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Local

State artist focuses on animal kingdom

By LISA SURMAN
Battalion Reporter

Jim Johnson of Bryan has focused his work on animals as a veterinarian, a federal researcher and now as a professional artist.

Johnson, who received his doctorate in veterinary medicine from Texas A&M University in 1969, in May was named the Texas Artist of the Year for 1982-83.

"I don't actually become the state artist until April or May of next year," he said in a recent interview at his home, "so I'm still getting a lot of attention when I'm really not the state artist yet."

Johnson, who has been painting professionally for three years, said the state artist committee selects two artists each session for the award. The committee, which meets once every two years, is composed of three state senators, three House members and three members of the governor's staff.

The artist spent three years in private veterinary practice.

Johnson said he decided to quit his practice in 1972. "I was work-

ing by myself ... and did everything," he said. I was the receptionist, the kennel-boy ... and at that time really tired of it.

"I had had this interest, or at least I thought I did, in research. The opportunity came along to do it and I accepted it," he said. Johnson did toxicology research, which studies the effects of insecticides on animals, for the U.S. Department of Agriculture until 1978.

The decision to paint professionally "was totally my decision," Johnson said. "My friends and relatives thought I was crazy. I didn't want to continue working in research anymore. I didn't like it. When you work for the bureaucracy of government, you see a lot of the problems and do a lot of things that have no point ... It was that kind of work — a lot of busy work."

The artist, originally from Midland, said he is totally self-taught. "I did a lot of sketchings and drawings when I was little, but never was interested in it enough to go to school for it," he said.

Johnson said he was painting a

lot before he decided to become a professional. "You have to really work hard at developing it. It's not something you just dive into and not have any experience with ... It's a very competitive and cut-throat business."

He said, "Being a veterinarian helps me with the animal's anatomy. Everything I paint I'm involved with to some degree. That's the only way I can really paint with confidence."

Seventy-five to 80 percent of his paintings are oils and the rest are water colors. Johnson said he is primarily commissioned by a client who specifies what he wants painted and the price he will pay. Johnson's prices range from \$75 to \$10,000.

"The price sets the limit as to the size and how complex it is," Johnson said. "Otherwise, everything else is left totally up to me."

Johnson said he's not the only artist in his family. His aunt, Margie Clark, was a professional artist whose work is included in the private art collections of Bob Hope, Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis and Red Skelton, he said.

Johnson said Clark influenced him greatly but never knew it because she died in 1966, six years before Johnson first tried to paint.

Johnson said good artists are constantly improving. "I can do a painting and three months later ... wish I could do differently," he said.

Johnson, whose paintings have been sold all over the country, said he reserves October to December for getting new material and clients. "I may not be actually painting, but I'm still creating something in my mind," he said.

During the rest of the year, Johnson said he spends six to 10 hours a day, seven days a week, painting.

The most expensive painting Johnson has done was a 30 by 40 inch painting of the daughter of Secretariat (the 1973 Triple Crown winner), he said. It sold for \$10,000 and took seven weeks to paint.

Johnson said he will be concentrating on shows and exhibits in the next year. As state artist, he will have a show in the Capitol Rotunda.



Staff photo by Greg Cason

Texas Artist of the Year, Jim Johnson, demonstrates his art at his Bryan studio.

An exhibit showing some of Johnson's work will be shown in the lobby area of the Former Student's Association from mid-April until mid-May, Jim Reynolds, Director of the Memorial Student Center said. He said the exhibit will be sponsored by the MSC Arts Committee and the Former Student's Association.

Johnson's wife, Jocille, said she is always amazed with her husband's work. "I never know what he's going to create," she said. "He says there's enough distortion in the world that we need something ... realistic." When asked to sum up his work, Johnson said, "It's always important to remember, there's always going to be a lesser and a greater than you are. Just about the time you think you're pretty good, there's somebody around there who's a lot better ... so the main thing is just to keep remembering what you do, have confidence ... and continue to be the best that you can — everything else will take care of itself."

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Houston Ballet to present Norwegian fantasy play

The Houston Ballet, sponsored by the MSC Opera and Performing Arts Society, will perform "Peer Gynt," the story of a wanderer's adventures, tonight at 8 p.m. in Rudder Auditorium.

Based on the Norwegian fantasy play by Henrik Ibsen, "Peer Gynt" is one of the largest touring shows ever produced by the Houston Ballet. The ballet is performed in classic form, and follows the life of a wandering, selfish

young man as he falls in love, battles monsters and gains and loses a fortune.

The ballet took director Ben Stevenson seven years to create. "I'd wanted to do a ballet with a story and this had always tugged at me," he said. "I've mostly done ballets about women, but this was different — about a man, but of course with very good roles for women."

About 150 seats for the balcony are still available in the balcony, Debbie Murray, Box Office employee, said today. The tickets are \$6 for students and \$7 for non-students.

Damon Greshaw, MSC chairman, said season tickets are also still available. These tickets give students a 20 percent discount on all MSC OPAS productions.



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