

Kathleen Carlton Johnson's

Life Among the Arts

By

Susan Sampson

You'd never know from looking at Kathleen Carlton Johnson that she is an independent scholar, poet, painter, and teacher. With her short curly hair, corduroy jeans, and black turtleneck sweater, she seems more like the other housewives that live in Traprock Valley down the road from the poorest town in Michigan, Lake Linden. You wouldn't think she is the type of woman who's on a first name basis with the Welsh poet, Annie Stevenson, a world traveler, and a speaker at Modern Language Association conferences. She gets up every morning not to write, but to drive to school where she works as a librarian and teacher. Though it is hard to picture Kathleen with her second one-woman gallery show - she is very much the woman of letters, an abstract painter, and the consummate teacher.

I first met Kathleen at a gallery show in 1985. We were the only exhibiting artists who attended the opening reception with babies in strollers. Over the years we've become friends and colleagues. We critique each other's paintings and edit each other's written work. Over the years, I've seen Kathleen's passion for art, writing and literature, but part of her passion manifests itself in her teaching. Teaching is another outlet for her creative compulsion.

At less than five feet tall, Kathleen has the energy of an Olympic gymnast. She is always moving. When I arrived at her home we settle ourselves in the formal living room. She immediately jumps up to show me her newest find; "I just bought the first issue of Hound & Horn. It was a literary journal started at Harvard in the 50's." Then she hands me a stack of poetry journals, the Bloomsbury Review, and an article about the papers of Jack Kerouac. "Read them, they're good," she says. During our interview, each of her four children pop their head into the room to say, "Hi," or ask a question. Kathleen transitions to mother and back to the task at hand with practiced ease. She throws her arms into the air in mock frustration and laughs.

She is excited about her most recent endeavor, a trip to Harvard University's Houghton library to read the letters the poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote to Houghton Mifflin, the publisher of her second book of poetry. Kathleen relates that Bishop's first book, North and South, consisted of twenty-five poems. When Houghton Mifflin asked Bishop for the manuscript for her second book, Cold Spring, she sent them twelve poems. So, the publisher combined North and South with the twelve new poems and published her second book. It was Cold Spring that won the Pulitzer in 1955. The Bishop/Houghton Mifflin letters have not been catalogued and Kathleen must present herself in person to gain access to them. She is preparing a paper on that correspondence for the April 2000, MLA conference in Ohio. "I will be the first person to read them in fifty years. Can you imagine that?"

She crosses the room to pluck her journal off the desk. Back in the chair with ice tea in hand, she reads me her newest poem

Thrift

No thrift in love,

no bargains

lots of waste.

this is the gift,

to own nothing but

another dish of day.

Kathleen has been published in numerous small presses and has two chapbooks, *Cold Pocket* and *Emotional Light*.

She is the consummate teacher. As I spend a rainy September evening with her, I learned about Elizabeth Bishop's relationship with her Brazilian lover, Lota. I hear Kathleen's newest poems, learn about rural Virginia schools, and am introduced to Harvard's Hound and Horn. Kathleen has been studying the works of Elizabeth Bishop and researching the poet's life to ascertain if and how Bishop's life impacted her work. At the invitation of the Elizabeth Bishop Society, Kathleen attended their conference in Nova Scotia. Part of the conference included a visit to Bishop's childhood home. "She lived in a tiny room under the eaves. When she was very young her father died and her mother was put in an insane asylum. And, she never saw her mother again. Years later, when her mother died, EB wrote one line in her journal, my mother died today." Kathleen says that last line with reverence. "One line, my mother died today, what emotions must be behind that one line!" Kathleen has been invited by Vassar University to catalogue Bishop's papers. It is a decision she has not yet made. Kathleen balances the demands of her own life, and guards her creative time.

In her research on Elizabeth Bishop, Kathleen wrote to the poet Annie Stevenson in Wales. Stevenson had been a friend of Bishop's. It was through Kathleen's correspondence with Stevenson that they became friends. Stevenson eventually asked Johnson to organize her papers. In November, Kathleen will leave for a trip to England, to Newcastle University, to present an Elizabeth Bishop paper. While there she will travel to Wales to visit Stevenson.

"Compulsion," she says. "Compulsion is what artists have. They must create. I remember when I was a child at the beach. I didn't have my paints so I gathered shells and worked with them. Artists will create with whatever is at hand. " She reaches to her right. "You have your art out here," she says. She reaches to her left. "You have your family out there. Or if not family, it could be a job, a friendship, anything, it doesn't make a difference, because everything takes second place to art. That is compulsion."

Do those statements hold true for Kathleen Carlton Johnson herself? No. She works hard to address the needs of her family while she pursues her "compulsion." She is a difficult person to get in touch with. I've called to find that she is out buying shoes for one son or driving a daughter to flute lessons. Unlike an artist compelled by their muse to pursue art to the distraction of everything else, Kathleen balances her responsibilities and still maintains the time and space for her art.

