

CONVERSATION WITH JOANNE CARSON

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Interview by Suzanne Unrein

JoAnne Carson was interviewed by Suzanne Unrein June 20, 2019

JoAnne Carson was born in New York City and currently splits her time between Brooklyn, New York and Shoreham, Vermont. She received her MFA degree from the University of Chicago and attended the University of Illinois for undergraduate school.

Her work can be found in various public collections including the Brooklyn Museum of Art, The Fort Worth Art Museum, Joslyn Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Frederick Weisman Art Foundation in Los Angeles.

She has received many awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, an Award in the Visual Arts, a Purchase Prize from The American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Louise Bourgeois Residency from Yaddo, and an individual artist grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Her sculptures, paintings and drawings have been shown in numerous solo and two-person exhibitions including The Fort Worth Art Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and commercial galleries in New York City most recently Black and White Gallery.

Notable group exhibitions in public institutions include the American Academy of Arts and Letters Ceremonial Exhibition, The Whitney Biennial Exhibition, The New Orleans Museum Frederick Weisman Collection, the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo, Institute of Contemporary Art in

Philadelphia, The Sheldon Art Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska and the Fleming Museum in Burlington, Vermont.

Reviews of her work have appeared in many publications including The New York Times, Art Forum, Art News, Arts Magazine, Art on Paper, Art in America, The New York Observer, Art and Antiques, The Nation, The Christian Science Monitor, and Galerie Magazine.



I was reading a statement you wrote about your work, "At once whimsical and monstrous, my work is a salutation to the resourcefulness of living beings and my own delight in playing the role of artist/god in creating new things at which to marvel. My subject is the instability of life, its changeability in a widening world, the purpose being to inspire a fresh but not always entirely comforting sense of possibility and wonderment." I'm taken by your optimism.

I am an optimist. I think even to be an artist, is somewhat optimistic. You're trying to make something you can't see that hasn't been made before, out of sheer energy and excitement about making something. I have always loved dueling forces. In my earlier work I had Cezanne and Cubist Masters being painted over wooden fences and broken furniture. One voice is saying "This is impossible." And then another is saying, "Oh yeah, well watch this. I'm going to paint a Braque on top of an old TV set." So there's a battle between something that seems like you can't go forward and then something else that says, "Yes you can." My latest painting is called "Nonetheless." It comes from this article I read about a writer who was talking about his father who was a very elderly man and had dementia. He was dying. He went to bed one night and the next morning he said to his wife "I saw Uncle Joe last night." And she said, "Uncle Joe has been dead for thirty years." And he said, "Nonetheless..." It sums it up. Everything is impossible and wrong and the world is going to end, but nonetheless, something is going to continue.

You should have a show titled "Nonetheless."

Wouldn't that be great?!

Tell me about this new painting, "Nonetheless."

Ok, I'm going to tell you about my new post-bad-boyfriend relationship with my work because it has allowed me to unveil layer after layer of narrative meaning in a way that none of my work has been able to get to until this point. I've always been trying to solve formal issues but now I'm working with several sources – three-dimensional models, paintings, and drawings, manipulated and contained using Photoshop. With

"Nonetheless," I started with a Japanese print of figures in a boat and an octopus. I probably have fifty versions of it as it was too recognizable. Step by step the octopus became a log floating in the water. The figures in the boat were flower creatures taken from an old drawing of mine. The boat became more specific, more Italian. Then I put this oasis in the background. I wasn't just trying to figure it out spatially but also those figures in the boat are like guardians. I don't think I ever thought that before. That this is like that. I might think this figure is more aggressive or trying to get under the shadow of this one. But I thought more about a peaceful place to be which is what that little oasis in the middle of the painting is. And then there is the catastrophe of the fire which is the part that activates "Nonetheless." This is an exciting place for me to be. Back in September I had brain surgery to remove a non-malignant tumor and that was followed by months of recovery. So I've only made two paintings since then.



JoAnne Carson, "Nonetheless"

Would you like to talk about that?

For the first three or four months that I was recuperating I wasn't able to make paintings but only small drawings. I didn't have the energy for the paintings. But I had a revelation that had to do with being resourceful and understanding I could solve some of the problems I was having while preserving the problem. I think every artist has a problem that they are working with. They aren't trying to solve the problem but illuminate it. You try to make it bigger. So things that are distracting you from that are an admirable goal to get rid of.

