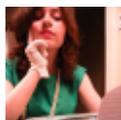


# This Winnipeg artist makes music fest photos come alive with glitter and paint

## Let this Sobey Art Award finalist take you on a Field Trip



Leah Collins · CBC Arts

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Sarah Anne Johnson. Yellow Dinosaur, 2015. (Sarah Anne Johnson)

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In [Field Trip](#), a new photography exhibition from [Sarah Anne Johnson](#), the Winnipeg artist captures the dizzy excitement of her own festival-going youth. And it's been years since her last Burning Man.

"I call them photographs. Maybe photographers would be, like, 'What?! No!'" - *Sarah Anne Johnson*

For the exhibition, which runs at Montreal's [Division Gallery](#) until January 30, Johnson returned to the festival circuit as a sober adult, photographing strangers documentary-style and, later, transforming the pictures with paint, ink or the occasional burst of glitter.

Sarah Anne Johnson. Kick in Tin the Cosmos, 2015. (Sarah Anne Johnson)

That's how she pulls off this time-travelling trick. They say that photographs capture the moment, but a moment is way too complex to be held within a frame — moments are full of unspoken stories and experiences and memories. So with every edit she makes, Johnson leaves a record of something personal and real: the things we might feel when we revisit an old photograph, but never see.

Here, the 2015 Sobey Art Award finalist tells CBC Arts about the project.

Sarah Anne Johnson. Group Portrait, 2015. (Sarah Anne Johnson)

### **Music festival memories**

Teen passions can fade as quickly as Manic Panic hair dye, but the memory and experience remains. Johnson is now in her late 30s, but in her teens, music festivals had a formative influence of her life. It started when she was 16. "I had really strict parents, but for some reason I was allowed to go to the Winnipeg Folk Festival for the weekend without any parental supervision," the artist recalls. "It was my first taste of freedom — camping with friends and like-minded community. The beautiful setting, the music. It was an important part of my upbringing, I guess."

For *Field Trip*, Johnson went back to music festival campgrounds and parking lots around North America, and while the exact locations aren't named, British Columbia features prominently. "The last two years, I'd go as an outsider — and feel like an outsider too," Johnson says. "I'm a little older, I'm not there with friends, I'm not in the scene," she explains.

"I started thinking about it as a project two years ago, but I kept trying not to do it," she says. "I'm over it."

"But every time I tried to stop making it work, it was all I could think about," she says. "I have all these memories, so I'm looking for pictures that describe my memories of how wonderful it was, and my experiences there."

Sarah Anne Johnson. Glitter Bomb, 2015. (Sarah Anne Johnson)

### **Beyond documentary photography**

Grey skies swapped for fuchsia. A glitter bomb detonated in a parking lot. Johnson's *Field Trip* memories don't necessarily match any literal reality. Every image is heightened with an assortment of physical and digital tools, but the artist doesn't describe her work as mixed media.

"I call them photographs. Maybe photographers would be like 'What?! No!' But, she points out, every photographer manipulates their images. Lighting, framing, colour, Photoshop: "they're all just tools in your belt and you can use them however you want." Her kit happens to include paint and ink and sparkles.

"I guess my issue with photography is it's really good at showing you what something looks like — the surface of something — but it's not so good at showing a sensation or an experience. Or what you keep learning from an experience after it's over," Johnson says. "My interest in photography is more about trying to reveal that other stuff that strict photography on its own can't show."

Sarah Anne Johnson. Neon Fun Blob, 2015. (Sarah Anne Johnson)

**Is this the real life, is this just fantasy?**

With *Field Trip*, every change Johnson makes to a photograph lets her represent what the eye can't see. "I can show what [the place] looks like, but I can also reveal the psychological landscape, the group mentality." Drugs are everywhere, so she can also conjure that experience.

Sometimes, the imagery represents her own memories. Other times, it imagines what others are feeling. "It's me sort of reacting to whatever the image is in the photograph," she says.



Sarah Anne Johnson. *Mess*, 2015. (Sarah Anne Johnson)

The resulting imagery is the stuff of psychedelic fantasy, but Johnson says every photograph expresses something 100 per cent authentic. "The photographs are based in reality," she explains. "This is how I have felt when I have been in these situations, or this is how I've felt looking at the situation."

"I think it's *more* reality. They're more honest photographs from my perspective."

Sarah Anne Johnson. *Fuchsia Beach*, 2015. (Sarah Anne Johnson)

*Field Trip*. Sarah Anne Johnson. To Jan 30 at Division Gallery, Montreal. [www.galeriedivision.com](http://www.galeriedivision.com)