

Black Sabbath

By Victoria Winfree





David Johnson

For the duration of Randolph College's fall 2009 semester, visitors to the Maier Museum of Art are treated to a special exhibition, titled *Teaching Begins Here: Recent Works by Randolph College Art Faculty*. The exhibition showcases the art of the school's four Studio Art professors. Upon entering the Museum's main gallery, visitors are greeted by the large-scale, vibrantly-colored works of David Kjeseth Johnson, adjunct professor of Art and Communication Studies. Johnson's paintings are characterized by harmonious imagery of birds, maps, female figures, and plant life. His style is figurative, with a twist of "subjective realism" (Johnson, *Teaching*). All of Johnson's works flow together visually—including two sets of animal-shaped monotypes—until one reaches a comparatively small triptych painting. This 28 by 34 inch piece seems to be of a different time and place, bringing to mind charming illustrations from antique children's storybooks. The image—four young girls playing outdoors, attempting to capture fireflies—seems playful and idyllic, until one notices the title of the piece: *Black Sabbath*. Suddenly, the atmosphere of the scene changes from sweet to sinister. One begins to wonder what disaster awaits these children: how might they lose their innocence? Johnson admits to giving the piece a deliberately jarring title. If he had named the triptych *Catching Fireflies*, Johnson smiles, "would it evoke the same reaction?" (Johnson, interview).

Like most of Johnson's work on display at the Maier, *Black Sabbath* is an oil painting executed on birch. Johnson prefers wooden panels over traditional cotton duck canvas due to the fragile nature of fabric. He explains that the structure of canvas—individual threads, with space in between—makes

it seem opposed to applying paint to its surface. An artist must spend time manipulating paint to fill these crevices on a canvas, whereas a wooden panel provides a relatively smooth surface upon which the artist may paint freely. Johnson also enjoys the physical aspect of working with wood, as it must be prepared prior to painting, and is sturdy enough to withstand almost any abuse. He began using birch as the support for his paintings after extended experience with woodcut printmaking: Johnson worked as a project assistant at Tandem Press from 1987 to 1989, where he helped other artists produce prints using both experimental and traditional printing methods (Johnson, "Craddock-Terry"). Realizing that he preferred the aesthetic of the carved wooden plates over the actual prints produced from them, Johnson developed a style of painting that relies on carved outlines to give further structure and definition to his brushwork. During the compositional phase of carving and painting, Johnson "often let[s] one image suggest the use of another" (*Teaching*), or permits the texture of the wood to influence his decisions. In many of his works, Johnson allows select areas of wood grain to show through, or to remain unpainted, though such is not the case with *Black Sabbath*.

Information provided by the Maier Museum gives *Black Sabbath* no date, but Johnson recalls painting the piece in the late 1990s, most likely in 1998. Johnson's serious interest in art began in the 1960s, when, at age 10, he attended an Andy Warhol exhibition. Johnson says the show, which included *Cow Wallpaper* and *Silver Clouds*, excited and enthralled him, as it was "the first time [he] had seen art that looked like something someone could actually do" (interview). The childlike wonder of the young Johnson carries over into his work. As *Black Sabbath's* appearance suggests, Johnson did base the image on an illustration he had seen in an old storybook. In fact, Johnson shares, much of his work includes images from children's books, antique maps, and scientific texts. Books from his own past also influence many of his pieces: as a child, Johnson enjoyed reading from *The Hardy Boys* series, as the plots involved "children living in an adults' world, and doing adult things, like chasing criminals" (interview). While the four young girls featured in *Black Sabbath* catch fireflies rather than evil-doers, the title is suggestive of more mature content, and the viewer must examine the piece with greater scrutiny in order to find it.

The three birch panels of the *Black Sabbath* triptych are joined by brass hinges, and each panel has been sanded

so that both corners and edges have a rounded, imperfect shape. The wood in these areas is tinted with what appears to be a mixture of pecan-tinged stain and brown paint. The effect of this coloration is that the edges effectively frame the piece as an antique-style image, as the birch panels appear to be reclaimed wood—a quick glance at the just-visible back of one of the side panels informs the viewer that this is not the case. The scene itself—portrayed in continuous narrative across all three panels—is composed of thickly-applied oil paint, interspersed with Johnson's trademark carved outlines. The palette, while vivid, seems more restrained than the luscious tones of the rest of his work at the Maier. The overall impression given by the presentation brings to mind the yellowed, softly-worn pages of the very storybooks which inspire Johnson's work.