What is your problem?

I think mine has to do with, and this is going to sound very grand, the energy of life forces. And not unlike your work, the idea of *vanitas*. Something that is beautiful and abundant and very alive. But it also reminds you there's a little skull or a mouse lurking underneath.

A little death around.

Yes, and that balance is the most vivid portrayal of what it feels like to be a person and to be able to make something that has energy and beauty but also isn't gratuitous. That has the energies of how we are afraid, but "nonetheless." Sometimes people think my work is very joyful but I think of it as very dark.

I think it's both. Your work always seems both to me. You bring out the strength and wildness of nature. They aren't pretty little flowers in a vase.

There is that notion of wildness. We think of it as being untouched by human beings. That's not what wildness is anymore. Wildness is what takes over after things have been deforested. It isn't wild anymore but also not completely contained by human beings. It's the dandelion in the crack in the sidewalk. Like Alan Weisman's book, "The World Without Us." How long would it take, if we weren't here, for things we made to break down? I think that every era has lived with that thought that we are on the brink of destruction.

I bet you are right. I've thought that too.

One of my favorite quotes is from my friend who says, "How do you get an English lawn? You get a piece of grass and you mow it for three hundred years." So even the idea of the picturesque is our notion of what nature should look like. In Stefano Mancuso's "The Revolutionary Genius of Plants", he talks about how we are prejudiced against the idea that plants have intelligence. We think that they live and then they die. But he talks about a plant that lives among other plants and how its leaf imitates the leaf of a different plant species that it comes into contact with. That its epidural layer has these convex or concave cells and it behaves like an insect's eye and possibly the leaf can see, not the way we think of it, but enough to figure out what's around it. I think about that and how porous this moment in time is. What's natural, what's synthetic, what's organic, what's a person, what's A.I. All these things are overlapping and things are breaking down in significant ways. We are having to reestablish what we believe we are and it's an opportunity as



JoAnne Carson, "Orange Sun"

an artist to project this onto all sorts of creatures. I look at Disney-era artists because they were looking at Picasso, Braque and Dufy. They were looking at graphic art from Japan, Asia. You start to see this thread, the simplification of forms. In minimizing a form, you have to make decisions about the main features.

Are you thinking about this in terms of your plants and their personalities?

I am. I do a ton of drawings.



I wanted to ask you about that in terms of “Nonetheless.” Are you doing drawings and revising directly on the canvas or are you making the drawings ahead of time before you begin the canvas?

It goes back and forth. I do a million drawings. Some are schematic, some more finished. Sometimes I’ll make objects and I’ll draw pictures of them.

JoAnne Carson, “Vortex Spin”

So most of these drawings are from your head, you aren’t looking at anything.

Correct. And I’ll draw these whole worlds in the drawings but then when I start to paint I realize I don’t have enough information to paint it. I think should I look at a tree? Another painting? What I’m really after is trying to make a world, and this is an event in the world with these monsters. I’ve always made monsters. When I was an undergraduate in the mid-70s, I made this great big puppet for a video class and it did this herky-jerky dance. It was part comic and part monstrous. And the people in the class didn’t like it because it wasn’t cool. And I’ve been doing this same thing for forty years. So I learned not to listen to people who weren’t empathetic to what I was trying to do.

That’s a great lesson to learn.

It is. Sometimes what people think is cool will overlap with what you are doing and with the time you are in. But then also that time will change. I think the key is to recognize what you are drawn to and to continue to value that.

From way back then, were you able to stick with your vision or did you ever get out of step?

I think I have had periods where I've gotten lost. Maybe I was trying to make the work more refined. Because my work isn't refined. Also, when I started out painting I was making paintings using images by artists of the past – Cezanne, the Old Masters – and it was an Oedipal struggle with the past. I wanted to make room for myself. The figures from those paintings didn't belong to me, I borrowed them. What took me so long to make the paintings I wanted to, was I had to invent a whole world in which I invented these characters. And they came from a many different places. From pop culture, to paintings, to sculptures I had made. I just now feel that I own them for the first time because of this new development in my work that is more visually informed by sources.

