



FEMI J. JOHNSON
Storyscapes

JANUARY 24 – APRIL 16, 2023

FREEDMAN GALLERY



ALBRIGHT
Freedman Gallery



pennsylvania
COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

Catalogue published to accompany the exhibition of Femi J. Johnson's Storyscapes at the Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania, January 24 – April 16, 2023.

Albright College
13th & Bern Streets
P.O. Box 15234
Reading, PA 19612-5234

The Freedman Gallery receives annual support from The Doris C. and Alan J. Freedman Family Fund, annual donors and Albright College.

Additional support for this project was also gratefully received from the Berks Arts Council and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

All images courtesy of the artist or John R. Pankratz, Ph.D.

Designed by Heidi Eckman
Printed by White Oak Group, Inc.
Edited by David M. Tanner
Copyedited by Carey Manzollilo

Catalogue copyright © 2023 Freedman Gallery, Albright College.

ISBN 978-1-7338981-8-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without permission in writing from the Freedman Gallery, Albright College, the artist, the photographer or the author noted herein.

Front cover images clockwise from left: *Friendly Fetish*, 2022, acrylic & mixed collage on canvas, 40x30 inches. *Blackboard Veve #2 – In Essence or Ancre dans l'amour*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. "Blues For a Hip King," 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36x36 inches.

FEMI J. JOHNSON

Storyscapes

ON DISPLAY AT THE FREEDMAN GALLERY

ALBRIGHT COLLEGE, READING, PENNSYLVANIA

JANUARY 24 – APRIL 16, 2023





Time Capsule, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 | FOREWORD *by David M. Tanner*

3 | FEMI J. JOHNSON'S STORYSCAPES *by Kristen T. Woodward*

11 | IMAGE PLATES & INSTALLATION VIEWS

FOREWORD

I shall never forget the studio visit to downtown Allentown, Pennsylvania, on September 16, 2022, during which I first met the artist Femi J. Johnson. It was an enjoyable excursion, traveling with my colleague, professor of art, Kristen T. Woodward, who was on crutches at the time. My birthday was the following day. While it was a fun trip with a friend, more importantly, I was struck by the creativity that was evident in the multitude of works I saw that day — works of all shapes, sizes, colors, and themes. Most importantly, I had the pleasure of meeting Femi J. Johnson, and I knew, right away, that I had met a person of great authenticity and profound compassion.

My instinct was confirmed when, in January 2023, the gallery made a series of quick changes due to some scheduling issues that resulted in Femi’s solo show, originally planned for our project space, moving into the much larger space of the main gallery. Femi graciously accommodated the switch without complaint. I firmly believe that everything happens for a reason. Femi’s works were destined to be in the main gallery, where they have brought the white walls alive with color, form, and composition. The saying goes, “if these walls could talk;” well, Femi’s paintings not only talk and tell a story, they practically dance to the Jazz, Blues, and resonating hum of the ancestors that inspired them. For sharing his creative genius, I am first and foremost grateful to Femi J. Johnson, and second, to Kristen T. Woodward for introducing him to the Freedman Gallery and Albright College community, and for crafting such an insightful essay.

As always, I am grateful for the excellent support of an amazing team that includes: the CFA’s assistant director, Steven Nicodemus, registrar Kate Mishriki, preparator Rich Houck, curatorial assistant Abby Platero, administrative assistant Kara Johnson, Dick Schuster, who provided assistance with framing and mounting labels, as well as the spring 2023 student gallery attendants and CFA interns.

I would like recognize the good work of our colleagues in the Communications Division, too: senior designer Heidi Eckman and communications director Carey Manzollilo, whose assistance with marketing materials and the creation of this catalogue are greatly appreciated.

A full list of current members of the Visual Arts Committee appears at the end of this publication, and we remain grateful to all these volunteers, led by alumnus and chair Jaap van Lier ’72.

The Freedman Gallery also acknowledges the ongoing commitment from Albright College administration, particularly President Jacquelyn S. Fetrow, Ph.D. ’82 and Provost Karen Campbell, Ph.D., and the support of Albright faculty who continue to thoughtfully and purposefully engage the student body with our exhibitions and programs. This semester, that included Simóne Banks, assistant professor of English, who brought more than 150 students to the gallery and this exhibition for a related poetry event on March 3, 2023.