The first of the four girls, depicted on the left-most panel, wears a short dress of a pale, nondescript blue-grey. A matching headband keeps her reddish-blond hair away from her face as she leans forward towards a glowing cluster of fireflies. At her feet are two oversized leaves, smoothly painted in autumn tones. An apple tree grows in the background, although on a normal scale. Must one assume that the fallen leaves, each larger than the girl's torso, were once part of this tree? Johnson appreciates, and makes use of, the "disassociation of scale" found in much of René Magritte's work (interview); Johnson's work, like Magritte's, distorts the scale of objects in a dreamlike manner which taps into the subconscious. Magritte's *The Treachery (or Perfidy) of Images*, painted in 1928-29, features a single tobacco pipe on a meditative, larger-than-life scale, punctuated by the caption, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," or "This is not a pipe." This statement teases the mind while demonstrating the emphasis which Magritte has placed on "the relationship of language to the painted image" (Arnason 307), just as Johnson has: like Magritte's caption, the title given to *Black Sabbath* causes the viewer to reassess the piece. Likewise, the scale of Magritte's pipe gives an ordinary object weighty importance. Here in Johnson's work, a similarly outsized bird rests on the ground to the right of the leaves; its plump body carrying over onto the center panel. The light yellow-green hue of the bird's feathers provide a lively contrast with the muted, muddy tones of the apple tree: unlike the bird, leaves, and girl, the tree is not outlined with carving; its trunk and foliage are formed by wildly gestural, blurred strokes of green and orange paint. The apples grown here are formed by fat daubs of red paint which are almost jagged in texture: this is not a friendly

tree. Several of the apples, symbols of sin, and innocence lost, have fallen, and lie rotting on the ground near the dead leaves; visually, they lead the viewer's eye downward to the dark stream that runs diagonally across the first two panels. Fireflies are reflected brightly in the murky water, providing ominous contrast. Rippling indentations in the paint's impasto surface serve to give the stream a sense of power and strong current, despite its shallow depth.

The second two girls appear in the center panel, both standing ankle-deep in the stream. More boldly gestural paint appears in the foreground, this time in the form of decaying autumn leaves. The brunette girl on the left, her back turned to the viewer, wears a dress of peach and grey-green. Her bare legs appear to be muddy, and the cheerful polka dots adorning her skirt add a sense of poignancy to the knowledge that harm may soon befall her. The girl to her right is visible only from mid-torso downward, giving her a decapitated appearance. One's view of her upper half is obscured by more oversized leaves, as well as the front half of another plump, outsized bird. Lacking eyes and beak, the scarlet-feathered bird is blind and mute. Above this trio grows another gesturally-painted tree, laden with dangerously sharp apples. A white house is in view on the horizon, but it is too far away and too small to provide refuge to any of them.

The right-most panel shows more of the same: a foreground of fallen leaves, the back half of the red bird, and a tree with leaves painted in an impasto fashion. A horizontal branch is visible under the foliage, and is grasped by what appears to be a disembodied hand. The fourth girl, walking beneath the branch, does not look up. She gazes instead upon the two oversized, green leaves she carries in her left hand. Her dress is a muted lavender-grey, and her blonde hair is cropped short. Her expression is one of concentration and concern. According to Johnson, the vintage illustration that inspired *Black Sabbath* depicted this girl carrying a platter of food to a picnic table, which, incidentally, Johnson chose to replace with the cluster of fireflies (interview).

After analyzing the painting, viewers still may be puzzled why Johnson chose to use beaming fireflies as a focal point in a work titled *Black Sabbath*. When he was a child, Johnson felt that "certain activities seemed to have more significance, a magical sort of significance, beyond the content of the activities...like catching fireflies" (interview). The girls of *Black*

Sabbath are engaged in "innocent play," yet Johnson shows us that children "already have definite ideas of, unconscious ideas of, fears and phobias" (interview). He relates a story about a childhood friend who kept a small, mummified figure hidden behind a brick in his father's basement. Occasionally, the boy removed the mummy from its hiding spot so that he and Johnson could stare at it. Johnson describes the mummy as "the creepiest thing...it seemed really forbidden for him to have it; something so wrong about it. It threw a pall over other play—everything else was forgotten" (interview). The boy's father, whose name was also David Johnson, later committed suicide in that basement. In Johnson's mind (then as now), the mummy represented mental illness, and he still wonders if it bore the same meaning for his friend. Johnson dealt with extreme, unprovoked anxiousness in his own childhood, even a feeling of impending disaster. He observes that his fears were not unique; children simply process issues such as phobias and mental illness differently than adults do. Another boyhood friend of Johnson's chose to deal with his own issues by scientifically experimenting with ants. This boy was certain that, "if an ant could comprehend the perfect crystalline structure of a single grain of sugar, the knowledge of this perfection would make the ant explode" (interview). When his experiment failed repeatedly, the boy insisted that he had not yet found the perfect grain of sugar. To the two children, this experiment seemed valid, and "brought into the intelligence of ants" (interview). Contemplating *Black Sabbath* after hearing this tale, one might relate the round forms of the fireflies to the perfectly formed grains of sugar, and the four girls to the ants. The girls, one hopes, are not doomed to die; instead, they will 'explode' into young adulthood.

