



Remembering David Johnston (1933-2016)

*The painter's vision is not a lens,
it trembles to caress the light.*

-Robert Lowell

CURATING

For the first time, in January of 2017, I had the privilege of viewing the entire extant corpus of David's work, in his studio, storage and home in West Orange with his widow Mary Lou and son Scott.

The experience was overwhelming. David, as the intimate intellectual I knew, was fond of shooting from the hip. In front of a delectable little work of art at the Morgan Library and Museum or the Metropolitan Art Museum, he would fire off a one- or two-liner that was not only brilliant but original. These comments came out of insights he had earned in a lifetime of looking and listening, and to me, they could be quite mind boggling. This was one of the reasons I loved our monthly junkets to New York City. On the other hand, frankly, they could be dumb – just dumb. His painting method was the same. A winner was a winner in anybody's league, but there were many losers. This was partly the nature of watercolor; partly the way David's mind worked. One thought followed another; it was expressed, used, discarded, food for the next thought. He did not undervalue the discards; he signed, dated, and entitled them all. In fact, they were never discarded, they were just not framed. They were part of his ongoing day-to-day evolution, David worked every day – sometimes 12 or 13 hours; his images were never out of his mind. One followed another, seamlessly. This is a way of working that is very typical of the 20th century or at least one branch of its visual thinking – the automatism, abstraction, cubism, abstract expressionism.

OBJECTS

David loved objects. One of his last inventions was an arrangement of *objets variées* on a wall of white shelving in his West Orange living room. Many of these had been in the collection of his parents who were dealers in antiques. It is typical of David's works that they focus on an object or objects. His assemblage of forms has references in the real world, and the flow of shape and sequence of colors culminates in the depiction, however abstract, of an object. Here the inherent fluidity of David's chosen medium, watercolor, plays to his advantage. The realization of the painted form coincides with the self-determination, the identity, of the object.

THE MEDIUMS

David had an affinity for watercolor and, in my view, achieved his best successes in that medium. He habitually used Japanese rice paper as a support rather than

standard watercolor paper. The rice paper is more absorbent and produces a soft, velvety surface for the watercolor washes. He also had an affinity for the art of China and Japan, where painting in ink on paper reached its apogee. In classical watercolor as practiced in the West, the white in the painting is the white of the paper. The paper must be a good tough rag paper, absorbent but a hard lay and with enough tooth to let the high points shine through. It must be able to support a puddle of paint until it can be worked into the right shape.

Acrylic has its own rewards. It is easy to use on a wide variety of supports; David used it on canvas. It dries quickly in air to a hard shiny surface that resembles oil paint. If diluted sufficiently, it resembles the aqueous medium but still dries to a tough surface that resists cracking. Acrylic on canvas or paper can be rolled – carefully. Its vehicle is acrylic resin whereas the vehicle in watercolor is, of course, water. When watercolor is applied in an opaque fashion, it is gouache. The following tubes of pigments were on David's palette: alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue.

TITLES

The title is an integral part of a work by David. Legend has it that Paul Klee, who always worked on a group of paintings, never just one, – “It kept the flowers blooming.” – would line up his latest efforts against the wall and hold a “christening.” Not infrequently a painting received its title from a friend or even a casual visitor. Ideally, when viewing a painting, you should spend at least ten minutes in front of it. Start with the title: frequently it is the clue to the work’s meaning and structure in terms of line, dark and light, color, dominance, sub-dominance, etc. This is almost always true of a work by David, who took great care in naming each painting and delighted in his titles.

ILLUSION

As a designer of stage scenery and painter of flats, David knew all the tricks of suggesting the illusion of reality with the flourish of a brush or the arrangement of a progression of colors that would suggest just the right depth. The sketchbook shown here will suggest his technical know-how.



Stage designers generally use water-based mediums because they dry fast in air and clean up with water. The design for *Craig's Wife* is remarkable for its pitch – scale if you will. Every line assumes its appropriate place in the design; it works full size on stage as well as in the sketch.

AN EARLY PAINTING



This painting was completed as a senior-year project in the School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan. David's wife, Mary Lou, remembers it hanging in his first studio in New York. It is "brushy." One might say it is about the brushwork with just the suggestion of an image. That aesthetic, of course, was in the air: it was the late 50s. The referent – the fully realized object or form – is really not there. It would take David years to reach the point where everything fell into place in a hierarchy of line, shape, and color stretching from chaos to plasticity.

