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THE PRIMAL PLANTS OF BUFFIE JOHNSON

Picasso said "art is what nature is not", and even Georgia O'Keefe, who was much more involved with nature than Picasso, said that "a hill or a tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is lines and colors put together so that they say something."¹ But for Buffie Johnson, who has devoted the last twelve years to painting flowers and plants, art and nature are practically interchangeable. The sensations of beauty to be got from the arrangements of lines and colors and shapes in a flower are kin to the esthetic emotions to be derived from her paintings of them – the subject and its treatment seem equally artful. An orchid, a mushroom, an iris or a dandelion puff is both art and nature when seen through Buffie Johnson's vision.

Flowers and plants mean at least as many different things to as many people as art does. Flowers are the luxury items of the young and the poor. They are symbols of love and metaphors for the Gods and Goddesses. Their short life imbues them with a moral meaning that comes closer to Humanism than any other form of natural beauty. As Thoreau said, "The mystery of the life of plants is kindred with that of our own lives."⁵ We honor our dead, our first born, those just married, and last loved with flowers. In an age of heightened sexual awareness flowers have become morphological metaphors for the sex organs; in an age of dawning ecological awareness, plants are coming to be seen as powerful forces for good, ceaselessly supplying us with the food we eat and renewing the air we breathe.

Traditionally, flower painting was considered a "proper" genre for a "lady painter", though it wasn't until Georgia O'Keefe and the Women's Movement that flower painting lost its minor status and took an equal place beside other major genres. The seventies (thanks largely to feminist artists) saw a return to subjective, emotionally and symbolically loaded art, after the dry decade of sixties objectivity. Buffie Johnson had been painting mythological subjects that reflected proto-feminist views as early as the 1940's. Though she went on to achieve a large measure of success in the "man's" art world of the fifties and sixties, her personal discovery of plant and flower imagery in 1968 was the fortuitous coming-together of a love for nature, with her parallel scholarly researches into the Great Goddess mythology. The time was right for this conjunction.

Johnson came into art the way anyone would in the 1930s, by studying at the Art Student's League, Stanley William Hayter's Atelier, and the Academie Julien in Paris. Her choice of Francis Picabia for private instruction stands apart from this sort of mainstream art school route, as does her choice of subjects in the early paintings of the 1940s – allegorical treatments of feminine themes like *The Passion of Beatrice Cenci*, *The Sorceress*, and *The Eleusinian Mysteries*. A typical canvas, titled *Déjeuner sur Mer* which was

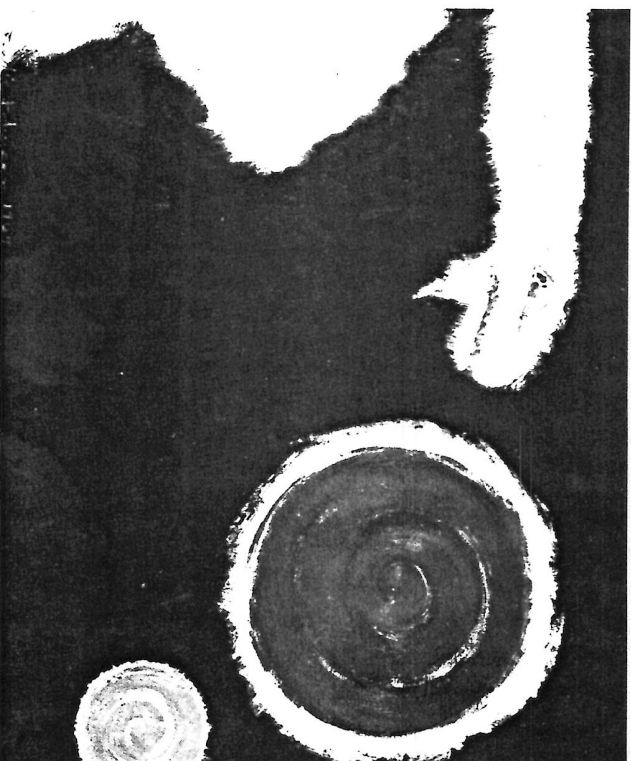


Bullfe Johnson. *Self Portrait*, 1939. Oil on linen, 24" x 18". (Photographs by Ambur Hiken)

included in the "31 Women Painters" show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in 1934 (the first show ever devoted exclusively to art by women in a commercial gallery), is full of erotically disporting female



Meridian, 1961. Oil on linen, 82" x 116"