The girl on the right-most panel underscores this second theme of maturation: the leaves she carries are not brown and withered, such as those that have fallen. Her leaves are fresh and green, and she carries them in such a way that they cover her abdomen and pubic regions, bringing to mind fertility and sexual awareness, reminders that she will soon grow into a young woman. The girl's concerned expression as she contemplates the leaves may be interpreted as reluctance to leave childhood behind. Her maturation is emphasized by her distance from the three girls at play. The leaf symbolism, reminiscent of the Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, also appears in one of Johnson's works from 2002, *Another Green World*. This piece, which shows a girl of teen or pre-teen age, "represents the bewildering complex-



Girls by A Stream, Arthur Rackham

ity of the world and the human effort to navigate it" (interview). The girl stands, hand over heart and leaf over breast in front of a massive nude female figure. The figure seems to sprout leaves and vines from her very fingers, and between her hands she holds a drawing of a tree: Yggdrasill, a Norse fertility symbol. The figure's groin is obscured by a plant which branches out like fallopian tubes.

Johnson confirms that

the leaves and plants represent the young girl's full realization of herself as a biological entity, though he admits that this was not his intention when he created the piece—for him, the meaning has evolved.

While *Black Sabbath* and *Another Green World* depict females in the autumn of girlhood, one may also compare the nature of Johnson's works to one such as British illustrator, Arthur Rackham's simply-titled *Girls by a Stream* (1906): this image, typical of many of the classic illustrations which so inspire Johnson, features young women in the spring of womanhood. These four women, shown in varying stages of undress, represent the progression and future of the four girls of *Black Sabbath*. As a work of pen, ink, and watercolor, Rackham's illustration differs from Johnson's work in terms of texture: the surface of *Girls by a Stream* is naturally smooth, lacking the physically carved and jagged texture of Johnson's painted panels. Still, Johnson has managed to echo Rackham's work in ways which, while not directly intentional, are uncanny. Two of the four young women of *Girls by a Stream* lounge on the rocky bank of a churning stream—one of them blithely nude—while a third stands with face partially obscured, similar to the "headless" girl of *Black Sabbath*. The fourth woman has jumped to her feet in an effort to retrieve one of her garments, which has just been stolen by a band of goblins. Standing, bare-breasted, this woman brings to mind *Black Sabbath*'s "biologically aware" fourth girl, the difference in Rackham's piece being

an elevated level of maturity: while a goblin leers at her suggestively, she stands her ground resolutely, unashamed of her own nudity.

Johnson's artistic use of psychology also finds a parallel in Rackham's work. Rackham, being a Victorian artist, lived in an era in which the unconscious was viewed as a sinister being, an "out-of-control beast which could 'come out' under the right circumstances" (Atzmon 66). The marauding goblins, therefore, symbolize the unconscious, as well as a "voracious goblin sexual appetite" (Atzmon 77). Likewise, the gnarled, grasping roots which loom over the women indicate a tree which, like Johnson's unfriendly apple trees, will provide discomfort and fear rather than shelter. A comparison of the titles—the daunting *Black Sabbath* and the neutral *Girls by a Stream*—affirms that both artists have named their works appropriately. While Johnson's girls nervously feel their way through the physically and psychologically daunting journey into maturity, Rackham's women are world-wise and seem to be calmly accepting both of their own bodies and of the pervasive beast of the unconscious. Whether one chooses to interpret *Black Sabbath* as a grim interpretation of classic storybook illustrations, as a manifestation of children's psychological worries, or as a bittersweet homage to the passing of girlhood, one will have reached a correct conclusion. Johnson has brilliantly combined these messages into an image that, at first glance, might appear to be a benign image burdened with a nebulous title—a title which serves as the catalyst to viewers' in-depth interpretation of the piece. If Johnson had named the triptych *Chasing Fireflies*, it would be to the detriment of his work.

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