Internally, projects at the gallery are supported by The Doris C. and Alan J. Freedman Family Fund. Additional financial support is annually provided by donors. This project was awarded additional support from the Berks Arts Council and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

David M. Tanner
Dean, Arts & Cultural Resources



The Cathedral of Id, 2019, acrylic and collage on canvas, 36 x 36 inches

FEMI J. JOHNSON’S STORYSCAPES by Kristen T. Woodward

Femi J. Johnson describes his paintings as “abstract storyscapes.” As the viewer experiences these lyrical works, we are drawn into a highly personalized visual dance. The push and pull of blue and umber swaths of impasto paint may initially recall Abstract Expressionism, but the marks venture off into surprising passages of line and pattern. Tension is created in the graphic balance between intention and accident. As one searches for vestiges of Johnson’s past professional life as a master draftsman, there is only an echo of control in the solidly constructed compositions. His mechanical drawings and blueprints of electrical conduits appear to have given way to painted biomorphic conduits of sorts. There is a sense of connectivity in the many disparate elements. For while he winds us through visual pathways in a staccato rhythm, he never leaves us hanging at the edge of the composition. Color and gesture form anchors that make our movement through the works an exhilarating pleasure.

Johnson’s frequent use of square canvas supports sets up an interesting denial of the pictorial space. Neither landscape nor portrait, it is the artist’s hand in the paint that commands our focus. Small drips escape from more robust shapes. But as in the color choice, these elements also repeat, comforting us within the uncharted territory.

There’s wry humor in the titles or naming of these pleasing works. Johnson doesn’t want us to take it too seriously. *Public Display of Affection*, for example, sets up an amusing coupling. Thick as mud brown brushstrokes appear to have settled in the bottom of the canvas, while thin scribbled lines glide over a smooth blue-green ground. Two brown shapes form a figural bond. Are they the affectionate partners referenced in the painting’s title, or are we the ones doing the courting? *Blackboard Veve-Transition or La Vie en Rose* is another painting indictive of Johnson’s playful approach. This piece includes an abstract but still recognizable female stick figure with a faint smile. She is partially dissolved into the chalky grey ground of a classroom blackboard. Absent of arms, she still manages to carry a loose block of pink pigment forward.

While the viewer revels in these formal delights and choreographed movements across exuberant canvases, there is a deeper conceptual underpinning to the visual dance. Johnson’s ancestral Nigerian heritage expands into Yoruba tradition. He was ordained as an Isele priest at the turn of the last century. Duality and universal rhythms are thus etched into his psyche as well as his multifaceted paintings. Johnson speaks of spiritual connections to people, places, and even inanimate objects. Forms can be animated with celebratory purpose, creating palpable and meaningful connections. For Johnson, Black sometimes references ethnic Blackness, cosmic forces, or the void of the unknown. We see loose figures dancing across the darkness, evoking human interactions that mingle belief with everyday routines. The artist considers the spiritual ritual of call and response as a methodology inherent to his religious and art practice. He may ‘call out’ a vibrant hue, and circle back to it in the composition, embracing the viewer in the pictorial syncopation.



Public Display of Affection, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches

Johnson's most recent paintings continue to abstractly explore Isese themes of belonging to a spiritual collective as well as meditative recitation. He speaks of predetermined versus open pathways, which ironically harken back to his days of mechanical draftsmanship. Johnson reveals and creates conduits. Employing an optimistic palette of lively pink and blue hues, the artist abstracts his, and our, world in these new storyscapes. *In Blues for a Hip King*, the viewer may envision elemental forces of water and earth toppling a powerful entity. Semi-transparent veils of acrylic glaze wash over and begin to erode a vaguely totemic form. The artist's backstory for this piece reveals a more melodic overthrow of sorts — South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim was playing in Johnson's studio in the final moments of its creation.



Blues For A Hip King, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches

Collage is threaded through some of these new paintings. Photographic elements pull us in and anchor the energetic movement without stealing the show. Bits of landscape or textile peak through the layers of paint. But these fragments of life in sharp focus are confined within warmer, humanistic brushstrokes. The new mixed media piece *Friendly Fetish* eschews the equalizing square support in favor of a vertical rectangle. While the proportions of the painting recall a traditional Renaissance window, Johnson plays with collaged frames, creating smaller vignettes and drawings within his abstract picture. Cosmic Yoruba symbols are sketched in pencil within the confines of larger boundaries, while pink dots encircle and highlight other shapes.



