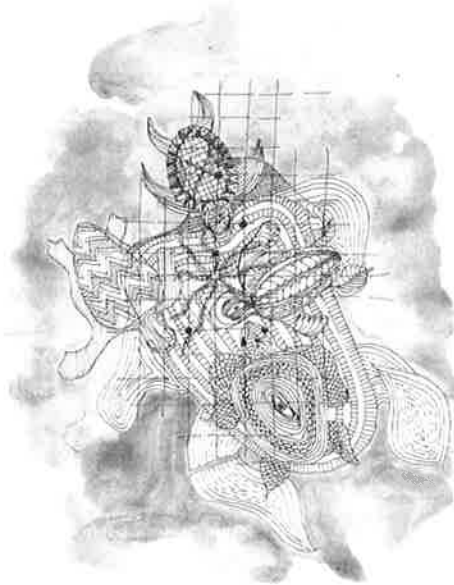


Art Upstairs

Gallery & Café

Middleton House
corner Young Street & the Carenage, St. George's



Paper Conversations

an exhibition of drawings by Erik Johnson
opening Tuesday, 7 June 2016, 4-8 pm
exhibition continues through 23 June

Erik Johnson

This exhibition marks Erik Johnson's first segue from architecture towards fine art, and comes at a time of significant transition in his life. It will be no secret that he has very recently come through heavy weather. Within the last fifteen months, he dissolved his long-term relationship. Additionally, he struggled with major health challenges, and to add more grist to the rumor mills, he turned around and waltzed away from the restaurant he and his ex-partner very successfully built two years ago, presciently named The Edge, virtually handing off the keys to the first lucky suspect happening by whilst he was packing up his wares.

"He's gone mad" was sung like a hymn wafting the atmosphere.

But by other perspectives, Erik had gone quite sane.

When Depth Psychology turns its gaze upon Art, it considers it an act of superb maturity on the part of the artist to focus inward, daring to dwell amongst the ghosts of hidden fears, failures and secret desires, in an effort to encounter and befriend the real soul. According to the 16th century British mystic, William Blake, whose poetic influence is felt strongly throughout Erik's oeuvre, this inner focus holds the only key to a considered spiritual life. To find oneself vulnerable, bereft of all social and familial safeguards, and to make of this chaos an opportunity to delve within and really grow; this is much more than the intelligent fluke of a smart architect playing with his pen and brush. This is Erik, a curly haired and bare-footed rascal, taking up the strings that would unravel the puzzles that bind his life, and tugging at them hard.

Now is his time.

Erik Johnson was born in 1953, and following his banker father's career, lived in Barbados, Grenada, the Caymans and Dominica. He was educated in England (or taught humility, as he would say), and worked in New York and Paris. He has built structures, run restaurants and galleries, and cooked up an

exquisite cuisine. He's illustrated books, written poetry and produced fine art. A man of many parts, what he has to say of himself is simply that he is "amazed by the quiriness of the physical and social environments, and in awe of the arrogance of humans."

When I first looked at Erik's drawings and read their poetic accompaniment, I experienced a sense of order and calm. Needless to say, since art is projective, equally reflecting what is within the author as is within the viewer, interpretations are highly subjective. And, art being art, interpretations are not only subjective and personal but emotionally fraught. Nevertheless, on repeated gazing, this sense of tranquility remained and I formed an early impression that this artist had come to the Tao of his life, in which movement of thought and movement of matter, simultaneously become softer, slower and smaller.

Small wonder that the first piece in his catalogue is titled *Song of the Seahorse*, the seahorse being an ambling, unhurried dancer, symbolic of patience and contentment. Believed by the ancients to have mystical qualities, and to represent strength and power despite its lazy gait, the seahorse also shows up to symbolize that protection is needed from external harassment and hurt. Additionally, the seahorse symbolizes extra-sensory perception, thanks to its very sharp eyes which work independently of each other, and which can discern the spiritual spheres as well as the natural.