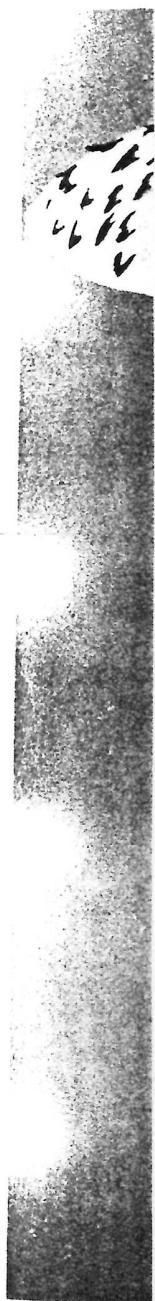
Subtlest Beast of the Field I, 1964. Oil on linen, 50" x 78"

figures, rhythmically submerged in a poetic netherworld that recalls El Greco's flickering light and Cézanne's dark passions. Strangely compelling sexuality co-exists with melancholy in many of Johnson's early romantic paintings, where figures with the healthy strength of an Esther Williams are imbued with the hectic flush of decadence that we associate with Leonor Fini or Félicien Rops.

Buffie Johnson concluded the 1940s by turning from such fearsome subjects as *Judith* with the head of Holofernes to still lifes and automatist monotypes with poetic titles. A calm mood comes over the "international style" abstractions she painted in the 1950s culminating in the huge mural she was commissioned to paint inside New York's new Astor Theatre, a geometricized abstraction of the heavens or a nightlit city grid. Something of the violent energy of the 1940s returns in the 1960s, minus the brooding temper. Explosions of brilliant yellow and red, spiralling nebulae, invasive bull, snake, spider, and fish forms, freewheeling calligraphy, and an obsession with certain symbols (particularly a center-dotted vertical lozenge for female sexuality) characterize these excited canvases. In *The Eternal Present II*, one sees a bull heading toward that sexual symbol, while a snake exits lower right (the Devil leaving the garden of Eden? or a snake goddess symbol?) – all of which points toward the clear-cut symbolism that will dominate the canvases of the next decade. In *Transcendence*, which seems at first to be only a gloriously glowing golden abstraction where sunlight, yellow pigment, and painterliness stand in for the attainment of enlightenment, one can discern a nascent flower form coalescing out of the brushstrokes. This image was to propagate the floral canvases of the next decade.

Buffie Johnson started painting plants in 1968 with *Autumn*, which is based on the theme of life–death–rebirth she had been exploring more or less directly since the early 1940s. The plant curling up in death, brown and green against a gold and green field, can also be seen to contain the germ of life in its coiled tendrils. Squeezed downwards by lateral pressures, it bursts upward to symbolize rebirth, just as dying leaves reveal the upthrusting buds of next year's replacements as they fall. "Beauty doth fade – its emblem is a leaf/that mingles with the earth in quick decay"³ wrote Thomas Cole, the 19th century American landscapist, adding elsewhere in the same volume, "All things live to die and die to be renewed again / Therefore we should rejoice at death and not complain."⁴

"Vegetable analogues", as Barbara Novak calls plant/human analogies in her book on *Nature and Culture* have long been philosopher's favorites, but in the golden age of American landscape painting when the Hudson River School painters found kindred spirits in the Transcendentalist philosophers, poets, and naturalists, they reached an apogee. There was a lesser resurgence of this kind of thinking at the end of the century as a result of theosophical speculations about a perpetual cosmic cycle of creation, death, and regeneration. Many Symbolists were directly involved with the Spiritualists, and even Mondrian, the apparant paragon of rationality, was deeply concerned with theosophy, painting living and dying chrysanthemums to demonstrate Rudolf Steiner's belief that one can find the "ex-



Lady Murasaki.

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For Buffie Johnson, and for a number of other women painting today, the metaphorical significance of the subject dominates formal considerations. When she paints a flower seven feet wide, emblematically frontal, and hieratically austere, she does so to give the meaning of the flower maximum impact. On the other hand, when Georgia O'Keefe painted near-abstract, larger-than-life flowers she did so to convey to the viewer the personal emotion she first felt upon observing the subject. For O'Keefe, "abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint."⁶ Johnson's flowers, painted on the same vast scale as post-war Abstract Expressionism, dwarf everything near them. She has written that their magnification is natural, "since the very survival of the planet is dependent on vegetation and because the enlarged image provides a way of re-establishing the important spiritual position that plants held in the ancient world. At the early agricultural festivals the sudden appearance of a single sprig of barley was sufficient to produce a state of ecstasy in the beholder."⁷ Her painting *Ariadne* illustrates this idea: "The single ear of a long-grained barley, named for the goddess of the grain, drops its slender strands to create a trance-like vision."⁸

