment of time and interests.”



DAPHNE'S VICTORY, 2018, THERMO PLASTIC, APOXIE SCULPT, METAL LEAF, 110" X 96"

RP: I like to ask artists this fantasy question: What famous artist from art history would you like to spend a day with and what would you do together?

JC: That artist would be Mark Rothko and for very personal reasons. My mother was his first wife, and I want to ask him what she was like as a beautiful, young woman. She passed away when I was 26 and there is so much I don't know about her. I admire many artists who I can imagine spending time with – but I can find out about them from reading their life stories. But visiting with Mark Rothko would yield something different than that, and something very powerful. Alas, it is but a fantasy.

RP: What is your major art career goal in 2020?

JC: I want to make artwork that is physically immersive using both sculpture and painting — perhaps an interactive diorama where the scene goes from winter to summer. It is an ambition that is a mountain to scale but it has been on my mind for years. I feel this is the moment to start investing time, resources, and research into making that dream come true.



STUDIO INSTALLATION, SCULPTURES, 2010

RP: Are you an active participant in social media? Why or why not? And, if so, where can we follow you?

JC: Yes I am on Instagram and LinkedIn. I don't really use FaceBook anymore because of their privacy policies that I find to be invasive. I like social media very much and am amazed at how many new artists I can view and connect with. Artists are a special sort of clan; social media puts you in touch with other members of your team – a sort of collaborative investment of time and interests.

Visit JoAnne Carson's website joannecarson.com
Follow her on Instagram @joanne_carson