

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jessica Krasinski, "Pioneering Performance Artist Joan Jonas Takes Flight," *The Village Voice*, May 16, 2017



Pioneering Performance Artist Joan Jonas Takes Flight

*A fifty-year legacy of trailblazing work is on display the
Gavin Brown Enterprise's sprawling new space in
Harlem*



Jonas's work at GBE in Harlem

"I think of myself as a kind of medium for information to pass through," Joan Jonas once said of herself. Since the late 1960s, this pioneer of video and performance art has channeled information and ideas with a deep sense of and sensitivity to how they manifest differently between one medium and another, and to how space — theatrical, televisual, conceptual — is broken open by the eye of an artist. A show by Jonas is always a grand occasion, and her latest, "What Is Found in the Windowless House Is True," covers three floors of GBE's sprawling new gallery space on 127th Street, presenting for the first time in the U.S. two of her most recent major installations.

Jonas was born in 1936 and came of artistic age in the late 1960s, when she began to make performances. She studied dance with Trisha Brown and performed with Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer. The sculptor Richard Serra, with whom she would collaborate on two short films in 1971, recalled seeing one of her earliest pieces in her loft in 1968. "The personality of Joan was long gone, a fiction," he explained of her altered presence. "In her place was a magical invocation." Ritual and folk culture suffused her work from the get-go. (A favorite biographical detail: Her stepfather was an amateur magician.) In 1972, she incorporated live video into her performances, a new space to generate aura and magic. The black-and-white video *Vertical Roll*, from that same year (considered Jonas's first masterwork), made use of a common television glitch — the rolling bar — as a frantic frame within which to perform, to present herself. Since then, she has created a luminous and trenchant body of work quite unlike any other.

In the first-floor gallery, laid across wooden tabletops, is a selection of her props: masks, wooden animals, toy houses, stones, and other objets that may appear and disappear throughout her work. Here, too, is a series of body drawings she makes during performances by placing a large piece of handmade paper over her torso and tracing it in charcoal. On the opposite wall is a series of sweet, loose-handed watercolors of birds, plucked from the past two years of her practice.

Up a flight of stairs there's *Reanimation* (2010/2012/2013), which the artist devised in collaboration with the MacArthur grantwinning composer and musician Jason Moran. The work exists as both a performance and

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an installation. (A video document of the performance gets the flatscreen-and-headphones treatment on one wall, while the installation fills the room adjacent to it.) Taking both inspiration and segments of text from Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness's 1968 *Under the Glacier*, Jonas's glimmering, mesmerizing, fraught piece deals in part with the unnatural fate of nature when left in our hands. It's one of Jonas's greatest achievements.

Reanimation isn't a taut narrative; it's an unfolding, a refraction of moving images and sounds across four screens that face one another at off-angles, like walls of a house that's been blown open. Roving footage of snowy mountains; driving through frozen tunnels; a seal half-immersed in water; a goat, sweet-eyed and curious, in a barn; Jonas's shadow cast over the ice-covered earth. There are also static, in-studio shots, a camera hung overhead to record hands making drawings — Rorschach-like blots — by pushing ice cubes around in small puddles of ink. Dozens of crystals hang from a knee-high steel grid placed before one of the projectors: They cast shadows over the images while also reflecting the light as prisms. Over all this and more, we hear the resounding voice of Sami yoik singer nde Somby; Jonas's strange sound effects; and Moran's graceful yet frenetic piano, which together can either sound like a shamanic healing ritual or blare like a warning signal, an urgent siren.

"Time is the one thing we can all agree to call supernatural," says Jonas, quoting Laxness. In one of the videos, we watch as she paints a figure in the snow. This, too, shall melt, it seems to say. Reanimation traces the traces we leave behind, the marks — whether art or otherwise — that may or may not last into the future.

Given the art and the artist's position regarding time, the exhibition causes an itch around the question of posterity, particularly where Jonas's performances are made available as videos. Video documentation is useful as proof and as reference, of course, but far less so as an experience — as a work of art unto itself. The purists among us (and I confess that I teeter into this category) would stump for some breathing room between the performance and the installation. In other words: Let what is live be live; honor the ephemeral by consenting to its power as a fleeting presence, and allow the video installation to tease out its own sensations in its audience at its own scale and speed: of time looped, rather than lost; of rattling, full-body confrontations with images of icy landscapes; of shifting qualities of light; of Jonas's performance gestures.

The same might be said for the objects displayed on the first floor. In theater, props just take up space until they're taken up by the performer, in whose hands they find their best, most potent use. Displaying Jonas's lovely curiosities here in the "real world" is certainly an educative move — we can see close up what might otherwise remain a bit inscrutable onscreen — but it does divest them of their magic.

On the fourth floor of the gallery is *stream or river, flight or pattern* (2016/2017), a contemplative, lightly melancholy installation of three projected videos entwining footage shot during the artist's travels to Vietnam, Italy, and Cambodia, at her home in Nova Scotia, and in other places, too. Hung along the gallery walls are drawings of birds done in china marker; from the ceiling hang paper kites made by hand, which look like birds, or planes, abstracted. Across the videos, Jonas continues to play with her images' depths of field, at times quite literally: Performers are filmed in front of projections of images from nature both moving and still, so that they in effect become moving screens; at other times, they block the light like shadow puppets, silhouettes interacting with vibrant landscapes. A regal bird in a cage, dancing, preening, then coming toward the camera for a closer look; caressing close-ups of ancient mosaics; celebratory paper animals burned; Jonas painting in a cemetery: All this and more joins the whirl, as nature unnatural. A favorite moment: Jonas, wearing sunglasses and a funny mesh helmet, with both arms and one leg stuck straight out behind her, posed as though a bird in midair. It's a gesture that stretches beyond broad imitation. It's desire, perhaps, a funny dance, yes — but it's also a portrait of an artist in full flight, at the height of her powers.