Friendly Fetish, 2022, acrylic and mixed collage on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

Drinking from an ancient well similarly floats chunks of color amidst tightly clustered scrawls of line. Rather than ground us with a focal element in this painting, the edges break down and dissolve into a weightless arrangement. The ‘ancient well’ is intuited to be a collective of timeless ideas rather than a tangible form or place. As such, the pale brown section of at the bottom of the piece is noticeably absent of mooring. We feel untethered. A darker shape in the extreme left corner conceivably offers a footing for us to stand at the well. But as with Johnson’s other pieces, it is more comfortable for us to move *through the work*, rather than remain at the precipice. In that sense, he asks viewers to take a leap — a leap of faith in the invisible, expressed in pure painterly expression.

One could say Femi J. Johnson’s paintings are for painters. But they are for all of us. While rooted in abstraction and spiritual inspirations, they reflect the primal rhythms of life we all innately feel and hear made visual — a synesthesia of our senses. In this exhibition, Johnson calls out, and it is only for us to respond.

Johnson, J. Femi. Personal interview. 16 Sept. 2022.

Born in Manhattan and raised in Easton, Pennsylvania, **Femi J. Johnson’s** early artistic talent in graphite and charcoal drawing led to a professional career as a master draftsman and designer for Bell Laboratories and Lucent Technologies. After thousands of technical drawings over decades of work, Johnson redirected his creative energy back to the fine arts. He completed a two-year studio program at Hudson Valley Community College, where his engagement with contemporary and modernist art inspired his emerging studio practice. In 2012, Johnson returned to the Lehigh Valley and has exhibited extensively across the region and internationally.

Essayist **Kristen T. Woodward** is a professor of art at Albright College. She received her B.F.A. in printmaking from Syracuse University and her M.F.A. in studio art from Clemson University. She currently teaches all levels of painting and printmaking, and interdisciplinary courses on Latin American graphic art, Drawing from Ecology, and Gender and the Visual Arts. Woodward’s own paintings and prints are shown widely across the region and throughout the U.S. in solo and group exhibitions, and she is a resident curator for Arists2Artists.net.



Drinking at an Ancient Well, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 inches

ADDITIONAL IMAGE PLATES & INSTALLATION VIEWS



Blackboard Vêve #12 – Dance to your Inner Spirit or Porteau Mitan, 2021, acrylic on blackboard, 40 x 30 inches