You make sculptures, drawings, paintings and gardens. How has that evolved?

Early on I was making very three-dimensional paintings until I finally took them off the wall to make three-dimensional objects. I'm still making sculpture as well. I'm doing both. My mother was a sculptor and then a jeweler and she made large flowers. This was an early model for me. When I first set out to make stand-alone sculptures I had to try to figure out how to make them.

So how did you do it?

Oh, every way that was wrong.

How did you start?

I wanted to make things that didn't have a lot of process. I didn't want to weld or pour bronze. No offense to sculptors, but most sculptors know how to make things one or two ways. If you want to know how to make

something, it's great to look at prop builders because they don't have any loyalty to a single material or technique.

Did you seek them out?

Yes, a friend of mine who is a costumer would say, "Do you know this stuff called Thermoplastic? Do you know this or that? She introduced me to prop builders in Red Hook and I saw how they they think about making things, using a wide variety of materials and processes. This was before the Internet so it wasn't easy to find out about new materials unless someone showed you. I would think "How do I go about making a great big flower?" One of my early works, Yellow Flower, is made out of metal and plaster bandaging. It's really heavy and fragile, a terrible combination. It's the first thing I made.

How do you sculpt it?

The sculptures are made in different ways. Sometimes I will make a mold. Like the piece Argyle, that has scales and each scale has to fit with another scale, like four hundred of them. I would have to make a mold of it.



JoAnne Carson, "Chlorophyllia 2"

That seems really time-consuming.

Yes, I would never do that now. First you have to make it with clay. Then I made a rubber mold. Then I filled it with aqua resin. Then I flocked them. The thing is it was so wrong. Now I can make things a lot of different ways. Now I have a versatility. That's where my optimism comes in. One thing I don't know how to do is weld. You should know how to make it stand up.

So how do you?

I pay somebody. I pay them to make the base. The biggest piece I've done, Bouquet The Brooklyn Museum owns. It's aqua resin and fiberglass and then the leaves are Thermoplastic.

Do you paint it at the end?

It is actually the color of the material. After I did a lot of these sculptures and saw them installed together they started to suggest this fictional world, like the worlds that exist in paintings.

So that's how you found your way back to painting?

Yes, when I had bunch of these sculpture figures grouped in my studio. With sculpture you have to negotiate it physically. It's factual. It asserts itself. When I started to see that they had relationships among themselves, I wanted to put them in a world. I didn't know if it was flat, a painting of a world. I'm interested now in making a hybrid world that is dimensional and flat. It's under consideration. For three years I struggled to make any kind of painting that made sense. I did collages, a million things. It was the drawings that lead me out of it. They had a spirit, a life. That's what the paintings borrowed from the drawings. I've been making art for forty years and now I have this actual live garden too.

I was going to ask about that. How does the garden fit in relation to these other things you are creating?

Now everything is overlapping. I'm using elements from the garden and stylizing and plunking them in the painting. Having the garden is very

much like my early work. When I'm in the kitchen looking out at the garden through the rectangular window, it's like a painting. I would buy a tree. I'd plant it. And then I would go back into the kitchen and look at it through the window. We have twelve acres but I would only work in the area that I could see through the window.

That is fascinating.

People would come over and wonder why I wasn't working in other areas. It was just like making a painting. I would have the topiaries and I would see the spaces between.



JoAnne Carson, Garden

Does it work all the way around or just from the kitchen window?

Good question but I think it works all the way around. It's not that I thought I wanted to be a gardener but I felt impelled. Give me a

shovel. This first year I made an elaborate blueprint of the garden and now, seven years later, I realize I have moved every plant since that beginning. I planted and then took things out.

So it's just like making a painting!

Yes, just like making a painting. For a long time, I thought my gardening wasn't making art but now I realize how much it was like making a painting. And now the trees make it into the paintings. The garden has given me an understanding of how you can move through space and how to think about it.

Is your process, waking up and deciding what you want to do today – gardening or painting or sculpture or drawing?

The first two years I was gardening I was possessed. I would get up at 4:30am and look over volumes of books and spreadsheets, memorizing the plants' Latin names. My journals would be "I worked 16 hours in the garden today." Over and over. I would do nothing but work in the garden. That's all I did. All I wanted to do.