She fills the field with an image, often extending it from the top edge to the bottom, and sometimes to both lateral edges as well. "I think of my paintings as objects of contemplation", she says, "that's why I do them large; it takes them out of the botanical class and transcends them into art."⁹ But, like the American landscapists of the last century who felt that promiscuously altering the God-given images of nature bordered on blasphemy, Johnson does, in fact, render her subjects with botanist-like objectivity. Unlike Turner, she will never be accused of confusing "Scotch firs with stone pines",¹⁰ a criticism Ruskin once made. She sometimes refers to botanical studies, garden catalogues and photographs, but prefers to work from the real thing. She works up in stages from small (7x9" and 8x10") formats through various middle sizes to huge canvases (6x7 and 8'), since some images (*Amanita*, for example) won't bear enlargement at all, and others need considerable adjustment of the forms to be "right" at the large scale. *Pasiphae* went from a square format in its small version to a long horizontal in the large one in order to better convey the seductiveness it symbolizes, but many of the more regular images, such as the near-circles of *Eos* (a morning glory for the goddess of dawn), *Ephesus*, 1973, and *Demeter*, 1974, needed little or no adjustment of the squares within which they reside so comfortably. Johnson articulates her backgrounds minimally to let the emphasis remain on the subject. Therefore they must be carefully chosen and adjusted as to hue and tone and are often greatly altered from version to version.

There are three basic categories of subject matter in Buffie Johnson's twelve-year oeuvre of nature painting: Flowers, such as *Iris*, *Violet*, and the tiger orchid with its flying petals in *Isis*; Plants, such as the leafless seedling she calls *Tree of Life* and the insect-eating swamp plant in *Sarcophagus* (representing the Great Goddess in her lethal aspect); and Fruit, such as *Eve's Apple*. *Lady Murasaki*, the first great woman writer of Japan, is honored by

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Iris, 1973. C



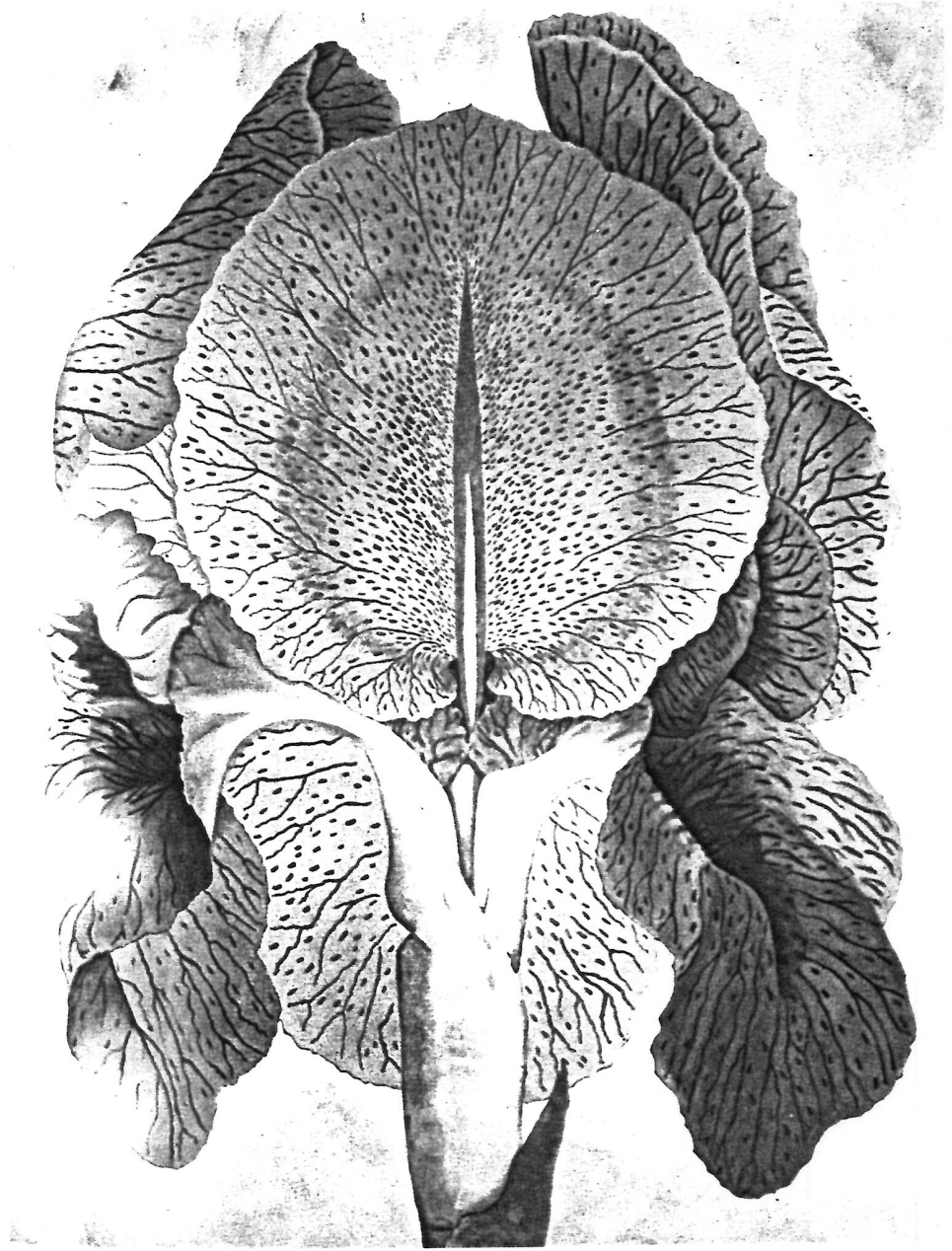
women painting today, takes formal consideration. Emblematically frontal, the painting of the flower makes the viewer the subject. For O'Keefe, "an imaginable thing in myself is painted on the same as everything near them. "since the very survival use the enlarged image spiritual position that cultural festivals the sufficient to produce a state illustrates this idea: "The goddess of the grain, n."⁸

