

Oh, pioneer

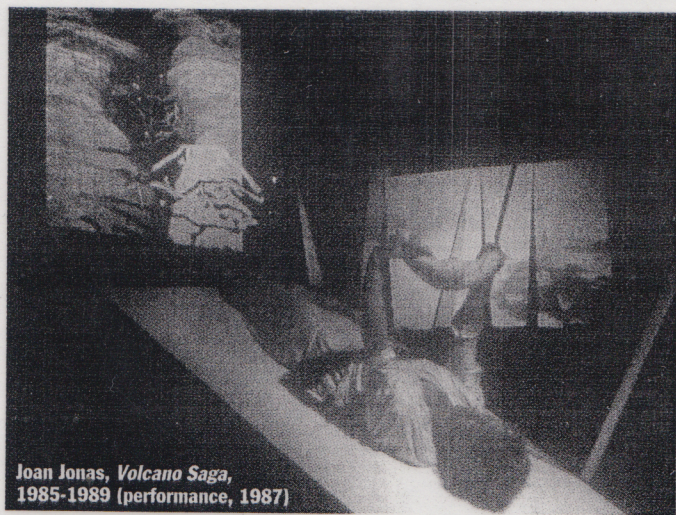
Trailblazing artist Joan Jonas's first museum show in New York proves well worth the wait **By Martha Schwendener**

There's something startling about the fact that groundbreaking artist Joan Jonas has not received a major museum show in New York until her late sixties. You could blame it on the usual art world bogeyman—sexism—but looking closely at her work provides another thought. Throughout her career, Jonas has continued to make challenging performance-based videos and installations that raise more questions than they answer.

The exhibition, on view at the Queens Museum of Art, is a "selection" of key works, rather than a full-fledged retrospective. Interestingly, curator Valerie Smith opens the show not with one of Jonas's seminal early pieces, but with the recent video installation *Lines in the Sand* (2002). The installation was inspired by the poet H.D.'s epic *Helen in Egypt*, which quotes classical sources contending that Helen of Troy never left Egypt and that the Trojan War was fought for trade and access to the Black Sea, rather than over a woman. In her piece, Jonas changes the narrative's location from Egypt to Las Vegas, an artificial landscape with its own pyramid in the form of the Luxor casino. The video includes many of her signature devices, such as masked performances, as she dances on a platform near a construction site or moves around her studio; meanwhile, in another video, we watch as she draws Egyptian motifs—a sphinx head, a pyramid—on a chalkboard. Also incorporated into the installation are a couch, a plastic cone and a sandbox, among other elements.

Lines, like all the installations here, features fragments of spoken text—culled from history, mythology and poetry—within performances that are as enigmatic as the images they are paired with. *Volcano Saga* (1985), featuring British actor Tilda Swinton, draws on the

Icelandic *laxdaela* saga; *Revoltd by the Thought of Known Places...* (1992) is based on the medieval Irish epic *Sweeney Astray*; and *The Juniper Tree* (1976–78) takes its name from a fairy tale Jonas describes in notes that accompany the show as "a story told again and again, mostly by women, and then written down by the Brothers Grimm." In each of these works, the viewer's job isn't necessarily to connect the elements into a cohesive whole, but instead to allow Jonas to act as a



Joan Jonas, *Volcano Saga*, 1985–1989 (performance, 1987)

kind of shaman, making incantations while conjuring new aesthetic possibilities. In this way, she works in the vein of Joseph Beuys, whose antics with coyotes, dead rabbits, felt and fat challenged Western notions of rationality. But while Beuys used video simply as a tool to document his performance "actions," Jonas used the technology as an integral part of her installations.

Much of Jonas's work is a medium-specific meditation in which the technology used to create a given piece becomes intrinsic to its meaning. A work such as *Vertical Roll* (1972), in which she jumped up and down in front of the camera in time with a vertically scrolling video image, questions

the ways in which film and video frame the female body—issues that were central to feminist critics of the era such as Laura Mulvey, who applied Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to Hollywood cinema. In *Mirror* (1968), female performers hold mirrors up to their nude bodies, then rest their breasts on the mirrors and stare into their reflected images—an scene that is simultaneously an enactment of narcissism (think Lacan's mirror stage) and of empowerment.

Jonas's concerns, however, go beyond feminism to encompass general human experience. Although recent works have focused on singular figures or couples, earlier ones, like the fantastic film *Songdelay* (1973), employ large, coed casts. Inspired by Japanese Noh theater, the film (transferred to video here) finds performers including the late artist Gordon Matta-Clark "drawing" on the landscape with hoops and other props, while the artist herself

dances with sticks in a way that suggests she is both puppeteer and marionette.

Jonas is an artist who appears to be better understood—or at least more widely recognized—in Europe than in the United States. She's been the subject of major museum retrospectives at both the Stedelijk in Amsterdam (in 1994) and the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (in 2000), venues where difficult work is greeted by receptive audiences. It may seem clichéd to say that American audiences are less up for the challenge, but the trajectory of Jonas's career would seem to bear the theory out. In this regard, the location of her show at the Queens Museum makes a certain sense, since—just like her oeuvre—it requires a journey, but the effort is part of the payoff.

"Joan Jonas: Five Works"

Queens Museum of Art, through Mar 14 (see Museums)