ON JOAN JONAS

On 19 February, Joan Jonas staged a performance of her elliptical, nonlinear narrative piece *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* in New York, and the photographer Peter Moore took a photograph, which would later become a gelatin silver print. In the image, Jonas assumes a female alter-ego on all fours, whose guise is the frozen face of a doll.

Words COLLEEN KELSEY
Photography TOBY COULSON

They Come to Us without a Word II, 2015, performance at The Kitchen, New York, 2016. Photography Laura Perez-Harris. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome

Lines in the Sand (installation view at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2007), 2002, video *Lines in the Sand* (2002/2005, colour, sound, 47:45 minutes), projection, blackboard, wooden structure, paint, video *Pillow Talk* (2002, colour, sound), monitor with performance video, green wooden couch, sand and relief box, plaster, photographs paintings, dimensions variable Photographed by Juan Andres Pegoraro

The closest I can come to adequately describing my affinity for the works of Joan Jonas is to say that they are made of that amorphous, sparkling kinetic magic that materialises when you close your eyes. Exit through one hidden trap door, and you are led to a slippery portal that turns in on itself, leading to another. Or maybe it's more like seeing with your third eye: surrender to higher consciousness.

Take, for example, her recent work *Reanimation* (2010/2012/2013), which New Yorkers were treated to last summer when Gavin Brown's Enterprise inaugurated their mammoth, four-floor gallery space on 127th Street with *What is found in the windowless house is true*, the entire building devoted to 50 years of Jonas' art practice, and the first Jonas show in New York since 2010. *Reanimation*, which was partly influenced by Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness' novel *Under the Glacier*, takes the shape of a transportive and immersive multi-screen installation surrounding a sculpture of spherical light-reflecting and diffusing crystals. The screens depict footage of the icy landscape of the Arctic Circle, and at some points Jonas herself, appearing as a sort of guiding spectre, drawing with ice and ink.

What is found in the windowless house is true is as strong a case study of the sublime nuances of Jonas' practice, and how her physical involvement grounds each of her works. Ephemera, drawings and props from the duration of her artmaking career served as totems for various points of fixation from over the years: masks, houses, birds. The other multichannel work in the gallery, *stream or river, flight or pattern III* (2017), installed on the top floor, was Jonas' largest scale work since her installation at the 2015 Venice Biennale—an examination of portals between humans and the natural world. Trees appear, birds talk and sway, Jonas is a translucent heroine.

Since she abandoned standalone sculpture for performative works in the 60s, the New York-born octogenarian has defied easy characterisation. Jonas doesn't constrain herself to one medium, comfortably wielding whatever suits her intentions—the arc of a drawing gesture, the lens of a camera, her own body in space. After seeing performances by Yvonne Rainer and Lucinda Childs, integral to the Judson Church scene, she studied dance (with Trisha Brown) to negotiate how to use the tool of the body, and became an early adopter of emerging technology, like video. Performance was another space open for experimentation, and she soon combined the two.

An influential trip to Japan in the early 70s brought the ritual and theatrics of classical Noh and Kabuki to her oeuvre (as well as a Sony Portapak video camera). Ghost stories, mythology, folklore, and science also figure into her idiosyncratic vernacular—recent works concern climate change and extinction. In much of her early work, which took a forthrightly feminist approach to the body as subject and object, just as second-wave feminism was reaching its apex, materials linked to human presentation and performance were Jonas' primary vehicle. She employed mirrors and masks and the surface of the female body. A few years before film theorist Laura Mulvey published her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'—which scrutinised the active male-subject, passive female-object convention of the classic Hollywood film within a psychoanalytic framework—Jonas was performing her own experiments in dissecting scopophilia. (For instance, the video work *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, in which a doll-masked Jonas becomes an avatar for feminine archetypes and enacts a masquerade of self-examination.)

In 2015, she represented the United States at the Venice Biennale and installed panels of mirrors, a crystal chandelier, and video shot from a GoPro attached to a dog's collar in the American pavilion's famed Jeffersonian rotunda, reflecting the glow of the works she erected in the other galleries in the space. Walking into a Jonas installation is like stepping onto the surface of the moon, or falling into the cut and carat of a well-polished jewel. The physical effect is maddeningly and satisfyingly insignificant and infinite.

This spring, the Tate Modern in London will debut a career retrospective of Jonas' work. An exhibition of this size and scale is long "overdue," "necessary," and whatever urgent modifiers press releases love to throw around with essential artists the canon has neglected for those that are, well, male, Western, and young. But Joan Jonas is very necessary, and we are very lucky to have her—as her power reaches its peak. The Tate's website rightfully describes Jonas

Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy, 1972,
performance at Joan Jonas' loft, New York
Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's
enterprise, New York/Rome

Reanimation, 2010, 2012, 2014, video installation, dimensions unknown
Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York: Rome. All works copyright Joan Jonas: Artists Rights Society, New York and DACS, London

as a "pioneer" and a "hero to a generation of younger artists." Jonas' hero status was cemented decades ago, but it's taken the art market five to catch up. She is one of the most famous longtime residents of SoHo, often seen walking her white poodle, Ozu. She ventured into uncharted territory—such as video—due to the dearth of men dominating the medium.

The bare bones set of materials (camera and body) with which she produced two of her most iconic video works in 1972—*Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Vertical Roll*—feel intrinsically connected with the iPhones through which young female artists document themselves today.

Rewatching those two works decades later, one not only succumbs to the sensorial, weird, hazy hum of feedback in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, or the repeated dissonant clang in *Vertical Roll*, but the provocative and prescient way in which Jonas examines the compulsive level of scrutiny of the female body. Jonas toggles between an image of herself and a masked alter ego in *Organic Honey*, preening and looking into a mirror and performing a series of gestures and drawings. *Vertical Roll*, named for the technological glitch in televisions that causes a black bar to repeat over a scrolling image, uses that very bar as a divider of space—fracturing, obscuring, and revealing the image of her body, clothed and unclothed, masked and unmasked.

Jonas understands compulsive obsession; it's at the very core of what she does. It's why the mirror has been one of the strongest material motifs throughout her career. In early performances, she flipped the reflective side to her audience, implicating and including her viewers into the beastly human business of objectification, fetishisation, and narcissism. How does what we see present itself, how do we look back upon it? And in the case of the human and spirit's place in the world (natural, scientific, mythological) where do we stand? Jonas' mirrorings show us the truth of where we are—diffuse, divided into tiny particles, lost and found.

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