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atter in Buffie Johnson's ch as *Iris*, *Violet*, and the h as the leafless seedling ant in *Sarcophagus* (repre- and Fruit, such as *Eve's* of Japan, is honored by

an exquisitely delicate umbrella-mushroom encircled at its neck by a ruffle of palest pink, and the Virgin Mary is symbolized by a *Lady Slipper*, 1975, with its chaste, womb-like sac to suggest "the vessel most pure". Though many of the canvases have predominately pale blue, beige, gray or whitish

1973. Oil on linen, 82" x 65"





Pasiphae, 1976. Oil on linen, 68" x 85". Coll. Marilyn French

tonalities, a few, such as *Meenakshi* with its incandescent red and white tulip, have brilliant hues.

Historian Linda Nochlin¹¹ has speculated that the large scale, magnified imagery created by women artists is the result of an archetypal imprinting of the female psyche. Women are literally closer than men to objects – the food they cook and the clothes they sew, the floors they scrub and, of course, the babies they nurse – so for this reason perhaps, they paint things larger than life. By symbolizing the Great Goddess with flowers and the life/death cycle with plants in the transcendentalist tradition, and by painting large so that we are surrounded by these images for contemplation, their borders reaching beyond our field of vision, Johnson brings us up close to the heart of religious emotion. The great purity of her handling of the paint surface, her fastidiousness, and her patience with detail and nuance all reinforce this effect. Buffie Johnson's quietly emphatic symbols convey consciously or half-consciously held attitudes that reflect a feminine world view, and, by extension, a larger philosophical notion. "From its inception", she once wrote in defense of painting, "art has ventured into the unknown realm of the spirit, a world that manifests itself through symbols rather than words. Magic images have for millennia ex-

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1. *ongia O*
2. *Nature and*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 10
4. *Ibid.*, p. 11
5. *Pet Mondr*
6. *Op. at. Gee*
7. *The artist'*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *at. Nai*
11. *Linda Noc*
12. *Buffie Joh*
13. *Op. at. H.*

Meenakshi, 19



pressed the timeless fears and concerns of the human mind."¹² Her fragile flowers, perfectly presented in an unadorned state of nakedness, serve, as an artist from the last century claimed all nature did, a clear purpose: "By gratifying through the senses, the instinct for beauty, (they) vindicate the poetry of life with a divine sanction."¹³

NOTES

1. *Georgia O'Keefe*. Viking Press, New York 1976.
2. *Nature and Culture*, by Barbara Novak. Oxford University Press, New York 1980, p. 114.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
5. *Piet Mondrian, Centennial Exhibition*. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1971, p. 42.
6. *Op. cit. Georgia O'Keefe*.
7. The artist's written notes on her work after seven years of painting plants.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Op. cit. Nature and Culture*, p. 114.
11. Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists", Part I. *Arts Magazine*, February 1974, p. 49.
12. Buffie Johnson, in "Painters Reply", *Artforum*, September 1975, p. 27.
13. *Op. cit.* H. T. Tuckerman, *Nature and Culture*, p. 101.

Meenakshi, 1978. Oil on linen, 52" x 78"

