

the city

Art preserves ties of former vet, animals

By CHERYL CESSNA
Battalion Reporter



James Harvey Johnson, a 1969 Texas A&M University graduate, displays one of his new paintings which will be shown Nov. 17 in Huntsville. Battalion photo by Lynn Blanco

He put down his scalpel to pick up a paintbrush, but he's still working with animals. Bryan artist James Harvey Johnson, 34, graduated from Texas A&M University in 1969, but switched from practicing veterinary medicine to painting in 1972. "I'd been in practice three years and I accepted a position at the United States Department of Agriculture — a research position. About that time, which was in '71 or '72, I started drawing again," Johnson said.

"As I matured as an artist and the business grew, I came to a point where I really wanted to see what it would do. I was ready for a change; I didn't particularly want to advance any further in research because I'd have to continue my education," he said. "So it was either go back in practice or become an artist. I didn't want to go back in debt again with the practice, so I chose this because already had it established and going well. And if I had never done it, then I always would have wondered whether I could or not." From the looks of things, Johnson doesn't have to wonder anymore. "I'd say an average painting would sell for \$750 to \$1,200. Of course I've done smaller and I've done larger. I sold more in the earlier years than I do now because I was doing smaller things. But this year, of the major paintings, I've sold maybe 15, and another 15 or 20 of the smaller ones," he said.

His wife and business manager, Collette, said Johnson is working on a show to be held Nov. 17 at the Franer Gallery in Huntsville. She said the gallery is introducing a limited edition of 490 signed prints, which will sell for \$100 each.

"We've been planning it for about a year," she said, "so it's going to be a major show. He's probably going to have about 20 original pieces for sale there."

"A lot of Jim's work over the few years has been commissioned paintings. The people at the gallery invited him to do the show a year ago, so he's been working on things that were not commissioned to use in the show. It's hard to get ready for a major showing like when you're doing commissions. You really have to plan ahead and you're a commission-painting artist."

Johnson's living room is a private gallery of sorts; it's filled with his paintings, and also the occasional mementos of several parrots — "not be mean," "I pretty bird" and "What ya doin'?"

Johnson said caged birds are his primary interest as a veterinarian. "I do some consulting work, and I help my hand in on the clinical aspects of caged birds. I have several of them as pets. I got interested in it because I had one bird who died a year ago. I replaced it, and the people I got it from started asking me questions about caged birds that I couldn't answer," he said.

"So I did a lot of reading and talked to a lot of other veterinarians and developed somewhat of an expertise. And I still do some relief work — if a vet goes on vacation, I'll be on his clients while he's gone." Johnson not only has birds as pets but he also hunts them, and is chairman of the local chapter of Ducks Unlimited.

"It's a non-profit conservation organization, and there's no government money in it. Money has been donated to it by duck hunters to purchase and lease wetlands in the United States, Canada and Mexico for the nesting grounds of waterfowl. Non-game species benefit from it, too."

He said he sees no conflict between his profession and hunting. "The types of animals I hunt are only available because of hunters."

ground gypsum which will support the oil. I do some watercolor — mostly opaque watercolor. I have done some sculpture, but I'm not currently doing that."

In spite of his success, Johnson said he has never had art lesson.

"I'm entirely self-taught. I've always liked to work with my hands. As a child, I built model airplanes, and I always used my hands to create things," Johnson said.

Johnson said the commission he would most like to receive would be to paint Secretariat. "I painted his daughter, Terlingua, and I'd like to paint him. I was commissioned by a man in Midland whose son co-owned the daughter of Secretariat."

"She had the most potential of any of Secretariat's progeny, and she won several hundred thousand dollars. She was a 2-year-old at the time I was commissioned, in October 1978, and there was a chance that if she did well, she could run in the Kentucky Derby as a 3-year-old. But she missed it by one race. It would have been nice because it would have been the first time in 20 years a filly has run against colts in the Kentucky Derby."

Johnson said horses are hard assignments. "Horses are very beautiful, but they're very difficult to paint because of the color and conformation, especially in a case like that of Terlingua. If I were just painting a horse I could make it like I wanted it. But when it's somebody's horse, and especially a horse like that, it has to be exact," he said.

Johnson said he is still trying to perfect his craft.

Johnson, "I'm a conservationist in that I know that the funds that are generated from hunting have allowed the types of animals that I hunt to still exist. This is because of the amount of money needed for propagation and for Ducks Unlimited to buy wetlands."

"As a result there is a huntable population of ducks; otherwise, there wouldn't be any at all. I feel real good about it. It's conservation rather than preservation. Conservation's just the use of a renewable resource, and I feel very strongly about that," Johnson said.

"I probably would not have had the inspiration to be an artist if it had not been for my experiences as a youngster hunting and getting to know bird dogs," he said.

Johnson calls on his early experiences as a hunter in West Texas as an inspiration for his paintings.

"I've painted a lot of different things, but now I concentrate on the subjects I feel I know the best. Most of those are dogs, mostly sporting dogs — pointers, setters, retrievers — and selected wildlife."

"I don't really call myself a wildlife artist, although I do a lot of that type of thing. But those are my favorite subjects, the ones that I really prefer to do. I think any good artist, if he really researches what he's doing and gets a grasp on it, can do almost anything. But all of them have favorites, because that's the thing they know the best. And it will show in their work, too," he said.

Johnson said he occasionally paints from photographs, even though there is a controversy among painters about their use.

"Generally, when I do that, I'll take my own because I can't depend on anyone else's photographs. The artist is still behind the camera; he's still thinking as an artist, rather than as a photographer. The kind of information I need from that photograph is different from what the photographer is trying to portray in a photograph standing on its own."

Johnson says he uses chiefly oil. "I paint on Masonite, which is a trade name for a sort of pressed wood. Its surface is treated with a

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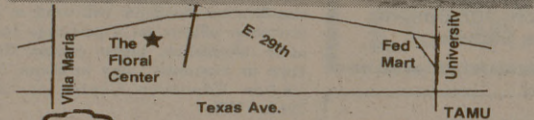
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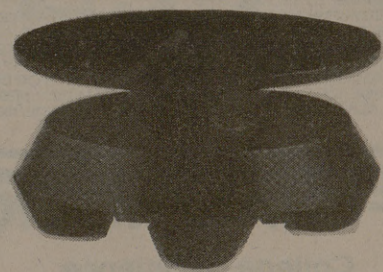
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