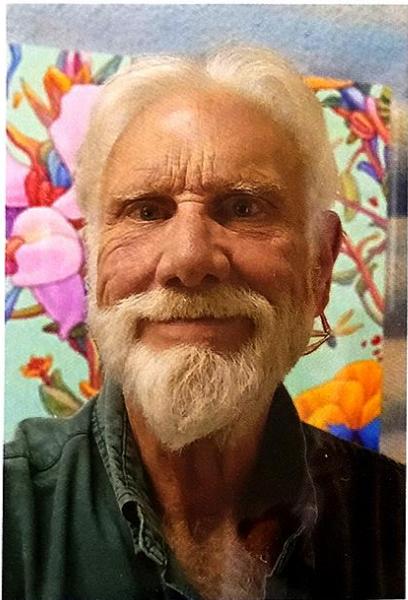


# American Painter of Distinction

## James W. Johnson

by A. Isabelle Howe



James Johnson began life in beautiful upstate New York and graduated with a bachelor's degree from the State University of New York-Oswego campus. He entered as a chemistry major, but that ended because he quickly realized that he hated math, physics, AND chemistry. He had taken an elective art course and enjoyed it so much that he points to it as a significant event in his life. When the science path didn't work out, James turned to art.

Thom Seawell, a faculty printmaker at SUNY-Oswego, mentored James. Seawell invited Professor Lynwood Kreneck, another printmaker, to come to Oswego to hold a workshop. That connection became the second big event to influence James' career path. Kreneck coaxed James, by then a senior, to consider pursuing graduate work under him at Texas Tech University.

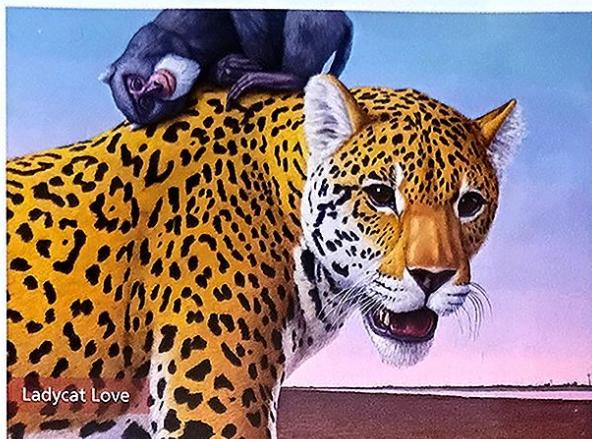
James had read an article in *TIME Magazine* about the art boom in Texas. He was offered a teaching assistantship that would pay for most of his expenses, and he was excited about pursuing the newly discovered passion of his life—creating art. So, he decided to move to Texas. He came to Lubbock in July to look for a place to live, recalling the enticing slide talk about Texas Tech that Kreneck had presented at Oswego with photos of a beautiful green, tree-lined campus with wonderful architecture.

He stepped off the plane into a 114-degree day and looked around to see nothing but flatness and brown. He rented a car and drove around downtown which looked to the New Yorker like a sepia-colored ghost town.



But he did return in the fall. Unfortunately, his first semester was "pretty rough." Soon after moving into his apartment, he was awakened by sirens because a neighbor's bed was on fire. A few weeks later, James was leaning on the balcony railing of his upstairs apartment. The rail broke,





he plunged to the ground and was hospitalized. Later that fall, he was badly beaten up. Despite all of the catastrophes which happened his first semester—before Thanksgiving—James decided to stay around for the second semester. Happily, with the coming of spring, he fell in love with West Texas—the people, the sky, and the open landscape. "I feel cramped in hills and forests now."

Kreneck became a fundamental influence on James' life. Much of Kreneck's work has an element of humor that reflected James' own sense of humor. Like his mentor, he has a natural sense of humor which he skillfully incorporates in one way or another into many of his paintings.

Somewhere on his journey, James decided to explore the characteristics and possibilities of painting with oils and acrylics. He also decided to paint what he wanted to paint without letting the thoughts of others dictate how he made his art. He wanted to paint with bold imagery through ideas of lust, fear, and humor. He found himself on the same path as many pioneer artists who cast aside rules of the past and created their own art. They refused to be limited by what had been done before or what popular critics wrote. The ledger of art history is filled with their names: Picasso, Bracht, Kandinsky, Dali, Duchamp, Klee, Ernst. James, an avid art historian, is keenly aware of his own historical heritage in modern art.

In 1985, he began a series of paintings. "The Golden Rule" was based on true stories from the local newspaper. Some of these paintings were larger pieces with great gory details of man's inhumanity to man. The subject of those paintings started to scare even him, so, after five drawings and six paintings, James moved on to another series.

Still another event influenced James' career path. It was the revelation that teaching was not the only way to make a living until his art sold enough to pay the bills. He was willing to paint houses, continue to learn . . . and to wait. He painted his last house in 1989. "Ten years after graduate school, I was making a living with my art."

He had waited and continued to pursue his passion. In the process, James became one of America's skilled artists whose joy in his art is revealed in an intensity that sometimes causes the viewer to feel uncomfortable, that

sometimes makes the viewer laugh but never leaves the viewer without a reaction to his bold statements.

Private and public collections throughout the world have curated James' work. He has received many accolades and awards throughout his career including the Legacy Award of the Texas Tech Museum and a recent induction into the West Texas Walk of Fame.

James W. Johnson's world class paintings are not for the meek because they stand up and smack the viewer with forms, colors, and ideas that James himself finds fascinating. His work invites the audience to consider the delicate beauty of a flower petal, find unexpected humor in a subject, or dare to look at the dark underbelly of an idea. His gift is in making viewers laugh, making them uncomfortable, but never leaving them with no reaction.