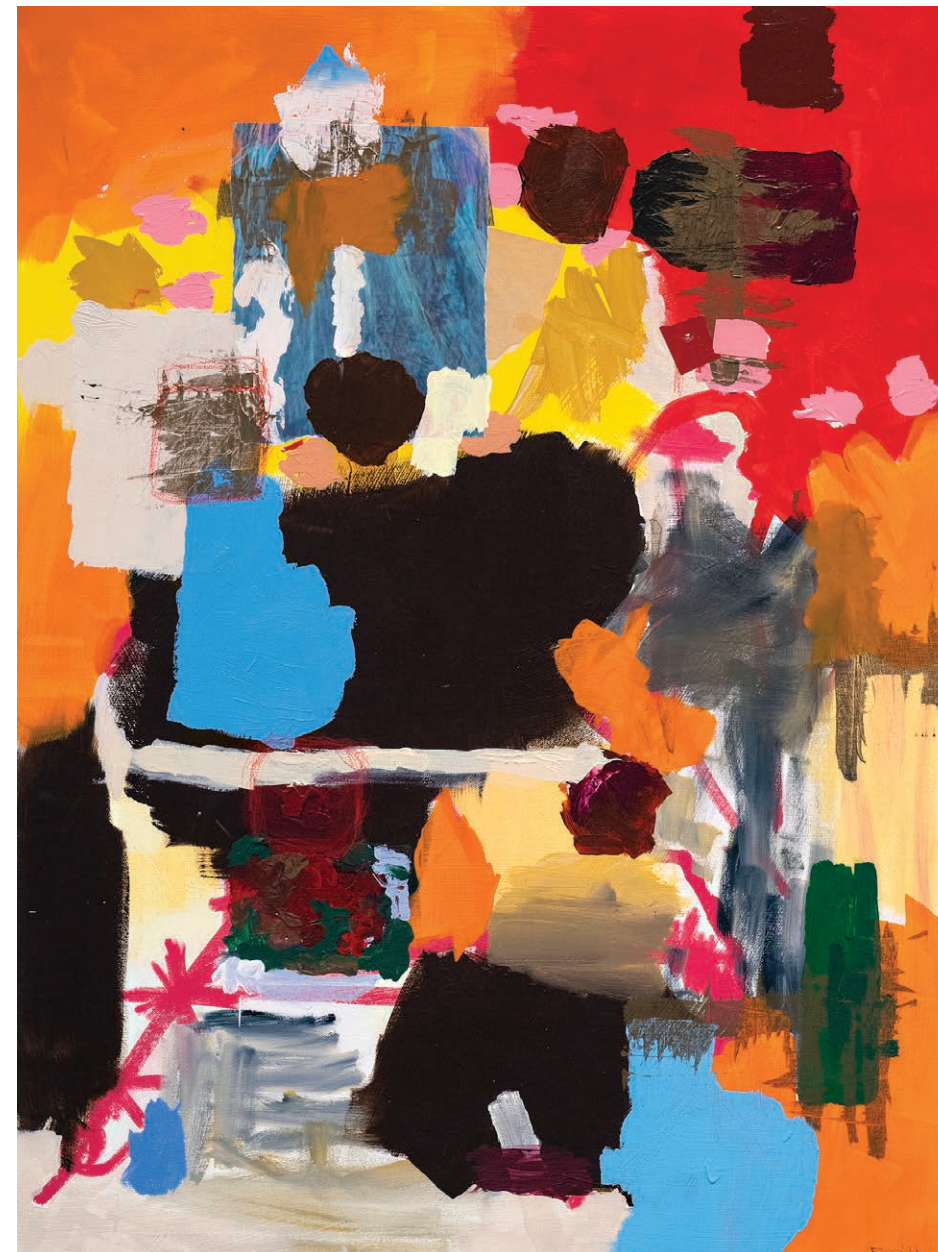
Forgive Me for My Mistakes, 2018, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



Blackboard Veve #2 – In Essence or Ancre dans l'amour, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches



Follow The Alley Cat, 2022, acrylic and collage on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



Feeling Alright or Train Man, 2022, acrylic and collage on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



Tomorrow's Walk in the Park, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 22 x 28 inches



Big Head, 2022, crylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches



Conjuring a Bird, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches



Oufu Oodu, 2022, acrylic and collage on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



Matchmaker, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Muse Ridi', 2021, acrylic and collage on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



Rooftop Meditation, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Happy Shadows, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



From left to right: *Doorman I*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 inches. *Doorman II*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 inches. *Doorman III*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 inches.



The Cotton Grows at Night, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches



Syncretized Resolve, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches



Muse Minded, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



Folklore, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



View From This Side, 2018, acrylic and collage on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



Hard Wishes, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches

CENTER FOR THE ARTS 2021/2022 & CURRENT DONORS

Major Gifts III (\$10,000-\$24,999)

An Anonymous Donor

Major Gifts II (\$5,000-\$9,999)

Mrs. Jane Masters Nase

Major Gifts I (\$2,500-\$4,999)

Barbara & David Thun

President’s Council (\$1,000-\$2,499)

Rev. & Mrs. Leonard S. Buxton ’52

Ms. Saidah Arrika Ekulona ’92

Dr. Jacquelyn S. Fetrow ’82 & Mr. Brian A. Kell

Ms. Mary E. Good

Ms. Carole Green

Darryl S. Jeffries ’66 & Thomas E. Shultz

Dr. Newton A. Perrin & Ms. Marijean Jerrell

The Estate of Elizabeth Rudy

David Tanner & Bruce Kimball

Tompkins Bank

Jaap van Liere

Director’s Circle (\$500-\$999)

Kristina C. Anderson, Ed.D.