This totem is perfect for introducing Erik's oeuvre, and his frame of mind. And, those who know him well will not miss his typical tongue in cheek irony in choosing the ephemeral seahorse as his totem, since the seahorse is believed by the old Greeks to carry the souls of dead men away. Very gently. So, what will it be, Erik must have asked himself, putting pen to paper and musing that *The landscape hadn't changed for hundreds of years*. Old entrenched ways of being, those deemed holy as well as those denounced as profane, all would now be called up from the murky depths for a good look around.

You will notice that his seahorse, bony exoskeleton and all, has a mandala at its core. Rather, as the horse is presented with dual aspects of itself, one more contained and the other wont to twirl away; each discrete representation of the ego-self has a mandala at its core. Jungians will tell you that once someone has undergone inner turmoil, and if given to paint, they will paint mandalas (circles) to force order back upon chaos. Rather, to find the order that exists inherently within, despite frightful turmoil on the surface. Mandalas turn up on almost every of Erik's images.

We are able to divine the artist's prayer, so to speak, that a fresh new being may eventually emerge from the depths of his agitated waters, or else be swallowed up and sunk with Poseidon.

The journey thus commences with thirst enough to decimate a desert floor. *The ground was awfully dry and had began to split and crack.* Signifying both branches and tributaries of a dry river, as well as connective tissue snaking between bronchial muscle and trachea, this image cries out that it cannot breathe. The two most vital requirements for life, air and water, are absent from the scene.

With reference to interconnections between medical science and psychology, or the psyche and the soma, issues with breath and the lungs are believed to have an origin in grief, loss, or a "death-fright". Indeed, the review of what life has brought so far, as Erik is undertaking through his art, is a work of mourning. And, considering that this representation of a wasteland is superimposed upon a square, a deeper symbolic message is implied. Squares typically represent *firmitas* or materiality. One might therefore consider squares grounding, or safe as houses. But given that dry rivers and bronchial tubes run away from this square, we then turn to the shadow side of the square's representation, and consider that the four sides represent the four limbs of the cross, therefore speaking to extreme existential suffering. In either event, we are put on notice that the normative ways of thinking and behaving are suffocating here, and are going to be snaked away from. There is a massive

devaluation of the current situation, and we are now about the business of taking stock of it all.

Erik's work is heavily symbolic, describing multiple layers of conflicted meanings. His drawings, in which his architectural formation is clear, recall those of another architect who drew profusely though she only had her first exhibition in her 70s. Brazilian/Italian Lina Bo Bardi believed that architecture, as well as art, should be expressive of direct human need, and purposefully "forge another true present, not found elsewhere."

Nor is Erik the first artist to use paper and canvas for working out dilemma. Most of the artists from the Romantic period embraced art to express melancholia, madness, and connection to divinity, espousing in fact that to be a serious artist you had to be "touched". Among the Modern masters, some of the iconic "touched" were Van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Georgia O'Keefe, each of whom was institutionalized at some point. The father of modern psychotherapy, Carl Jung, is also known to have holed up in his studio and purposely went crazy for a while. Jung's Red Book (of drawings and poetry) was the famously influential result. *Baal* is another piece of Erik's which, like other seekers before him, puts "wilderness-wandering" in the pride of place. The central understanding amongst all of these artists and psychologies is that a fully integrated individual is not an aloof, academic sage, but one who feels everything deeply and has the wisdom to face it, and show it.

While densely symbolic these images are also beautiful to behold. They hold *venustas* (beauty). Compelling, intricate and structurally robust, there is humor and whimsy enough to make the darker transformational elements actually draw the viewer in. From the landscape of a previous image comes *One of them came out of the Ground in front of us. It was fully formed*. Visually, it provides a respite from the cracked and starved images which come before. The movement in the architecture here is vertical; everything rises; mountains, vegetation, and even a flag. Vegetal matter doubles as a bright central sun and

germinating seedlings present hopeful regeneration. But Erik is still working an alchemical dimension, don't forget, and what is also bursting out of the ground in front of us is a primordial reptile holding us fixed in the gaze of that one eye. Moreover, half of the fish's body is earthen and still parched, or it may well be rotting; it's evolutionary promise not as yet fulfilled.

