



John Alexander in his studio with *Ship of Fools*, 2006-7, in the background.

Fools and Ghouls

John Alexander, skilled draftsman and sharp-eyed satirist, has spent a career rendering "the dark side of man, the glorious side of nature, and the destruction of both" **BY ANN LANDI**

Sharp-eyed satirist, deft observer of the natural world, accomplished draftsman, frenzied expressionist—as an artist, John Alexander is hard to pin down. In his 40-year career, he has gone through periods in which he's turned a critical eye on the social and political scene; years when he's dedicated himself to honing his drawing skills to the level of an Old Master; times of painting lush landscapes, bursting still lifes, and churning seascapes; and an explosive phase in the late 1970s and early '80s when it seemed he was about to transform into a full-blown abstractionist.

The lack of a consistent, identifiable style makes it difficult for curators, critics, and collectors to get a handle on this multi-talented artist. The only continuum has been a fierce commitment to whatever happens to engage his sensibilities. "Everything is connected to my life and my feelings and my foibles and what makes me angry and what makes me happy," he says.

A retrospective—on view at the Smithsonian American Art



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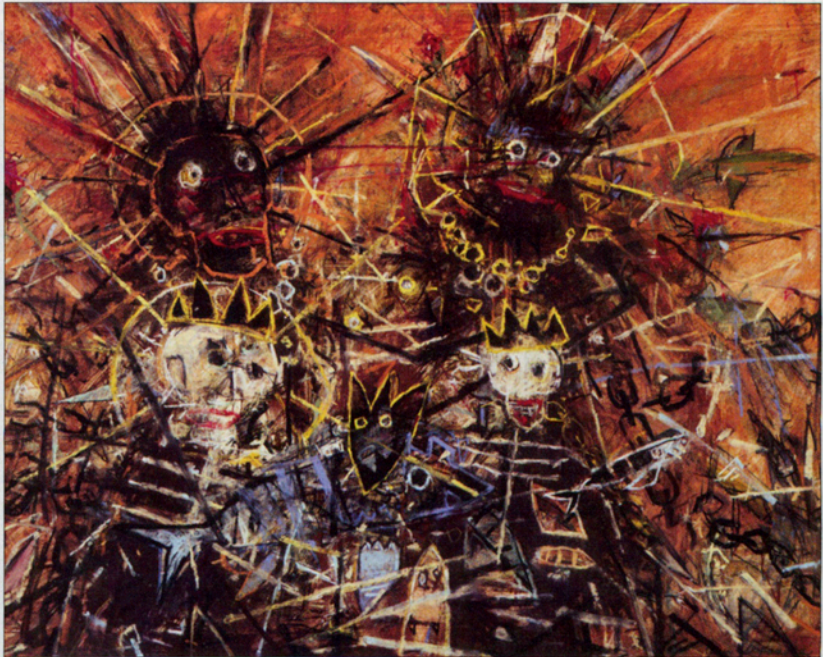
Museum in Washington, D.C., through March 16 and at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from April 13 through June 22—and the publication of a handsome companion volume by Yale University Press should help bring Alexander's career into clearer focus. Leafing through the book in his SoHo loft, a cavernous, simply furnished space, he is a little overwhelmed by the forthcoming tributes. He pauses at the reproduction of *Ship of Fools* (2006–7), an eight-foot-tall painting that shows a boatload of hapless characters, some in masks and some with animal heads, surrounded by roiling waters and floating skeletons. "It seems that in the midst of periods where I've become deeply disillusioned by politics and the government—now more than any other in my lifetime—I just gravitate toward this kind of painting," he says in a voice that retains his native Texas twang. "It's not like I sit down and think, 'I'm going to do this satirical, politically charged image making.' One day I just look back, and in the last six months, that's what I've done."

The idea for *Ship of Fools*, inspired partly by a painting of the same name by Hieronymus Bosch, had been developing for some 20 years. "I just kept thinking about it and thinking about it. Finally I saw in my mind how to make it. It just fits in with all these strange things I've been doing lately." Those "strange things" include flag-waving bureaucrats, a screaming monkey's head, a portrait of Richard Nixon, and another large canvas, *The Parade* (2006). Like *Ship of Fools*, that painting is an assemblage of ghoulish creatures, a nightmarish gathering of doomed souls that seems to condemn the current sociopolitical climate without pointing a finger at specific targets.

