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Cape artist Joyce Johnson honored with library exhibit

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Joyce Johnson is remembered not only for her art, but also for her generosity, grace and community involvement. Her death in April at the age of 84 was a significant loss to Cape Cod, where her roots go back to 1929. That was the year she was born and when she first came here with her parents, who bought a summer place in North Eastham where they spent their summers.

Drawn by the natural world and inspired by it, Johnson was a full-time resident of the Cape since the mid-1960s. Honoring her in the town where she lived is an exhibition of her work at the Truro Public Library through Dec 29. Featured are rarely seen drawings, paintings, prints, pastels, photography and, of course, her sculpture, which fascinated Johnson since she was a child.

Before she was 10, she was whittling. "I always loved the sea," she told me several years ago. "My father was in the Navy. I made ship models and hulls ... a ship captain with a sou'wester on and a couple of faces. I went from that to doing portraiture in clay of anyone who would sit for me."

Johnson's commitment to the arts community was vigorously expressed when she founded the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill. More than 40 years later, it is a dynamic supporter of the arts, a tribute to her vision. Johnson directed the center for 10 years, taught sculpture there and served on the board of directors.

Her connection to nature is long and deep. She was a founder of the Peaked Hill Trust and helped to preserve the historic Province Lands dune shacks in the Cape Cod National Seashore. She spent a great deal of time in the dune shacks, and, she told me, "Spiritually, physically and psychically, it is an unbelievable experience. You have a view of the ocean, sand dunes and sky. You see the sun rising and setting. You realize how profoundly powerful the universe is and you relax into it."

Working both figuratively and abstractly, Johnson is well known for her carved wood pieces, related to her love of nature, referencing organic forms, which often venture into the abstract. She also carved stone, shaped clay and resin, and created bronze sculptures.

You can see her love of nature in the organic shapes of her sculpture, with its sensuous curves that sometimes lean toward cubism. She often makes a totem of bulbous shapes and other rounded forms that are graced with sharp cuts and angles, as in the ceramic "Abstract" and the carved redwood "Multiple Forms," which also seems inspired by the human form.

"Dune," a mahogany piece with rounded forms, is essentially abstract; but if you are familiar with the sand hills in Provincetown, you are likely to see the relationship.

The sensuous curves of her sculpture relate not only to the Cape's natural world – the rolling dunes or waves furling on a beach – but also to the undulating lines of a female figure.

Johnson delighted in the curves of the female form, as her figurative pieces beautifully capture. Some of her abstract pieces reference the elegant lines of the body.

Johnson lived a simple life. She built her own house in Truro. The natural world was a constant influence on her work.

She had numerous one-person shows: at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Cape Cod Conservatory in West Barnstable, and Truro Center for the Arts. Her work has been included in group shows at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the museums in Dennis and Provincetown, as well as the Tanzer Gallery in New York City.

In 2013, the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod presented Johnson with the Lifetime Achievement Award. This year, she was posthumously honored with the Award for Artistic Excellence from the Provincetown museum.

Helen Addison, of Addison Art Gallery in Orleans, who has represented Johnson for 20 years, knew her well and not only admired her art but also the woman herself. "She made us laugh, think, see; she showed us all a better way to live."



Artist Joyce Johnson created her sculpture "Multiple Forms" out of redwood. JIM ZIMMERMAN

If you go

What: "Honoring Joyce Johnson in Truro" When: Through Dec. 29 Where: Truro Public Library, 7 Standish Way, North Truro Information: 508-255-6200 or helen@addisonart.com