

Charmian Johnson

Exploring beauty via two distinct practices – ceramic pots and botanical drawings.

by Amy Gogarty

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Charmian Johnson, installation view, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, 2021 (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries)

It's unusual for an artist to achieve renown in two very different forms of practice, yet Charmian Johnson was an acknowledged master of both ceramics and botanical drawing. Twenty-eight of her exquisite pen-and-ink flower drawings share space with 18 signature ceramics in a beautiful exhibition at Catriona Jeffries in Vancouver until July 3.

Although she travelled extensively, Johnson, who died in 2020, was based in East Vancouver for nearly 50 years. Born in Pouce Coupe, B.C., in 1939, she was widely recognized for ceramic pots rooted in the philosophy of British master Bernard Leach, yet she also devoted considerable attention to her drawing practice.



Charmian Johnson, not titled, unknown date, ink on paper, 26" x 34" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries)

Her meticulous renderings of flowering plants were the subject of a Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition in 1989, but otherwise have rarely been seen. In 2018, they were included in a group exhibition, *Nature*, at Catriona Jeffries. The current exhibition allows for a more sustained viewing and the opportunity to observe affinities between her drawings and ceramics.

The ceramic component comprises pots produced between 1983 and 2003, arranged in a serpentine line down the centre of the main gallery. The pots sit on purpose-built wooden structures that suggest both studio shelves and a domestic table. This clever solution to displaying functional ceramics intimates how they might be encountered in domestic settings.



Charmian Johnson, installation view at Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, 2021 (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries)

The ceramics are generous open forms glazed in subtle colours of great sophistication. Here, celadons range from clear azure to grey-green to a darker olive. But there are also several exciting examples of the artist's remarkable "poison purple to red glaze," which iridesces from deep purple through lavender to red, along with a beautiful lapis blue bowl.

Johnson's renderings of flowering plants can be a revelation. She worked almost exclusively with extremely fine pens and black ink, building tonal gradations from layer upon layer of minute swirls, dots and hatching. While most works are neither titled nor dated, it's possible to discern a loose chronology from the few that do have identifying dates.



Charmian Johnson, not titled, 1978-80, ink and graphite on paper, 26" x 34" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

The earliest works were produced in Tangiers, Morocco, from 1978 to 1981. These are characterized by sharp black and white contrasts, a prevalence of pattern, and a suggestion of architectural elements backing a tangle of plants. The black areas are built up from such a density of marks they appear almost solid, yet they have the velvety quality of a mezzotint.

Later, in Hawaii, where she had access to orchids, her drawings become more subtle and volumetric. The darkest areas are delicate and veil-like; light appears to emanate from tiny points of paper left uncovered by the myriad of marks. The range and sensitivity of the gradations produce a sensation of colour, although only black ink is used.



Charmian Johnson, not titled, unknown date, ink on paper, 26" x 30" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

Individual flowers are studied and rendered with intense concentration, and compositions are more eccentric. Plant forms sprawl across the picture frame, and large areas of white paper are often left untouched. The effect is to present each flower as a portrait, an individual entity rather than a specimen, as is conventional in scientific drawings.

In later life, when health issues restricted Johnson's travels, she found a wealth of subject matter in her garden. Tulips and irises, in particular, attracted her and she rendered the intricate swirl of each petal with rapt devotion. Some compositions suggest a sort of drama: a stamen reaches out to touch another flower, or a tendril rises triumphantly against the sky.

Often, she depicts transitions, from the initial unfurling of a fecund blossom to the final droop of a dying bloom. Johnson never worked from photographs, instead relying on the actual plant or her eidetic memory. She worked on drawings over a period of years, returning to them as the flowers came back into season or to develop them further.



Charmian Johnson, 1983-2003, 18 glazed ceramic works, varied dimensions (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

Seeing the drawings together with the ceramic pots, it's easier to understand how both practices absorbed her attention. Both respond to a given reality, a source of information and a beauty that allowed her to express her personal vision.

The sense of form developed by making pots appears to have influenced her growing sensitivity to flowers, while the colour and variety of the natural world attuned her to immensely suggestive possibilities for luminous ceramic glazes.

This exhibition reveals an artist totally immersed in her vision, one whose skill and passion directed over a lifetime produced profound art. ■

Charmian Johnson at Catriona Jeffries in Vancouver from May 29 to July 3, 2021.