It's not unusual for Alexander, 62, to revisit ideas, images, and impressions from his earlier life, going all the way back to childhood. He was born in 1945 in Beaumont, Texas, a deeply religious Baptist community. His father, John Edgar Alexander Sr., a construction engineer, was in his 60s when he met his second wife, Zeila, who was 35 years younger and whom the artist has described as a maverick for her time and place: "She danced, cussed, raised hell."

But she also went to church every Sunday, and the presence of the Baptists in Alexander's early years was inescapable. As independent curator Jane Livingston, who organized the retro-

spective, writes in her catalogue essay about the painter, "Pentecostal warnings of the fires of hell, and a communal belief that between sin and salvation lay no safe territory, influenced every aspect of his childhood, and patently found their way into Alexander's art." Images of tormented souls, grinning



OPPOSITE Roy with Cigar, 2007. **TOP** In the early '80s Alexander worked in the freer, expressionistic style seen in *Two Popes Arguing Over a Blue Fish*, 1984. **BOTTOM** *Montauk Point*, 1997.



fiends, and all-consuming flames occur regularly in his drawings and paintings. His savage attitudes toward hypocrisy also stem from childhood. "I remember when I was very young being aware of the fact that a member of the church was beating his wife," he says. "I recall thinking, 'That's really not right.' There's nothing more hypocritical in the world than a

In the late '80s and early '90s Alexander turned a keen eye on celebrity

bunch of Southern Baptists and racist Klan types. They take hypocrisy to an extreme.”

His family encouraged Alexander, who wanted to be an artist from the age of ten. He was given a set of paints for Christmas and spent the holidays recording the world around him. His father regularly took him camping and fishing, and the bayou country became a favorite subject (a painting he made at the age of 15, *Neches River*, is included in the book).



He was developing a taste for the music that he says he is still “obsessed with”—blues, gospel, and postwar country by musicians like Hank Williams. But when it came to visual arts, he had few models. There were no galleries or art museums in the area, and “not only did we not have art in our house,” he says, “I didn’t know anyone who did.” His sources of visual stimulus were the magazines of the day, *Look*, *Life*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and even *Popular Mechanics*.

It wasn’t until he went to college at Lamar University in Beaumont and met a young teacher named Jerry Newman that Alexander could begin to acquire a solid academic foundation in drawing, painting, and art history. Newman’s instruction was rigorous and intense, including night classes spent drawing from models and still-life arrangements, and

making copies after the Old Masters. “This whole approach was disappearing from college art education in the United States, so I feel lucky to have been at Lamar when I was,” Alexander told Livingston.

HIS FIRST REAL encounter with the great art of the past came during his sophomore year, when he traveled to Chicago to visit a friend and discovered the Art Institute. He remembers the “towering pictures” and “being absolutely shocked,” and he asked himself if he should give up art then and there. “I thought I’d never do anything like that”—“that” being the great 19th-century realism of the Barbizon School and the Hudson River School panoramas of Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Edwin Church. He was especially impressed by George Inness’s landscapes and still remembers a small Manet still life of a red fish and oysters—both of which find echoes in Alexander’s later work in those genres. “Within two years, I was in New York, at the Met,” he says. “I began to realize that art was something much bigger, much more spiritual and grand, than anything I’d ever imagined.”

After graduation, Alexander spent two years teaching high school as a way to avoid the draft. He describes the Vietnam War as an experience that “radicalized” him politically and led him to distrust authority figures of all kinds.

By the early '70s, he had earned his M.F.A. from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, which boasted a first-rate faculty and an ambitious visiting-artist program, and had accepted a position

teaching at the University of Houston. He and his first wife, Wanda Brod, fell into the city’s lively, burgeoning art scene, which included James Surls, Dan Rizzie, and James Hill, as well

Alexander brings together some of his favorite motifs—monkeys, masked men, and skeletons—in *Ship of Fools*.

as the forceful presence of John and Dominique de Menil.