THE SERIGRAPHS

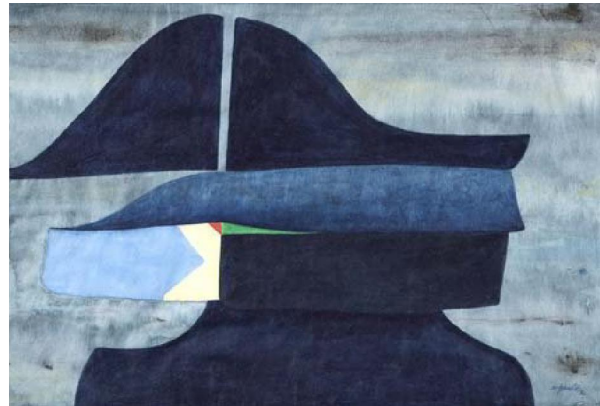
A serigraph is a print made by the silkscreen process. A different screen is employed for each color or group of colors. The screen is laid on the paper. Certain areas of the screen are blocked out; others are clear to allow the ink to run through. Repeated applications of color produce the final image. A serigraph is a multiple: an edition may run as high as 100 prints. A/P means artist's proof. 2/100 means it is the second print struck in an edition of 100.

Europe was kind to David and Mary Lou. They loved it – especially France, southern Switzerland, and Italy – and the regard was mutual. Most of David's 41 one-person shows were mounted there. In 1974, he joined a Swiss printing atelier and produced a small group of serigraphs extraordinary for their attack, minimalism and boldness of execution; two are shown here.



LOCAL COLLECTIONS

In 1975, the Johnstons returned to the United States; David continued to exhibit in Europe as well as in the US, in both one-man and group settings. They moved to Montclair in 1978 and David had a solo exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum in 1980. Two of his watercolors, *Lost at Sea* and *The Admiral* were purchased for the museum's permanent collection; they are represented in this exhibit as photographs. Five of the works on display here are on loan from private collections.



SPACE

We have all been cubists since 1907 when Picasso unveiled *Les Femmes d'Alger* to a group of mystified friends, among them Henri Matisse, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas. They were put off by the brutality of the attack, the bestiality of the forms, and the space. The stage opens up in a series of scrims parallel to the picture plane, the window drawn by the edges of the painting. Since the Middle Ages, European artists had been learning to create three dimensional forms receding into space. There was foreground, middle distance, and deep space, often set down like flats on a stage. After *Les Femmes d'Alger*, there was no more foreground and background. All parts of the painting were equidistant from the viewer, who was as close to and no farther from the top of the painting as the bottom. In between, there was a series of carefully graded shapes and forms, almost made to measure, which carried the eye to and fro between the surface of the painting and the middle distance. Seldom did the artist venture into deep space. This post-1907 space is David Johnston's space, which he inhabited happily and with an enviable degree of expertise in modulation, transition, and punctuation.

DAVID, MY FRIEND

I always thought of David as more European than American. One of the reasons Europeans patronized him, especially in Italy, is that they like the idea of a well-made painting. David was also well made, but not conventionally. Instead of the four-in-hand, there was an ascot and pocket square. Instead of sneakers, there were well shined wing tips, stylishly frayed. Not exactly the Bohemian, though no one lived the life of a painter more than David. His conversation flowed easily – from music, to art, to theater, to politics. Nobody could be more enthusiastic; nobody could be more damning. Brilliant in public, but only on his own terms, he was an intensely private man. He lived for his art and his family. David was enthusiastic about the dance – especially the New York City Ballet and, above all, Fred Astaire. There is a photograph of Astaire in David's studio. Mary Lou has told me that David was afraid to dance in public, until they took lessons. Then nobody could stop him: he even studied tap and ballet. I remember a most impressive turn he demonstrated at the African Art Museum of the Society of African Missions. These remarks on David and the dance are not as idle as they might seem. There is dance-like movement in many of the works on view here. He and Mary Lou retained an interest in theater all his life. They saw anything and everything answering to a taste both adventurous and discriminating.

I remember that in 2016 David and I went to see “Rembrandt's First Masterpiece,” an exhibition at the Morgan Library and Museum. David not only loved the works on view; he had astute remarks to make about all of them. As always, his enthusiasm was infectious, galvanizing those within hearing range. He frequently studied the catalogue of the exhibition down to his last days.



David continued to paint until the very end of his life. The part of his brain that was attuned to the perception of art continued to function. *Babalu Babalu*, an acrylic on canvas, is one of his last paintings and is an accomplished work. You may conclude, as the viewer accustomed to David's perfectly nuanced design, that this piece lacks focus and proportion, but to me, as his loving friend and harshest critic, it is a coherent farewell to a lifetime of serious, determined, and joyous effort.

Robert J. Koenig, 2017

Curator