

Dialogue in art: Femi J Johnson making impact in Lehigh Valley with his collage-like abstract works

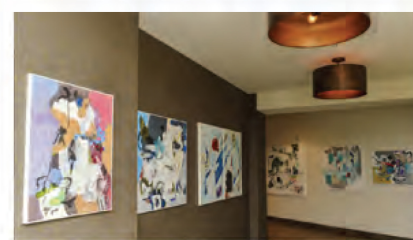


PHOTO GALLERY: Allentown Artist Femi Johnson shows work at Renaissance Hotel (April Gamiz)

By **Tim Higgins**
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In Allentown, there's a gem hidden in plain sight.

Amid the restaurants and small businesses on Hamilton Street between Fifth and Sixth streets, a glass-pane door leads to a flight of stairs that go up into an old office building.

Up three floors and along narrow hallways is Expressions Studio, the art gallery and studio of Femi J. Johnson.

Johnson is one of the leading artists working in the Lehigh Valley today and has work at three local venues.

At the Nurture Nature Center in Easton is "Urban Pathways," a series of 10 works he calls "abstract story-scapes" that focus on living in Easton. The show is curated by the center's art director Keri Maxfield.



"Walking the Streets — Benevolent Solitude" is among the works by Allentown artist Femi Johnson on display in "Urban Pathways" at the Nurture Nature Center in Easton. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

In the mezzanine of the Renaissance Hotel in downtown Allentown through November is “Abstract Story-scapes,” a collection highlighting Johnson’s signature style, curated by Deborah Rabinsky.

His work also can be seen in the “Fences” urban gallery project hanging on construction fences between Ninth and Tenth streets in Allentown. The gallery, sponsored by Allentown’s City Center, features large banners by seven artists.

Johnson’s style is a mix of the abstract, the expressive and the figurative — filled with snippets of realism, symbolism and surrealism. His work is marked by the additions he makes to the canvas in the form of collage. He describes his work as “... a series of conscious decisions with no complete outcome in mind.”

“Walking the Streets — Benevolent Solitude,” at the Nurture Nature Center, is a good example. A predominantly yellow background is covered by paint, photographs and wallpaper swatches. Blues, dull grays and browns are dabbed and splashed, interspersed with photos of windows — street scenes — that are mimicked by a rough representation of squares drawn in gray paint.

The work is an impression of life in the city as well as an expression of his involvement in it and his observation of it.

For his work, Johnson relies on his experience in life, as well as his art education, which began at an early age. From childhood, he referred to his drawings as “collage expressions,” when putting together multiple drawings became his process or his method of incorporating other paintings, photographs and drawings into his own work.

“I kind of always drew like that, putting it all on one page,” he says. “I envision the world, my existence within and meaning for painting, as collaged experiences.”

Maxfield, who has worked with Johnson for five years as a partnering artist and workshop presenter, says, “Femi’s work is unique in that it is richly layered with life experiences, but remains fresh and improvised. His color is intuitive, and the collaged pieces and drawn images that weave in and out of the visual plane become a symbolic shorthand in which the artist represents his story while remaining open to the process of creating.”

That story begins in Manhattan, where Johnson was born. He was raised in Easton and began making pencil drawing at age 10. “I learned early on that I loved drawing,” Johnson says. “I love pencil drawing.”

That love blossomed. He became a master draftsman for major corporations and manufacturers, for which he drew exploded views of mechanisms and machinery. “I was doing big contracts at AT&T, Kraft Foods,” he says. “But I didn’t think about painting.”

As the digital age dawned, industry became more computerized and Johnson found himself having to develop new computer skills, including taking a year to learn Computer Aided Design (CAD) programs. It was during this time that the urge to paint became strong, and instead of pursuing drafting he enrolled in a two-year directed study in studio fine art in Hudson Valley College, N.Y.

“Going to school and being in a big studio with students who were a generation behind me,” says Johnson, “it was a real motivation.”

In 2012 he moved back to the Lehigh Valley, and a year later started Expressions Studio and Gallery at 542 Hamilton, a space he shares with Ana Hamilton and Andi Grunberg.

The gallery, built by Johnson, who even designed the lighting, has a work space with windows overlooking Hamilton. The public is encouraged to come inside.



Outstanding Achievement in the Visual Arts honoree Femi Johnson speaks during the 28th annual Allentown Arts Ovation Awards, presented by the Allentown Arts Commission, in 2016. (MATT SMITH / SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL)

It is this kind of openness that Johnson brought to the Allentown art scene that helped cement his reputation. He has had showings at most local venues in the area in recent years, including RE:find Gallery and the Allentown Art Museum in Allentown, Bethlehem House Gallery, the Bethlehem Fine Arts Commission gallery and Santa Bannon Fine Art gallery in Bethlehem, and the IF Museum/Academy, Brick and Mortar and Connexions Gallery in Easton.

In 2016, Johnson received the Allentown Arts Ovation Award for Outstanding Achievement in Visual Art.

Johnson's work is unique in his infusion of narrative elements into areas of raw paint. Look closely, and viewers find scratches, marks, graffiti or calligraphic lines and swirls incorporated into his paintings, with many of the marks done with the tips of stiff, dried-out brushes.

Johnson works primarily in acrylic, often with an oil glaze that adds a transparency to the paint as well as a kind of evening out of surface across the canvas. It is an example of the mastery Johnson has achieved in directing the eye across his works.

"It gives you a place to be — there has to be some connection between the viewer and the work. It's just a consciousness, everyday consciousness," he says.

Johnson's unique visual language can be seen in a striking piece in his show at the Renaissance titled "A Voyeur Moon Rising." The work is predominantly blue with swathes of black that evoke blocks of night and a deep blue sky. Evening is coming and the work is a walk through the city accented by collaged photos of buildings and a piece of cardboard, like something off the street. At the center is a rectangular whirlwind of color, like a small, separate work surrounded by pink, yellow and aqua in a symphony of shapes, forms, colors — a free-flowing riff on the act of looking and seeing.

"I call it contemporary raw art. I think it is quite urban," he says of his work, often referring to it as a "representation of the abstract consciousness of the Lehigh Valley. It's a life — it's a meaning."

Ultimately, Johnson's art is about art. "I'm looking for that rawness in the pigment," he says. To him, paint provokes conversation and Johnson is looking for a dialogue, not only between the elements on the canvas but also between the viewer and the work. He pokes our sensibilities with splotches of color and pokes again with drawings and photographs that throw you into another world.

"Layers and fragments from childhood to adult, formal and self-education, adding personal and media influenced worldview with spiritual and practical human gestures all floating inside looking for position," he explains. "The work is about translating that to canvas with a forward view in process."

Johnson is evoking a connection and "shifting consciousness."

"I approach subject matter in a manner to exalt life ... in whatever form it occurs."

Tim Higgins is a freelance writer.

DETAILS

Femi Johnson

"Abstract Story-Boards": Through November, Renaissance Mezzanine Gallery, Renaissance Hotel, 12 N. Seventh St., Allentown. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. Third Thursday reception: 6-8 p.m. Aug. 16

"Urban Pathways: Safe or Sacred Spaces," through Oct. 16, Nurture Nature Center, 518 Northampton St. Easton. noon-4 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday; 6-9 p.m. Thursday

"Fences," presented by Allentown City Center, between Ninth and Tenth streets.

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