Suzanne E. Anderson

Anonymous

Mr. Wilmer F. Johnson ’95

Mrs. Eleanor A. Lentz

Kathleen & William Michael

Mrs. Kirsten Tewfix

Ralia C. Vardaxis ’87

Benefactor (\$250-\$499)

Ms. Ann-Marie Aymer

Dr. Karen A. Campbell

Mrs. Kathy A. Hodak

Mrs. Jessie N. Kuntz

Jaap van Liere

Thomas B. “Drac” Williams

Dr. Francis H. Williamson

Mrs. Christine Woodhouse

Kristen T. & Richard Woodward

Patron (\$100-\$249)

Anonymous

Pamela G. Artz & James D. Yoder

Ms. Sara Bergstresser

Mark I. Blank

Mrs. Lois Flannery

Sally and John R. Garrison

Mrs. Sally Gazzo in memory of Paul Gazzo Jr.

Brian & Katie Glaze

Dr. Patricia Hummel

Dr. Roseann Pagano Pizzi & Mr. Donald Pizzi

MeeAe Oh-Ranck & Douglas Ranck

Donor (\$50-\$99)

Anonymous

Jeffery Gorrin

Chipotle Mexican Grill

Denise & John Ernest

Matthew M. Garrison

Jeffery Gorrin

Michael H. Reese

Jennifer M. Romans Medeiros

Suzanne Palmer, Esq.

Friend (\$49 and under)

Anonymous

Ms. Cornelia M. Archey

Dawn Gieringer

Dianna Russell

Amy Sewell

Mckenzie Skye Sullivan

The Freedman Gallery at Albright College, named after former Albright trustee and alumna Doris Chanin Freedman, is located on the ground floor of the Center for the Arts. Since its inception, the gallery focuses primarily on contemporary, living, American artists and hosts approximately twelve exhibitions each year rotating in the Main Gallery, Project Space, and Foyer Gallery. Freedman Gallery is located at 13th & Bern Streets, Reading, PA 19612. Gallery hours are Tues.-Fri. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sun. 1-4 p.m. The gallery is closed on Mondays, holidays, breaks and summer. Scan the QR code to visit the Freedman Gallery.



Named a top national college by Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education, Albright College (founded 1856) is home to a diverse community of learners who cultivate integrity, curiosity, connection and resilience. Through learning experiences that engage a student’s creative and innovative capacities across all disciplines, both inside and outside of the classroom, an Albright College education guarantees that each student learns how to engage the world, understand the world, and is prepared to make an impact on a rapidly changing world. Located in Reading, Pa., Albright is home to undergraduate students, adult learners and graduate students.



VISUAL ARTS COMMITTEE

Chair — Jaap van Liere ’72, *community member*
Mary Jane Androne, *community member, emeriti professor of English*
Matthew Garrison, M.F.A., *associate professor of art and digital media*
Joe Hocker, M.F.A., *assistant professor of photography and digital art*
Brian Glaze, M.F.A., *associate professor of sculpture, art department chair*
Madison Johnson ’21, *community member*
Arlene Krumholz, *community member*
Karyn Loveless, *community member*
Militza Molina ’21, *community member*
MeeAe Oh-Ranck, M.A., *assistant professor of fashion design*
Suzanne Palmer, LL.M, *assistant professor of economics and business; pre-law advisor*
Jane Runyeon, *artist, community member*
Scott Schweigert, *curator of art and civilization, Reading Public Museum*
Kristen T. Woodward, M.F.A., *professor of art*

ALBRIGHT COLLEGE
Jacquelyn S. Fetrow, Ph.D. ’82, *president; professor of chemistry and biochemistry*
Karen A. Campbell, Ph.D., *provost and vice president for academic affairs; Kenneth Nase M.D. ’55 chair of biology; dean of the faculty*

FREEDMAN GALLERY
David M. Tanner, M.P.A., *dean, arts and cultural resources*
Rich Houck, *preparator*
Kate Mishriki, M.A., *registrar and collections manager*
Steven Nicodemus ’16, *assistant director, Center for the Arts*
Abigail Platero ’22, *curatorial assistant*
Kara Johnson, *administrative assistant, Center for the Arts*
Rafael Cuënca, *curatorial intern*

STUDENT GALLERY ATTENDANTS
Victoria Aquino ’23
Maya Burdick ’25
Ben Galosi ’25
Mary Kurtas ’23
Cary Shurtz ’23
Brennon Wittekind ’24



Martha Hill, 1977
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 in.



Martha Hill, 1977
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 in.



Martha Hill, 1977
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 in.

