

## Sculpture Descriptions for University of Florida Exhibition, Fall 2011

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### **A Turn of the Century**

*Inspired by "Dance At Bougival" by Pierre Auguste Renoir*

Renoir completed three nearly life-size paintings of dancing couples in 1882 and 1883. The painting on which this sculpture is based appears to have been conceived as an independent work, while the other two were intended to be a pair.

In Johnson's sculpture we can take a "turn" around the dancing couple, referred to in the title, which is not possible with the painting. In both Johnson's sculpture and the painting, the handsome pair seem to be on the verge of a breathless twirl that will billow the skirt of her wide, laced-trimmed dress and draw the attentive escort even closer to his blushing partner. The models for Renoir's *A Dance at Bougival* were friends of the painter, seventeen-year-old Suzanne Valadon (she also posed for *Dance in the City*) and writer Paul Lhote (who posed for all three paintings).

Renoir discouraged a specific, narrative reading of his works. The painting conveys a mood that is enhanced by the abandoned nosegay of violets cast upon the dance floor. In *A Turn of the Century* Johnson's sculpture gracefully follows this lead.

### **Time For Fun**

*Inspired by "Dance in the Country" by Pierre Auguste Renoir*

Compared to the formal, almost solemn mood of *Whispering Close*, *Time for Fun*, its mate, is as open as the fan splayed in the hand of the woman, who listens with abandon to the sweet nothings of her partner in anticipation of a kiss. In Johnson's three-dimensional interpretation, we are especially aware of her ample, ruffled dress cinched at the waist that emphasizes the curves of her body. Her robust figure contrasts with the slim elegance of the city counterpart, but her plump stature matters little to her companion. The partners seem, in fact, to complement one another, her rounded shape playing off his lean one, which is accentuated by his dark, tailored suit. Paul Lhote, author and long time friend of the artist, modeled for all three of Renoir's dance paintings, but this is the only one for which Aline Charigot posed. She was to be Renoir's future wife.

### **Whispering Close (monumental)**

*Inspired by "Dance in the City" by Pierre Auguste Renoir*

*Whispering Close*, like its companion piece *Time for Fun*, is based on one of a pair of paintings by Renoir. The subjects, city and country couples dancing, invite comparison.

In contrast with their country cousins, the elegant ball attendees presented here are locked

in an intimate but formal embrace. Their emotional absorption keeps us at a psychological distance, and the luxurious waves of fabric of the lady's gown spill onto the floor around the couple, keeping us at a physical distance as well. Unlike the original painting, *Whispering Close* allows us other views. We are encouraged to look beyond the fancy trappings of the graceful couple and into their faces. Johnson felt free to play with their expressions in order to give us his view of their relationship. What do you think? Have they been together for a long time, or have they just met? Johnson asks us to explore these questions.

## **La Promenade**

*Inspired by "Paris Street; Rainy Day" by Gustave Caillebotte*

The wide boulevards, slick with rain, could be nowhere else but Paris. They are as French as the angled facades of the grand apartment buildings and the fashionable, nonchalant couple strolling in the rain. But it is important to remember that the Paris in Johnson's tableau and Caillebotte's painting is modern. When the Frenchman painted the wide streets and handsome buildings, they were brand new, the product of Baron Haussmann's redevelopment of Paris. This enormous project, undertaken during the Second Empire (1852-1870) of Napoleon III, drastically changed much of the physical aspect of Paris, destroying old winding streets and neighborhoods to bring better circulation, electricity, and a proper sewage system to the rapidly expanding city. This venture also altered social relationships. The wide boulevards provided places to see and be seen, not only in a carriage or on a sidewalk but also in the cafés, shops, restaurants, and other establishments that prospered on the ground floor of the new apartment buildings.

Johnson's tableau allows us to visit the intersection at rue St. Petersburg between the tracks of the Gare St. Lazare and the Place de Clichy. Although the background of the painting seems so naturalistic, it was a particular challenge to recreate for the tableau. Johnson discovered Caillebotte had manipulated the usual modes of perspective to create his wide-angled vision of the scene. Johnson was also astounded to find that as he worked on the large foreground figures, visitors to his studio were so familiar with the painting that they recognized the handsome couple at once, even from behind. And though with Johnson's help we can now follow this impressive pair down the street, we will never know what they were thinking, or what they saw, on the drizzly, gray day.

## **The Landlady**

*Inspired by "L'Arlesienne" by Vincent van Gogh*

Presumably the thoughtful lady in Johnson's tableau is musing about the contents of the books lying open on the table before her. Their distinctive red and yellow covers indicate that the jumble of books consists of inexpensive modern novels. Her choice of reading material is recent and up-to-date for the late nineteenth-century, but she is dressed traditionally in the style typical of the women of Arles, a city in southern France. The old-fashioned black dresses and hats with ribbon streamers were still commonly worn there in van Gogh's time. Her pose, with one elbow bent and resting on the table so that

her hand supports her tilted head, draws on a portrait convention that suggests melancholy.

Johnson's sculpture is based on one of the several portraits van Gogh painted of Madame Marie Ginoux, who with her husband Joseph-Michel were the proprietors of Café de la Gare (Railway Station Café) in Arles. The Ginoux family ran a boarding house on the same premises, where van Gogh rented a room for several months before moving into the Yellow House in October 1888. Van Gogh believed portraiture would be "the thing of the future," but he always had difficulty persuading models to pose for him. In this case, Madame Ginoux finally agreed to pose only after Paul Gauguin, who apparently had a way with the ladies, arrived in Arles and asked her to sit for both artists.