Does your intimacy with plants make you want to be more true to their details when re-creating them?

No, I've never looked at a plant and thought "That's so beautiful, I want to make a sculpture of that." I sort of want it to look like that but I also want it to say, "Fuck you!" To fight back. The last sculpture – I made three in the last year – was a lot of work for me. I wanted to make it feel like a plant but to be intensely decorative. Decoration is a riff on something from the natural world. I think about creating something that looks like it's from nature but I don't hide the seams. So it feels like a kit. When I was trying to make paintings it felt like I didn't know what I was doing.

When was this?

In 2010. I made so many bad paintings. When I would do a lecture, I would show all the paintings that I would try to make that I thought were

really bad, and later realize they weren't bad at all. They were just not what I was trying to make.

What every artist struggles with.

Right. Where you realize yes, I could have done that instead. But instead, you feel lost.

Yes, I feel lost every time I start a painting and I wonder why everyone doesn't feel that way.

Well I wonder if everyone does feel that way. I think maybe artists do. But yes, that was what I was trying to get through. I was thinking "What can I rely on?"

And how did you go about figuring that out?

Well I would make a list. I would say "I can rely on the drawings, but the drawings have limitations." "Maybe I can get this from the sculptures." This takes years. My biggest mistake, which I think is true for a lot of artists, is that I thought one thing was going to solve the problem. So you need to be resourceful. You need to have a more well-rounded vocabulary. Rather than say, I don't like to use photographs because photographs do this. Well realize that photographs don't do anything. You can look at it and simplify it and have it more in accordance with a drawing. I think it has to do with developing a methodology in working with an image. And listening to moments of inspiration. I think I'm a little unusual in that I do so many different things. Now I can use my garden in my paintings. Things that are lurking around and now I see them adding to each other. It's like what Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The years show us what the days never know." When you are in the days and you are trying to do this and that and then you track back 20 years and you can see the trajectory, your way of thinking. And that's the thing ultimately that gives us authenticity instead of thinking you are inventing from scratch every day. It's simply not true.

What did you make as a kid?

I remember at six or maybe earlier, falling in love with the sculptures of Bob's Big Boy and the Planter's Peanut Man. They were both painted sculpture. When I was a kid, I was just the same. I would do things that were really ambitious, really elaborate, that I had no skill for. I made a Pueblo village that looked fantastic but when I picked it up it crumbled because I didn't know how to make it properly. What about you?

I made this world out of clay with seals and sea lions. And now today, of course, I'm painting animals. You are talking dirt and earth and Bob's Big Boy.

Yes, he was monstrous. I don't remember thinking when I was growing up that I was influenced by those things but clearly I was. It's interesting to think about what one's aesthetic is. I don't think about it so much as what I was influenced by, as much as an innate aesthetic. That when I saw it, I recognized it rather than it acting on me as an animated force. I've asked a lot of artists what their first aesthetic experience was and you really see that connection to their mature work. For me it was the monster thing (if you accept that the Planter's Peanut Man was a monster). Funny and horrifying appeal to me. Even when I try and make something joyful I find that something horrifying seeps in.

Me too. I recently found an illustrated story that I made when I was young. I was frolicking in the forest with some deer when out of nowhere helicopters flew over and killed all of them. Every story I wrote had that beauty and then destruction.

I think they are signals you are receiving. If you talk to an art historian they will ask you why are you using this color or this subject matter and often I think, sometimes you are choosing but a lot of it you aren't choosing. It's what I call sensibility, which is so deeply imbedded that you are regurgitating whether you are aware of it or not. And that's why I think you benefit from having a big sweeping amount of time to look back. It gives you a certain amount of courage when you realize you've been doing this a long time. It helps to squash the self-doubt. It's the well you keep going back to and it's full of disguises.

After seeing Bob's Big Boy and the Peanut Man did you try and create anything similar?

I was doing a lot of what I'm doing now. I would try and make something I didn't know how to make. I would try and make a doll's dress and I couldn't figure out the seams and couldn't get the dress on. I would make a boat with my sister and we would put it in the water and it would sink. Another thing I would do with my sister is we would create plays. One time we did the Three Little Pigs and I made this tree that was six or seven feet tall.

