

Artist

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largest crowd ever for an exhibit's opening reception, between 50 and 75 people, according to publicist Bob Fennessy.

"People know her," Fennessy said. "Her work is on a number of buildings downtown, and people are more familiar with her than with someone in a gallery."

Although Johnson's primary medium is paint, she has experimented with a variety of media, including ceramics, tiles and concrete sculptures. In 1993, she donated a stained glass window to the Eugene Public Library.

The colorful window, depicting a fish about to swallow the sun, resides in the library's children's section.

"It's a fun piece, a fantastical image," described youth services librarian Claire Ribaud. "It really warms it up in here. It makes the library seem more owned by the community, and it makes the space more inviting." While Johnson used to give her paintings away for free, she is now able to charge anywhere from \$30 to \$1,300 for her artwork. She has sold an estimated 250 pieces locally and is now financially supported by her painting and a few odd jobs as a house painter.

But Johnson doesn't see herself as having an artistic career. A self-described radical feminist anarchist, she is concerned about the future role of art in society.

"Painting is like some luxury commodity for the ruling class, and I'm not OK with that," she explained. "I don't see myself as displaying my art in a gallery in New York."

She believes society is crumbling, and she fears that when it does, the arts will either be used to maintain the current system and become lifeless, or they will have no place in what society becomes.

That's why she's learning how to garden.

"I started last year with a wimpy, lame little garden," she said, laughing at the memory. "My squash and little corns never got

big. It was so pitiful."

This year Johnson has plans for expansion, which will include raised beds. Her leaves are already composting, and she plans to make her starts as soon as she can.

But painting remains her first love, and she is excited about her current display at WOW Hall. She is curious about how patrons will receive one painting in particular.

In it, a menstruating woman squats on the ground, using her middle finger to paint a dot of blood on her forehead.

"It's quite shocking, but I wanted to get a point across," she explained. "I wanted to address some questions, like, 'What's the insult about the middle finger?' and 'Why has our basic animal nature and sexual nature become the most insulting curse?'"

While she normally completes a piece in one sitting, Johnson worked all summer on the painting and considers it her greatest artistic accomplishment.

"That one definitely gets a reaction from everyone," Fennessy said. "But the feelings are mostly positive. Most people believe that art is supposed to elicit a reaction from the viewer, and if it does, it's doing its job."

Johnson's art has found its niche in Eugene, but she actually began painting in Virginia, where she grew up "an artist in captivity."

"When I was [a teen-ager], my culture started constricting me to an unbearable degree," she said. "I had to express something."

Johnson discovered art at age 16, and art saved her.

She began dabbling in painting, at first creating abstract watercolors, and fell in love with color.

"Take a look outside and what do you see? Just gray. Seeing the colors made me happy," she recalled. She added that she has never taken an art class, which is why she still loves painting.

Johnson lived in the East until about 12 years ago, when the forests she had played in as a child were destroyed and the land was covered with housing develop-

ments. She left Virginia and ended up in Eugene, attracted by the city's artistic reputation.

Unfortunately, she said, she now sees the same problems happening here.

For example, "you can't sit on the sidewalk on 13th [Avenue] anymore," she said. "It used to be so incredible. There used to be all sorts of people — peddlers selling neat things, music. It was like a little festival."

"Now there's a police station down there, and nothing's going on anymore."

Johnson believes one of society's major problems remains its restrictions on artistic expression outside.

In this culture, "there is almost no social expression permitted outside of buildings," she said. "Almost any other culture has a gathering place where people can dance and play music outside — all sorts of stuff goes on outside."

Painting murals is one of the few and limited ways by which artists can leave their mark on the outside environment, which is the opposite of how things should be, she believes.

"The outside of buildings is our communal environment. If we could do whatever we wanted on them, there would be so many surfaces people wouldn't even compete," she said. "People lay concrete, and people draw and write poems in it, but then the city comes and fills it in. This city could be gorgeous."

Johnson has to remain content, however, with painting the few murals that business owners will allow. She has already repainted the figures on the Fourth and Monroe mural, and she plans to recreate the background this summer. And McComas hopes to eventually bring her back to refurbish the agricultural scene at Sundance.

In the meantime, Johnson has plenty of ideas to keep her busy.

"I want to communicate more scenes of the possible futures we have as a species."

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