

JoAnne Carson's Garden of Earthly Delights



JoAnne Carson, *Wishful Thinking*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas.

Guggenheim Award-winning artist JoAnne Carson's fantastical imaginings teeter somewhere between the perils of temptation envisioned in the otherworldly painted gardens of Hieronymus Bosch and the lush but benign beauty of Monet's Giverny.

Recognition of Carson's talents producing genre-bending works of painting, sculpture, and assemblage has grown steadily since she emerged from the University of Chicago with an MFA in 1979. Her wall reliefs from the 1980s bearing titles like *Heaven* (1981, Collection of the Smart Museum of Art Chicago) and *Open Window* (1981, Collection of the Koehnline Museum of Art, Des Plaines, IL) are

paintings rooted in cubism exploding from their moorings, their subjects splintered and whirling in the vortex of a *Wizard of Oz*-like tornado. In 1985 her work was included in the Whitney Biennial. It is rare that an artist so shortly out of art school has their work scooped up by museums. These early portends of success included grants from The National Endowment for the Arts, a Prix de Rome in painting, a Yaddo residency, along with other accolades too numerous to mention.



JoAnne Carson, *Blue*, 2006. Fiberglass, aqua resin, acrylic paint

Born in New York City, the daughter of sculptor/jeweler Edith Sachar who also happened to be the first wife of painter Mark Rothko, Carson now divides her time between her home in Brooklyn, New York, and Shoreham, Vermont. Never having gardened before moving with her husband Jim Butler to this rural enclave in 2011, her decision to transform the sloping hill viewed from her kitchen window into a garden was a challenge she considered quite separate from making art. The influence of the garden triggered an internal dialogue with Carson about

nature's resistance to human intervention and the artifice that represents nature on a canvas. "As source material, photos of a flower or tree are too normative. I need a physical thing to look at." Carson has come to accept that deciding where to plant a cluster of iris is indeed a product of the same energy and vision expended in the studio. The garden, with its signature topiaries, has inserted itself in her most recent Disneyesque paintings of landscapes in a Mad Max world.



JoAnne Carson, *Breezy*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas

Tree of Desire, a 1993 fiberglass, oil paint, and object-loaded relief, signals a major shift from a muscular testosterone-infused vision of disaster to one of feminine seduction and power. This pivotal work is so baroque, so potent with desire, fecundity, stuffed with religious and art historical symbolism, that it appears to be alive. Like Kali, the Hindu Goddess of Time, Creation, Destruction and Power, Carson's multi-limbed woman demands our attention. It is hard to look away. At this point, Carson embraces the divine and destructive possibilities inherent in nature as the inspirational heart of her creative practice. A Kali-like figure appears again in *Wood Nymph*, a 1999 relief in the form of a trompe l'oeil wood grain cross-section of a California Redwood. Here, Carson has Kali twirling pies adding a touch of wry humor that is occasionally bubbling just beneath the surface.

The Victorian cult of death was all about preserving evidence of life in cabinets of curiosities filled with pressed flowers, bones, feathers and locks of hair. In Carson's thermoplastic, fiberglass and aqua resin *Bouquet* (2001), icy blue roses on steroids jockey for space with a deeper turquoise-hued feather and a monster-

sized flower of undetermined genetic origin. Flamboyant, decorative, seductive and scary like a siren song, *Bouquet* lures us as those dangerous creatures from Greek mythology lured sailors to their demise.



JoAnne Carson, *Sampler*, 2007, Fabric, yarn, aqua resin, copper tubing.

January 2020 finds Carson at mid-career juggling *Rise Up and Shine!*, a 25-year retrospective of her work at the Opalka Gallery at the Sage College of Albany, along with *Wood Nymphs*, a solo exhibition at the University of Maine Museum of Art later in May. In preparing for the upcoming shows Carson muses, “You make art for forty years, at first, the narratives are different but situated within the pantheon of art history, then you find your own language.” Developing a unique visual language is every artist’s goal. Carson has been speaking boldly in her own distinctive voice for decades.



JoAnne Carson, *Nonetheless*, 2019.



JoAnne Carson, *Log Jam*, 2019. Painting and accompanying diorama.



As part of her practice, Carson makes dioramas, little 3D landscapes using props as studies for the paintings. She told me she would just shove them in a closet when the painting was done. "I didn't think of the dioramas or the garden as art, but then I came around." Several are in her retrospective. Lighting and manipulating these mini stage sets and having them included in the exhibition has inspired Carson to consider their possibilities on a grander scale. Perhaps as life-sized environments, transforming her wildly exuberant paintings and sculpture into an installation, incorporating sound and movement, allowing viewers to physically enter the world that up until now only Carson has inhabited.