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Smithsonian American Art Museum Opens the First Major Retrospective of Contemporary Painter John Alexander

John Alexander (b. 1945) is internationally renowned for his paintings and drawings, which convey humor, rage and a robust appreciation of the human and natural world. “John Alexander: A Retrospective,” on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from Dec. 21 through March 16, 2008, is the first full-scale examination of the artist’s three-decade career.

The exhibition encompasses works from the late 1970s to the present. It includes powerful landscapes and intimate studies of birds and plants; it also presents many of his incisive, satirical commentaries on politics, religion and the human condition. The exhibition features 40 paintings and 27 works on paper. Jane Livingston, author and independent art historian, is the curator of the exhibition, which is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Eleanor Jones Harvey, chief curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, is the coordinating curator in Washington.

“John Alexander’s lifelong fascination with the natural world connects his work with subjects of deep meaning throughout America—what land means and how it reflects subtle changes in our world,” said Elizabeth Broun, the museum’s Margaret and Terry Stent Director. “I am hopeful that visitors to this retrospective will find these same themes of identity and respect for the land in works by 19th-century landscape painters hanging in the museum’s permanent collection galleries.”

“Whether puncturing inflated egos or studying nature, Alexander has created a body of work that reflects his own restless appraisal of the world around him,” said Harvey. “Ultimately, his paintings and drawings stand as a passionate elegy to the earth as he knows it.”

“John Alexander: A Retrospective” demonstrates the artist’s superb command of his medium. His monumental canvases, such as “I’ve Been Living in a Hydrogen Bomb” (1983), establish his authority with large-scale mural-like paintings, while his more intimate compositions, including “Palm Beach Reflecting Pool” (2003), embody the artist’s mesmerizing anthropomorphism. Alexander’s drawings demonstrate his sharp eye for natural detail, his brilliant draftsmanship and deft handling of charcoal and watercolor.

Alexander has been a part of the vibrant art scene in New York since the late 1970s. His career path has led him to create compelling motifs that satisfy his deep and abiding love of nature. Along the way he also has developed a finely honed sense of humor, which is evident in many of his works.

Alexander's paintings are firmly anchored in a long-held tradition in American art that valued a sense of place. The early visionary landscapes set in the East Texas swamps give way to vibrant expressionistic canvases following the artist's move to New York in 1979. His career trajectory during the 1980s, with his kinetic approach to brushwork and form, earned him early praise from critics and support from serious collectors of American art.

While mastering landscape, Alexander also turned to the challenge of figuration and narrative in his work. With his return to figural work came a renewed look at the human condition, notably in large-scale works tackling social injustice and the foibles of political expediency, such as a recent work included in the exhibition, "Ship of Fools" (2006–2007). Acknowledging his debt to artists Francisco Goya and James Ensor, Alexander has shown himself to be an insightful proponent of modern painting.

His mature style carries him fluidly from pure abstraction to large-scale figural work to riveting views of East Texas swamps and Long Island coastal landscapes. From the late 1980s forward, Alexander explored the formal and spatial issues of the old masters, such as Édouard Manet and J.M.W. Turner. His paintings evolved from the earlier frenetic expressionism, as seen in "Chocolate Boogie" (1984), to tightly constructed compositions, as seen in "Glory Bound" (1993).

Most recently, Alexander has returned to the deep strain of naturalism that fueled his early career. Inspired by his own lush garden, the swamplands of Texas and his travels to Africa and Australia, he has devoted himself to drawing the world's flora and fauna with a keenly observant eye. These hauntingly beautiful drawings of flowers, animals, fish and forests, such as "The Beast, Arnhemland, Northern Australia" (2001) and "Thistles" (2002), reveal Alexander's commitment to the environment, a subject he returns to again and again. These works are often tinged with a subtle sense of sorrow and fear of imminent loss. As Alexander once described one of his works, "It's a look at Shangri La before the wrecking ball hits."

About the Artist

John Alexander has been described as iconoclastic, irreverent and, at the same time, deeply compassionate. He was born in 1945 in Beaumont, Texas, an oil and fishing-industry town in the marshlands of the Gulf Coast, a region heavily influenced by Cajun, Creole and African American cultures. Early in his career, Alexander produced visionary landscapes and feverish drawings that

incorporate elements of self-portraiture grounded in the imagery of his East Texas heritage. He lived in Houston, where he was an influential teacher at the University of Houston from 1972 to 1979, until he moved to New York. His work first took the national stage at the 1977 Corcoran Biennial in Washington; and in 1980, he returned to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which held a major solo exhibition of his work. Alexander's paintings and drawings have been exhibited in museums and galleries across the United States, Europe and Latin America, especially in France and Germany. Currently, he divides his time between New York City and Amagansett, Long Island.

Free Public Programs

On Saturday, Jan. 26 at 3 p.m., Alexander sits down with the museum's chief curator Eleanor Harvey to discuss his three decades in the vibrant art scene in New York, his powerful paintings and his biting sense of humor; tickets are required. Guest curator Jane Livingston will talk about Alexander's work Saturday, March 1 at 3 p.m. Both programs are free and will take place in the museum's McEvoy Auditorium. Visit the online calendar at reynoldscenter.org for more information.

Publication

The fully-illustrated catalog, published by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in association with Yale University Press, includes essays by Livingston; Alison de Lima Greene, curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and Robert Hughes, art critic. It is available for \$50 (\$38.95 softcover) in the museum store.

Tour

The exhibition travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (April 13 – June 22, 2008).

Credit

"John Alexander: A Retrospective" has been organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The presentation in Washington is supported in part by Catherine and Ernest Abbott, the Abramson Family Foundation Inc., Conrad and Ludmila Cafritz, Timothy A. and Mary Anna Eaton, The Eugene McDermott Foundation and Frank R. Ribelin.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to

7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Gallery Place/Chinatown (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Recorded museum information: (202) 633-7970. Web sites: americanart.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

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