Alexander’s first mature landscapes date from this period, and he enjoyed critically successful and remunerative shows at Meredith Long & Company. These works are generally bleak and often haunting, filled with ominous shadows and realized in a limited palette of ochres and mauves along with black, white, and gray. A few years later, James Harithas, the charismatic director of Houston’s Contemporary Arts Museum, saw some offhand scribbles and freewheeling sketches the artist had been working on and encouraged him in that direction. Alexander moved into looser, more expressionist territory with canvases like *Cry Me a River* (1978) and *Caught in the Act* (1976).

By this time, he was forging connections with dealers like

moguls like Donald Trump and Henry Kravis, as well as some society types

Betty Parsons and Max Hutchinson and visiting New York regularly. There the gregarious artist began hanging out with a cluster of young talents like performance artist Van Schley, actors Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd, *Saturday Night Live* creator Lorne Michaels, and comedy writer Rosie Shuster. After his marriage dissolved in 1978, he decided to quit his teaching job and move full-time to New York, where he married Shuster and settled in the studio he still calls home.

His work from those early years on the East Coast reflected the turbulence and upheaval of the move from Texas. "They were the first paintings I ever did where I let myself go and let all this stuff inside me come out," he says. "I'd left a very comfortable job and life, my family, and all my old friends. Those first few years of living in this building were so foreign to me. All of a sudden I'm surrounded by SoHo and New York City." The paintings from this time—like *I've Been Living in a Hydrogen Bomb* (1982), *Hiding from the Hunter* (1982), and *Red Devil* (1984)—are filled with intimations of catastrophe and what Alexander calls "hellfire and brimstone and all that old-time religious hal-lelujah stuff."

"I was around a group of very bright and talented people, and it was truly like somebody going into a psychiatrist's office wound up tight and for the first time just openly weeping and letting go," he explains. "I was exorcising my own demons." As Alexander acknowledges, such vulnerability and openness is difficult to maintain for more than a few years, and by the end of the decade he had returned to a more conventional kind of representation. At times he would revisit this forthrightness, as in *Venus and Adonis* (1989), a haunting parable about the breakup of his second marriage in which a masked couple confront each other in bed as their bodies are consumed by flames.

THE LATE '80s and early '90s were a period of high-rolling excess in certain Manhattan circles, and Alexander turned a keen eye on celebrity moguls like Donald Trump and Henry Kravis, as well as some of Texas's better-known society types. After a 1989 double portrait of the Trumps became renowned not for its merits but because "all people talked about was the Trumps," Alexander says, "I made a decision that I didn't ever again want to paint pictures that were so specific."

In the mid-'90s, he settled happily into family life when he met his current wife, Fiona Waterstreet, and adopted her son, Harry, now a senior in boarding school. When Alexander turned 50, he consciously turned back to studying his subjects firsthand. "I want to readdress myself to my craft. I need to become more skillful, and the only way to do that is to work in a traditional way, from observation," he told a group of students

at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1996. The results of that approach have included sea- and landscapes that recall the painters he studied so many years ago in the Art Institute of Chicago, lush and exuberant still lifes, and meticulously realized drawings of flowers and animals.

The last decade has been particularly rewarding for the artist, who divides his time between New York in the winter and a home and studio on Long Island's East End in the summer. He

The charcoal and pastel *Coin Gobbler*, 2007.



shows widely, most regularly with Gerald Peters Gallery in Dallas (where drawings range from \$8,000 to \$10,000 and large paintings can go for \$150,000) and most recently at Eaton Fine Art in West Palm Beach, where a survey of prints is currently on view. His extracurricular activities include fishing, frequent travel, and following the minor-league baseball teams he co-owns with his old friend Van Schley.

Alexander has no immediate plans to abandon the satirical side he's been exploring lately, but he does want to return to the more painterly expressiveness of his works from the '80s. "One thing that's been consistent throughout my life is the images I draw from," he says. "The dark side of man, the glorious side of nature, and the destruction of both." ■