



# Smithsonian American Art Museum

“John Alexander: A Retrospective”

On view Dec. 21, 2007 – March 16, 2008

## Exhibition Wall Text

*The Night the Lights Went Out in Dixie*

1982

sepia ink

Collection of Gary and Stacey Towning

“I grew up with the Civil Rights struggle etched into my memory. My mother had family in Alabama who were police officers, and images of the Selma riots affected us profoundly.” —John Alexander

*I've Been Living in a Hydrogen Bomb*

1982

oil on canvas

Collection of Randy Lerner, East Hampton, New York

John Alexander painted this work after making the move from Houston, Texas, to New York City in 1979.

“[It] is an accurate reflection of how highly charged my life was when I painted it. . . . I changed jobs, locations, and lifestyles all at one time. The trauma associated with all of this upheaval took a tremendous toll. Out of that came the largest and most challenging painting I had ever attempted. I guess it was a form of exorcism that kept me from becoming an ax-murderer.” —John Alexander

*The Mighty Bog*

1997

oil on canvas

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Berg, Houston, Texas

“I’ve found that my work has taken on a much less angry tone, a more peaceful one. I see myself as much more relaxed as an artist, so I think I can bring a different kind of intelligence to the work. So much of my art was always done based on raw, maniacal energy. Now, they are much more reflective, and they take much longer to do. They are more about the thought process as opposed to physical response.” —John Alexander

*Dancing on the Water Lilies of Life*

1988

oil on canvas

Dallas Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. Claude Albritton and the Museum League Purchase Fund

“Have you ever seen an East Texas swamp on a foggy morning? Everything works together to give you an incredible sensation, a spiritual communication with nature. Painting is the only other thing that can give me that kind of feeling.” —John Alexander

*Honky-Tonk Moon*

1989

oil on canvas

Collection of Alice and Lorne Michaels

“When I painted this picture, I’d been in New York for almost ten years. I was homesick sometimes, thinking about my early troubled years, an abandoned railroad track that I used to walk along. I used to watch for red-winged blackbirds in the rice fields. I love the new moon. There’s nostalgia in this picture, but also a feeling of foreboding.” —John Alexander

*Marabou Stork*

2002

watercolor, charcoal, and pastel

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, Bequest of Caroline Wiess Law, 2004.4

“Not one day since I was born has the landscape gained an inch. Every single day habitat is lost, and species are vanishing at an alarming rate. . . . The more people you have, the more land disappears.” —John Alexander

*Red Devil*

1984

oil on canvas

Private collection, Houston

“Ghost stories were abundant; the image of headless people running through the swamps was something I remember as a kid; ghosts and myths and voodoo images were a big part of my childhood. Eyes staring back at me became a theme. I like the idea that my paintings look back at you.” —John Alexander

*Windmill Lane*

1995

oil on canvas

Collection of Ann and Michael Mantell

In 1986, John Alexander began painting and living in Amagansett, Long Island, part of the year.

“It is a very rural and a beautiful kind of tranquil, bucolic area and I came out here in the summers. I started to plant a garden, started to plant flowers. I became very much involved in the summer experience of fishing and boating and gardening. All of a sudden, if you look at my work you start to see a very calming effect take place where it’s less frenetic, less emotionally crazed, less emotionally charged, and less psychologically dramatic.” —John Alexander

*Winter Storm at Montauk*

2004

oil on canvas

Private collection

“I ride my bicycle past [the ocean] every day, and it’s so close I can hear it at night. But I’d always had this terrible fear of painting it. One day there was this huge nor’easter, and I stood and watched the water, this great, majestic force of nature. It was just too overwhelming. . . . I then started making waves.” —John Alexander

*Man with Two Lives*

2007

oil on paper

Courtesy of Eaton Fine Art

“If you want to do a symbol of opulence and greed, you do it more universal. That’s why I put the mask on my subjects—I don’t want people to know who they are . . . You bring your own life experiences to the images. Then you can get behind the mask.” —John Alexander

*Alpha Males*

1994

oil on canvas

Private collection

“Comedy has been a huge, huge part of my life. I was married for many years to a comedienne, a great comedienne. . . . So sometimes, I give my paintings humorous titles. I’ve never actually set out to try to paint a humorous painting, but I have tried, consciously, to give them humorous titles.” —John Alexander

*Ship of Fools*  
2006-2007  
oil on canvas  
The Dicke Collection

“We can do our best as mortals on this earth to try to progress as sane civilized creatures. However, life provides obstacles that we as mere mortals cannot begin to understand. Therefore we break down and begin in the most savage manner to dissolve—it all seems so unnecessary.” —John Alexander

*Lotus Walk*  
1998  
oil on canvas  
Collection of Elana Stuart Ryan

“It’s a look at Shangri-la before the wrecking ball hits.” —John Alexander

*Glory Bound*  
1993  
oil on canvas  
Private collection

“Me at my best is when I do something completely unexpected, mysterious, and weird that allows the viewer to go in and try to find his own meanings. . . .When the mystery is gone I think it loses something.” —John Alexander

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