Kathleen attended William and Mary College and received a BA in Fine Art. She then taught elementary school in Isle of White County, Winsor, VA for two years. It was a rural school with a black population. "I remember one day I didn't have any art materials and I

wondered what to do, so I went to the library and got the Uncle Remus book, you know the one I mean?" Johnson asked looking at me. I nodded. "Literature is art so I decided to read to the children. I did, but I read in that black dialect of the rural south. The children's eyes were wide. They loved it! The next day I went back and one little girl had the Uncle Remus book on her desk. I asked her if she was going to finish it. She patted it as if the book had magical powers. She said, 'I'm gonna read it, Mam, but I can't read right now.' I was astounded. I was teaching fifth grade! I asked the faculty about it and was told that they just pass them on. That was one of the reasons I went to graduate school. I had to get away. I couldn't abide the neglect of the teachers."

Kathleen attended Villanova University in south Philadelphia and received an MA in English literature. That was during the recession of the 70's and jobs were scarce. Villanova offered her the position of Assistant Dean of Students; along with funding for a second MA. She took the job. She worked at the university for two years and completed an MA in library science.

She went on to teach in Des Plaines, Illinois, and eventually moved to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. "My father's and old Laurium - Michigan - boy," Johnson explains. She has been in Traprock Valley for twenty years.

Kathleen leaves to answer the phone. I look around her living room. She tells me with a laugh that it is her "literary" room. Along one wall is a computer, scanner, and printer. She designs book covers for poetry chapbooks. The walls have Kathleen's own paintings. She paints abstracts using acrylics. I like the large painting that hangs behind two antique leather chairs. The painting, with its horizontal and vertical geometric divisions, and black/red/gray pallet, looks like a painting that belongs in the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago, and not the backwater of rural America. Another wall holds books. Earlier Kathleen had shown me her collection of first editions. "I do this for the children," she says showing me a copy of a 1912 issue of Poetry magazine. "Someday they'll appreciate them. Now, I'm having fun collecting," she says with a grin.

Kathleen returns, "Come on, let's go out to the studio." We head down stone steps and out the large oak front door. As we cross the gravel yard I see her studio. It is as large as a two-car garage and has a wide expanse of storefront windows. Through the windows I can see a terracotta clay bust, foam core geometric constructions, and walls hung with framed and unframed paintings, mats, tools, brushes: an endless conglomerate of creativity.

Inside, she hits a button and Vivaldi creates a backdrop for her large paintings on the far wall. One painting is Finnish blue with pages from a Finnish prayer book pasted across the foreground. "I want to meld the word and the paint," she says. "There is a power in the written word. It separates us, makes us human. Even people who don't have the opportunity to have books in their life are somehow fascinated by the word. Words are gems. That is what I want in the paintings, the words as sacred but ordinary and approachable." Kathleen has just returned from Sacramento, California, and her second one-woman show. The abstractions, that looked so awkward among the local landscape paintings, have found a venue across the country. As I look through Kathleen's thick sketchbooks with drawings, collage, and paint, she begins to discuss teaching.

When Kathleen talks about her students she says, "You can see them behind the persona they present to their peers. That is whom I strive to reach. Some of them have never been to an art museum. Some of them have never been south of Green Bay!" she says and throws her hands in the air. "So, what do I do but bring the world to them." She has them watch videos of poets and writers reading their own work. She tells me that she hands out dictionaries to students. "I tell them that they - the dictionaries - are magic. Anything they want to know is there. How do you get them to love the word?" she asks.

I remember a class I visited, Kathleen was teaching fifth grade that year, creative writing. She told the class, "Shut your eyes. Now, imagine that you are an animal. Do you see yourself?" All the little bowed heads nodded. "Keep your eyes closed, now look around you, what do you see? Look in the sky, under your feet, next to you, in the distance. OK, open your eyes." The class blinked their eyes open. "Now, write what you saw." She got them to love the word that day.

Kathleen feels frustrated teaching. She brings the world into her classroom. She inspires her students to seek beyond the norm, beyond Lake Linden. However, when student have not been out of Michigan's Upper Peninsula or beyond Green Bay, Wisconsin, she feels the frustration of that uphill battle. It may be that frustration that is addressed in her current paintings. She can exalt the word in her paintings. She can abstract the frustration and realize a melding of word and paint on the canvas. She can create a painting as a lesson, a painting that stretches the viewer beyond his or her own notions of their world. Perhaps Kathleen wants everyone to be passionate about life, to grab it with fistfuls and explore its possibilities as she does. Perhaps there is an inherent failure in that desire, living in and creating a world as we wish it to be rather than as it is

Kathleen is aware of the difficulties of inspiring her students, of opening up their lives to new possibilities, new options. But, she has a character trait that keeps her trying: a passionate love of learning and teaching. During the course of our interview she had digressed and taught me about Elizabeth Bishop, Annie Stevenson, teaching in the rural south, and her own teaching philosophy. Teaching is part of who she is. It is inherent in her character. That is her gift. She is the scholar, the poet, the painter, but she takes everything in, explores it, consumes it, and then returns it to the students. Kathleen Carlton Johnson is the teacher we all wanted in school.

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