It's interesting you made a lot of sculpture back then. I wonder if making three-dimensional objects was an innate interest for you.

I think so. It's in my genetic pool. My mother was an artist and my father was an engineer and I've always liked to puzzle things out. I learned that from him. I get pleasure out of the do-it-yourself.

So what are you working on currently?

Now it's revolving around exhibitions. I have two shows coming up. One of them is at the University of Maine's Museum of Art in Orono. I'd like to have a combination of sculpture and paintings. It's going to depend on the place and how they work together.

Do you show drawings too?

Yes, I do. I show a lot of drawings and smaller paintings too. I am now really occupied with this multi-layered way of working. I'm referencing photographs of my garden, photographs of the sculptures, and unfinished paintings. Now it all seems like they all come from the same world. I'm a trier. I try this and think "That didn't work." And then I'll try this other thing and "That didn't work." But really what's working is that things start to overlap. Trying is a resource. That's what I think is great about being an artist. Either you have a plan and you work from that or you work in a more improvisational way. For me, I'm a collagist and improviser. I'm collaging and those changes and developments are telling a story.

Is that how you see life?

I think so. Trying things and then recently I've sped it up with Photoshop. Instead of thinking what do I do now, I will just drop different things into Photoshop. I'm collaging in Photoshop before painting it and not liking it. It's a quicker way of making work. It really suits me. And this all happened after my brain surgery.

Interesting. In what ways did the brain surgery change you. Was it all about speeding up time?

Partially that. It was also about not wanting to have the same relationship with my painting. Not wanting to feel like it's my bad boyfriend. I want a more supportive partner. I want a wife! As artists, we get attached to things. There's drama in being lost. It's pretty compelling. There's drama in the suffering of "I don't know what I'm doing." I decided I did not want to do that anymore. It was a conscious decision and quite dramatic. I evaluated without prejudice what resources I had at my disposal. I would think I'm not a technical person so I can't do Photoshop. Or I'm a sculptor I'm not a painter. All these prejudices of keeping things separate that I wasn't aware of. I was thinking of finding a single way of doing something instead of using the richness of all my resources of everything I've done.

Interesting that this happened after the brain surgery.

I have what I call the exhaustion theory. You just wear yourself out. Once you've exhausted yourself out, you have this peaceful mind. This really came about also because I had not been working aside from small drawings. I had this fresh place to see myself and to see my work. And not think "You can't do it this way."

Allowing yourself to make art that isn't necessarily making "JoAnne Carson art."

That's a really good point. You see yourself getting to the end and needing to have produced a body of work. I think it's about confidence. About the confidence to know you are going to see yourself to the end. It's not easy to learn how to draw and to use a photograph

and to move past them. It's not the system but the vision behind the system that's so important. You have to be open to that. I think there's a couple of crossroads. First having enough experience as an artist to develop that road. Then you can make moves within it where you don't think if I work this way then I can't do that. More like a banquet where you can have cuisine from all over.

Well I think it's what you said about have the confidence to know you can figure it out. You'll get it done.

And allow yourself to stay in this moment of being uncertain. Not judging every little thing. Allow yourself the pleasure of curiosity and just seeing it. Photoshop lets me go through that process so much faster so I can keep up with my imagination. It's like dreaming. You need the equipment in order to do it. It's like the stories you wrote and what you are doing now. We really don't change that much.

Yes, every artist knows somewhere they are going to be able to do it or they wouldn't keep trying but they also have that uncertainty.

I also think "What do I know?" I know that things happen in certain moments. Years ago I was talking to my therapist and every time I expressed being disgruntled and then apologized he said "stop doing that and say what you want." I thought I was doing that but I really wasn't. When I thought about what I really wanted to be doing I realized so clearly that I wanted to be doing sculpture. I learned bravery after the brain surgery. Patience and bravery. Those are good things to know as an artist. Those were elements that enabled me to have a new charge. I don't have to keep being lost at this point. The patience and bravery are about trying something different or trying something tomorrow. I don't know if someone could have told me this 10 years ago. But the sense of confidence of knowing you have a distinctive voice is key to being an artist. But you can't be prejudiced against yourself. You can't undermine your own best interests.