

WILLIAM H. JOHNSON'S FORMAL GENIUS

By John Yau

By the time William H. Johnson (1901–1970) painted *Three Girls* (c. 1941) and *Homesteaders* (c. 1942), he was making the best work of his career. Returning to America after living mainly in Denmark and Norway from 1926 to 1938, his future looked bright in many ways. Sadly, just a few years later, he stopped making art, and for the last twenty-three years of his life he was confined to Central Islip State Hospital, New York State's largest mental health facility. This means that Johnson stopped making art when he was in his mid-forties, and that his career barely spanned two decades.

It is in his views of African American life, which he started in 1939, shortly after returning to America, that one gets a sense of just how far Johnson had to travel, both geographically and artistically, in order to embrace a subject that he left behind when he moved to Paris in 1926. Previously known for his landscapes, Johnson seemed to turn on a dime and began focusing on the figure. His depictions of black people in urban and rural settings, both carefully observed and recreated from memory, are what earn him a special place in the history of early American Modernism.

Johnson was one of a handful of American artists to take first-hand knowledge of European modernists – such as Paul Gauguin, Chaim Soutine and Edvard Munch – and transform it into something all his own. In this regard, Johnson shares something with older vanguard American artists – Alfred H. Maurer (1868–1932), Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), Patrick Henry Bruce (1891–1936) and Stuart Davis (1892–1964), august company. The difference is

that for Johnson, being modern meant a “return to the primitive,” which helps clarify his interest in expressionist artists.

Beginning with the lessons he learned from his teacher, Charles W. Hawthorne (a former student of William Merritt Chase), who recognized his student’s talent and helped him, and continuing through the work done in Denmark and Norway, Johnson’s progress was consistently toward an ever more radical understanding of painting and composition. Moreover, in jettisoning his academic education to make seemingly untrained art, especially after returning to America, Johnson reveals how deeply he absorbed one of Modernism’s most potent qualities: the search for the authentic.

For Johnson, the authentic turned out to be African American life, particularly as he witnessed it in Harlem, where he began teaching at the Harlem Community Center in the spring of 1939. Looking at the lushly painted, expressionistic landscapes that Johnson made at the end of his time in Norway, and then at the stripped down, simplified paintings of fashion-conscious Harlemites he began making shortly after settling in New York, I am amazed by how quickly and thoroughly he both inhabited and discerned his new circumstances.

In *Three Girls*, Johnson arranges interlocking flat forms of unmodulated color to depict three young African American women, seen from the waist up and standing close together, pressed against the picture plane. By slightly overlapping the face and blouse of the woman on the left with the left side of the one in the



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middle, and the face and blouse of woman in the middle with the right side of woman on the right, like three playing cards spread on a table, Johnson evokes space and volume through the use of flat forms. Each woman's face is a different color, and each is dressed in a distinctively colored blouse and hat. Although the three figures are shown as a single form, suggesting the strength of their friendship, Johnson's attention to telling detail, from the tilt of their eyebrows and the shape of their mouths, to the turn of their collars and the simple pattern on their hats, endows each woman with distinctive features and fashion sense that seem both aesthetic and political. Or, to be blunt, Johnson is relying on purely formal means to remind viewers that African Americans do not all look alike. But rather than being didactic, the painting is tender and sweet.

In *Homesteaders*, Johnson returns to the rural South of his childhood through his imagination, and depicts an African American family on the porch of their one room house. Again, Johnson makes distinctions with incredible economy. As Richard Powell astutely points out in his indispensable essay published in the monograph, *Homecoming: the Life and Art of William H. Johnson*, (1991):

By making his black subject's hands and feet appear larger than life, Johnson underscores the manual, blue-collar drudgery that defined the lives of most African-Americans during this era. For audiences already attuned to such racially grounded pop refrains as "Your Feet's Too Big" (sung by jazz musician Thomas "Fats" Waller), [such] figures [...] become stand-ins for an entire race and class of people.

Depicting them on the porch, under a crescent moon, Johnson subtly suggests that even though their days are long, this family attains unity and independence through their labor. At the same time, the flattened space, the horizontal clapboards, the vertical bands of the furrowed field hem, and the tree on each side of the house hem in. They are free and not free.

Johnson's ability to contain conflicting viewpoints, his eye for telling detail, his seamless adaption of folk art to modernist demands, and his economy of means are unparalleled. This intrepid artist, after absorbing various currents of early modernism, introduced them into new areas of social consciousness and aesthetic thinking. For that alone, he becomes one of the giants of American Modernism and an important groundbreaker.

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