The bold color and sparse setting effectively convey van Gogh's perception of his landlady as a strong and forceful character. The 3-D aspect of Johnson's re-creation enhances that image and encourages a deeper investigation of the sitter in her solitude

## **Follow Me**

*Inspired by "The Fifer" by Edouard Manet*

For this sculpture, Johnson chose one of Manet's best loved and most poignant pictures, that of a small boy in the uniform of the *Garde Impériale*. As the mascot for the French Emperor's personal Guard, his baggy pants (not the style for boys then as they are now), oversized shoes and spats make him look even younger and more vulnerable than he already is. This painting and Johnson's sculpture are not so much portraits as contemplative reflections on childhood and the passage from innocence to knowledge. In France this boy, with knowing eyes on his open face, standing all alone yet poised to meet whatever comes, would have been called a *gamin*, a street child left to fend for himself. *Manet* used more than one model to create this picture. Among them was his son, Léon, whom he never officially recognized.

For this striking painting, Manet combined the unmodulated expanses of color and suppression of modeling he observed in Japanese prints with a sense that the figure is surrounded by nothing by air, a trait he greatly admired in the work of Spanish painter Diego Velázquez. Both the critics that admired the work and those who despised it had the same reaction: that the boy seemed ready to detach himself from the background and enter our space. Johnson readily accomplishes this with his sculptural tableau. We are free to join this small fifer, although even if we do follow him, he will be no less lonely or committed to his mission.

## **Monet, Our Visiting Artist**

A painter all his life, Seward Johnson began sculpting in 1968. Since then he has gained international renown for his highly realistic, life-sized bronze figures depicting day-to-day life situations and activities. Sometimes these works even provoke a double take and a momentary fool of the eye.

The work titled "Monet, Our Visiting Artist" depicts a sculpted full figured portrait of the beloved painter Claude Monet (1840-1926), and was originally created as an homage to Monet painting "Terrace at Sainte-Adresse." The bronze figure has since been shown "painting" other Monet inspired sculptures as a playful "art imitating art imitating life" scenario. Through this sculpture installation of Monet and his "subject", the viewer is confronted by the question of what constitutes an original work of art vs. a derivative work, since the French artist seems to be "violating" the copyright on Johnson's artwork. This conversation speaks to the most current and controversial copyright regulations and protections that can sometimes help an artist, or sometimes constrict him or her.

## **God Bless America**

In this piece, Seward Johnson brings to life one of the most famous paintings in American history. Painted in 1930, *American Gothic* was Grant Woods' celebration of the moral virtue of hard-working Americans. Some critics believe it may also have represented the repression of rural America. Because of its many interpretations and the riveting portraits, the piece has gone on to become a widely parodied image in pop culture. The presence in Johnson's series called Icons Revisited reflects this magnetic attraction, and asks the viewer to examine what facets of the image have created the broad appeal. Additionally, the question presented by Seward Johnson is - has there been a change in perspective since this iconic painting was made, and what are the shifts that have occurred?

When Johnson re-imagines a classic artwork, he adds his own transformational message. The depiction of these two American farmers in his sculptural three-dimensional work is accompanied by a suitcase with stickers from many of the overseas outsourcing capitals. Johnson uses this addition of the suitcase to comment on the loss of jobs in America to overseas production. Today, there is a prevalence of outsourcing of US jobs in the fields of agriculture, manufacturing, and even art. Johnson invites viewers to see these farmers, and their stern countenances, from the perspective of modern day and asks us to take a closer look.

## **Unconditional Surrender**

Well-known for recreating life in our times in vividly realistic bronze, Johnson steps back into history with his work entitled Unconditional Surrender to pay homage to the veterans of World War II. The piece was inspired by that celebratory moment in US history when World War II ended, concluding almost seven years of wartime. It is also reflective of the spontaneous joy and "surrender" being experienced with the couple, becoming an iconic symbol of this time.

## **Coming Home**

After Desert Storm, artist Seward Johnson was touched by the photos on the news

showing the troops returning home to their loved ones. This sculpture was made in homage to that outpouring of emotion and affection. This sculpture has been on exhibition at the Pentagon under the auspices of General Colin Powell. Though the inspiration came from a specific moment in history, Seward Johnson is also making a statement about the love of a father for his children, and the heartbreak of separation.

### **Nice to See You**

This piece was conceived by sculptor Johnson as a challenge to create a figure viewed from back, sides and the front through glass. The window creates another type of artistic framing that interested him. It also takes the viewer a little bit longer to recognize a non-human presence when they approach this piece from the glass side. The double-take is even more pronounced as people become suddenly aware that the "face" greeting them is not another live person. Note that another expression of Johnson's natural humor is shown in the inclusion of a paperback book in the washer's back pocket. The title is Rear Window, a nod to the very frightening Alfred Hitchcock movie.

### **Summer Thinking**

This piece shows a student enjoying the first warm days of spring, day dreaming about the summer vacation ahead. She is interrupted by either a passing friend, a thought or a desire to look at the newly blossoming campus. Her pencil is poised above a poem she is writing. One shoe off and a bare foot aloft are further gestures of the casting away of her studies, cares and pressures.