This image recalls another architect, the Canadian Frank Gehry, who also made furniture and jewelry (for Tiffanys), and who became obsessed with fish in his middle age. For him, fish symbolized a hesitation to go forward without further understanding of the past from which he had come.

Take a second Eden-esque drawing of Erik's, this one a recognizably Caribbean landscape, and therefore safe and familiar. But while sugar cane stalks again confirm the upward impetus of life, vitality and the quench of thirst, this tall drink of water is dripping with serpents. If you stay with the picture long enough to attend to its symbolic message, you will remember that snakes always signify the same primordial intensity as the fish of the previous frame. Snakes show up in all Edens, muscular, masculine and writhing with sexual muscle. One snake in a tree suffices to flood an image with all of these meanings, and Erik has given us a field full of them. So alluring are they, with their pretty, pretty colors and searching tongues that you long to touch. but only at your peril. *King Sugar* has a lethal bite, and even if one handles the threat like all Caribbeans handle snakes, with the swift, singing arc of a flying cutlass, the message remains the same. Reach for some sugar, and serpents will deploy.

The theme of duality and a search for balance between polar opposites populates all of Erik's drawings. Take the raw sensuality expressed in *Karioche's* full red lips and raining kisses, juxtaposed against his a-sexual representation of the feminine in *Surprised to see me*.

The conflict of opposites shows up too, in *The Matador*, where the fullest representation of masculinity possible rears up to dominate all other elements (even the absent bull), yet which renders the Matador without feet and without hands, and therefore entirely without means to save himself, At his most very alive,

he is simultaneously the most helpless, and all this in full view of an entire stadium. What a fix.

At some point in Erik's literal journey through this series of drawings - about one year in all - he moved away from the incubating phase in which he "doodled" on eight-by-elevens in order to go sane, and began making "art" for its own sake. As his canvas widened to allow for this advanced direction, Erik never let go of the central force behind his creative energy, his own soul's yearning. *I awoke to find myself surrounded by ancestors* is one of the most resolved pieces, artistically, symbolically and spiritually. Without jokes, rudeness or other kicks, Erik presents the fragile and numinous nature of the dreamtime, where the integration of our conscious and unconscious lives takes place; where healing occurs; where myths and archetypes come together to make sense of the big questions. We sense a new at-one-ment, and see that Erik now moves away from motifs of death (arid landscapes, poisonous serpents, grief sickness) and towards recognition of life-after-death. We see the personal (narcissistic) ego giving way to the suprapersonal, or collective. We do see evidence of the fragmentation which is a constant psychic phenomenon for all mankind, but moreover we have a sense of an adult and fully embraced space amongst the ebb and flow of all things eternal. For better or for worse, this image suggests the distinct awakening which comes with a successful reassessment of feelings and values, and speaks to great existential change.

Though viewers may choose any of these works as the climax of the exhibition for them, for me *Ancestors* does the trick for me, particularly as it fulfills the third of the third and fundamental principle of architecture, *utilitas*. Here Erik has used his significant talent as an artist to tease out his own process of individuation.

This catalogue essay was conceived to reflect the artist's process, in which he literally drew and painted his way through an epic personal renaissance, only later realizing that he had produced a full gallery of art. The result is a very exciting and provocative exhibition. I have been delighted to contribute this small part.

Hazel Da Breo, PhD, Historian / Psychotherapist

Prices

original drawings,
big, mounted & glazed. ECD 520 / USD 193

original black/white drawings
8.5 x 11", unframed. ECD 150 / USD 56

Handpainted prints
8.5 x 11", glazed, backed
(sold without corners). ECD 150 / USD 56

