





PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

George Johanson (American, born 1928)

Under the Volcano, 1984

Color etching on paper,

Plate: 18 x 47 3/4 inches; sheet: 21 1/8 x 50 5/8 inches

Gift of the Artist

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George Johanson is a painter and printmaker whose work spans more than 70 years and encompasses abstract composition, portraiture, and cityscape. His style carries strong surrealist tones. Human figures take part in fascinating and mysterious scenes, often accompanied by cats. The images may evoke a specific place and time, yet appear dreamlike and remote and rich with symbolism.

Johanson was born in Seattle, Washington in 1928, the child of a baker and a beautician. The difficulty of growing up during the Great Depression led Johanson to consider the possibility of art as a career, “I remember my grade school teacher taking me aside and talking to me about becoming a commercial artist, and that was my goal from early on.” After graduating from high school in 1946, Johanson moved to Portland to learn painting and printmaking at the Museum Art School (now the Pacific Northwest College of Art) where he joined a strong community of fellow students and teachers. From there, he spent time in Mexico and in New York City, where he met artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. At a time when the prevailing style in modern American art was abstract and nonrepresentational, De Kooning provided a model for Johanson of a painter who remained interested in the human figure.

Johanson had received training in life drawing at the Museum Art School and, when he returned to Portland in 1955 to teach at the school, he continued to explore

portraiture. His expansive understanding of the genre encompassed both representations of people and depictions of Portland itself. “Practically everything I’ve done with landscape has been the city of Portland. I think of the Renaissance painters who would use their own town as setting... I feel like I’m doing a portrait over and over again of the city.” Most of these city portraits are represented from the perspective of Johanson’s home near Vista Bridge in Southwest Portland.

On May 18, 1980, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake triggered a massive landslide of Mount St. Helens’ entire north face, shortly followed by the most destructive volcanic eruption in the history of the United States. The ash cloud from the eruption traveled as far as North Dakota and produced a premature night for all of the Pacific Northwest, continuing to clog the air and water for weeks afterwards. In the aftermath of the eruption, Johanson took up imagery of the erupting volcano as a manifestation of catastrophe. The erupting Mount St. Helens has since been a recurring motif in Johanson’s Portland cityscapes.

In this 1984 print, *Under the Volcano*, the Portland skyline and an erupting Mount St. Helens meet at the center of two panels. In the foreground, a collection of people (and one cat) appear to sunbathe, draw, and gaze in the mirror, seemingly untroubled by the cataclysm at hand. The volcano illuminates the scene, casting long shadows toward the viewer. While the blue line of the Columbia

River perhaps offers protection and cool relief, a bright ball of flame extends the volcano’s reach, nearly touching the drawing figure. Scattered mirrors show disorienting reflections, insisting we take in multiple perspectives at once. A rainbow arcs over Portland. Johanson appreciates this dissonance: “I think serene and violent things can exist simultaneously and become more potent because they’re juxtaposed.” By representing things on opposite extremes of scale (the very mundane to the most catastrophic) with equal importance, *Under the Volcano* brings into question our perceptions of the stability of the world as we know it. In his words, “the eruption seemed like an incredible reminder of how thin a crust of earth we live on and what kind of intensity nature has.”

Johanson taught at the Museum Art School for 25 years, until his retirement in 1980, and remains a beloved mentor and community member. He continues to live and work in Portland, where he recently celebrated his 90th birthday.

portlandartmuseum.org/learn/educators

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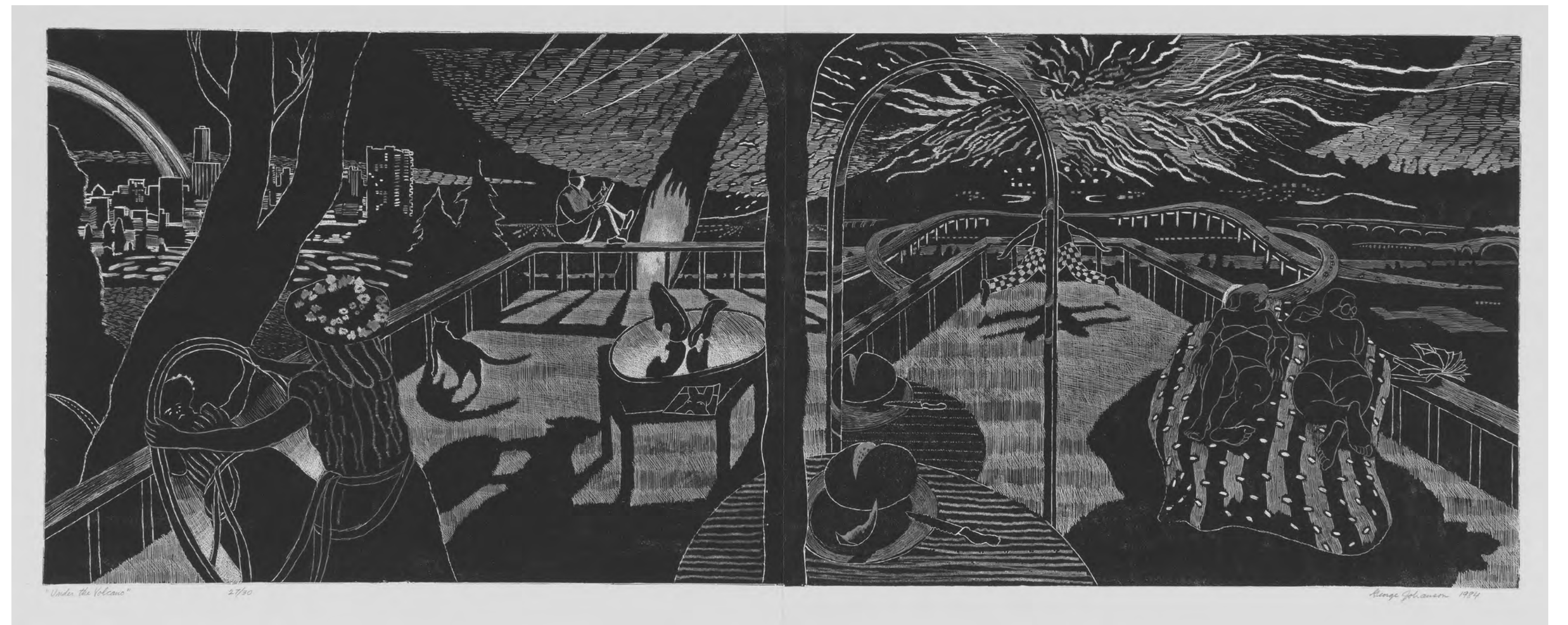
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Discussion and Activities

1. Look closely at *Under the Volcano* for 30 seconds. Make a list of all of the people and animals you can find. What is each one doing? How do their activities relate—or not relate—to Mount St. Helens’ eruption in the distance? What would you expect people and animals to do during a volcanic eruption? What is the meaning of these figures’ activities?
2. What is the focal point of the work? Are there secondary focal points? How is linear perspective used in this piece?
3. Look closely at the mirrors represented in this image. What is their function visually and symbolically? How does Johanson’s use of mirror imagery compare to the use of mirrors in Isaka Shamsud-Din’s *Rock of Ages*?
4. Choose one person, animal, or object in *Under the Volcano* that particularly interests you. Write a short story or poem from their perspective.
5. Create a portrait of the place where you live. Begin by making a list of the defining characteristics of the place. Then, think about how to translate those characteristics into visual form. Consider landmarks, buildings, the natural world, human or animal activity. What makes this place itself? Do you feel its best portrayed in two-dimensional or three-dimensional form? Which medium seems most suited to representing this place?