



← ALL

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Works from the Collection: Charmian Johnson

Charmian Johnson ...

“... epimedium and some divisions of tall blue Siberian iris, one side shoot of Japanese toad lily, and a little pot of...”¹

Like stepping through a greenhouse. Ducking between vines and leaves and flowers as lush and thick as layers of pottery set and scattered throughout the studio. Feeling the light cast through the window, then through the pane of veins of broad leaves and petals. Charmian Johnson kept her house and studio something like this, so I hear – a place full of ways of looking quietly, looking intently, and the vibrancy of growing things.

“... our native spring blooming primula, planted to grow in the half shade for a while until they root in for transplant are all together here at house...”²

The drawings carry this with them; there is a vibrancy of layer and mark that makes them shimmer, lending a depth and translucency that seems to hold more than the marks of cross-hatched or dappled ink on paper. Looking slowly, over hours, days, years, the eye picks up things only the hand can translate: the slow uncurling of petals as a Higo iris blooms in the quiet midwinter light; the weight-born impression of a pistil as it rests against a broadleaf; the fluency of a vine’s winding through crevasse and crumbling mortar on the exterior of a building’s edge. Touch knows these sensations better than the eye does.

This act of translation, from the slow looking to the slow marking to the buildup over space and time, whether through the veins of a leaf, whippiness of a vine, or stamen of a flower’s head, brings a bodily quality to the drawings. There is a visceral sense there, but more so, it is a

viscerality that asks to extend beyond the human. There are questions in the work: is this the gut feeling of a flower about to bloom? Is this the prickling-at-the-edges trepidation held by these vines as they cluster? What is the gentle sensation of light against the fine hairs of a stalk? Less so botanical drawings, Johnson considered these works portraits. Of her work, she writes:

“My attachment to flowers springs from my childhood and my mother’s beautiful English garden. Each species manifests unique characteristics within a sensual, natural, growth cycle. I observe the intrinsic visual properties of each, much as a portrait artist dwells on the character of each sitter. It is my hope that through slight stylized adjustments I might intimate both the natural inclination and the spatial context of each specimen.

Each drawing is, if you like, a proposal that the flowers unfold on the page in their own inimitable way, just as delicate and translucent bowl unfolds in the hand.”³

Johnson was better known as a potter, but let us not forget that both matter for clay and vitality for plants come from the earth.⁴ These are portraits not just of flora, but of the places they connect to, whether the roots spreading through the ground itself, or the sun soaking into leaves in the environments they grow in. She largely drew plants that originated elsewhere; transplants cultivated by and carried with people on their own journeys – whether for food, for medicine or for company. With them are stories of cultivation, and the way plants bend or change to the worlds of people as they are carried with, as wide ranging as across broad stretches of land and water, or as close as from the back garden to a pot on the studio window sill.

But these plants shape in turn. Many of the drawings possess an architectural quality, and at times, one referencing landscape; the plants are not passive subjects, nor passive in the worlds they inhabit and create. Some of her works are titled after sites shaping and shaped by these plants – referencing the places she observed, drew and marked through her travels. While she moved quickly between places, from Bernard Leach’s pottery studio in St. Ives, England to Tangiers, Morocco and Hawai’i, the touch of her eye to vegetation to hand kept her lingering over the same flowers as sitters for decades.

“...needed to go out and throw a few bowls and watch the white Higo iris bloom...”⁵

The slowing down in these works, and a commitment to vegetation and growing things, their worlds and their times, exists against the rhythms of life and time seen more frequently today. In any act of translation, from looking to feeling to marking, something of yourself is always translated in turn. This matters; which feelings feel, which marks mark, which worlds world.⁶ Johnson’s life held a dedication to the ways of pots, plants and materials born of the earth. These drawings ask and offer in turn, not only how these materials and sensations translate to the

human, but how it might be to bend oneself to the worlds of flowers.



Charmian Johnson, Untitled, c. 1990s, ink on paper, Purchased with support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Morris and Helen Belkin Foundation, 2018

Works from the Collection considers works in the Belkin's permanent collection in conversation with ongoing exhibitions, programs and the world around us. This entry is brought to you by Jay Pahre, Digital Publics Facilitator at the Belkin. He is a visual artist, writer and educator. To see more of the Belkin's collection, visit belkin.ubc.ca/collection.

IMAGE (ABOVE): CHARMIAN JOHNSON'S DRAWINGS, INSTALLED AS PART OF *THE WILLFUL PLOT* AT THE BELKIN (13 JANUARY-16 APRIL 2023). PHOTO: RACHEL TOPHAM PHOTOGRAPHY

END NOTES

1. Charmian Johnson, email correspondence with Jana Tyner, July 3, 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. Charmian Johnson, "Artist's Statement," *Charmian Johnson* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989). Exhibition Pamphlet.
4. The history of botanical drawings in the west, and in particular settler colonial states such as British Columbia, is bound up with notions of science, discovery and progress emerging from colonial outlooks. For a brief introduction to this history in the context of botanical drawing in BC, see *Plantae Occidentalis: 200 Years of Botanical Art in British Columbia* by Maria Newberry House and Susan Munro (Vancouver: UBC Botanical Garden, 1979).
5. Charmian Johnson, email correspondence with Jana Tyner, June 19, 2013.
6. Referencing thinking from Donna Haraway's "Staying with the Trouble" in *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation* (Netherlands: Valiz, 2022).