Code and Inside Jokes (Wink, Wink) for Notorious Provocateurs

ART REVIEW

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Among the revelers at Studio 54, in its heyday, were Dalí and Warhol. For young artists, catching a glimpse of one of these figures was probably more exciting than rubbing shoulders with Bianca Jagger.

Art-world and traditional celebrities overlap, as in the nightclub, in the exhibition "Ray Johnson . . . Dalí/Warhol/and Others . . . 'Man Ray, Ducham, Openheim, Pikabia . . . ' " at Richard L. Feigen & Company. It explores the arcane ways in which Johnson, best known as the founder of "mail art," engaged these modern and contemporary provocateurs.

Johnson (1927-1995) knew Warhol socially; the two had a close friend in common, the Factory photographer known as Billy Name. Johnson's connection to Dalí was more tenuous, though he met that Spanish Surrealist on several occasions at Studio 54. In his art, at least, Johnson had an easy familiarity with both men.

Organized by an independent curator, Frédérique Joseph-Lowery, the show places Johnson's collages from the 1950s through the 1980s alongside a smattering of Warhols. (Dalí, alas, is present only in reproductions, photographs and catalogs.)

It's a scholarly undertaking with a mischievous edge, replete with dissertation-worthy dissections of Johnson's wordplay and iconography but able to wink at his subversions of gender and other nods to gay subculture.

There's also a frisson of glamour. Songs by the Velvet Underground, Debbie Harry and other Factory scenesters play in the gallery, along with audio excerpts from movies starring Mae West and Marilyn Monroe.

Johnson, once described in The New York Times as "New York's most famous unknown artist," didn't seek the name recognition of a Warhol or a Dalí. But he used their fame, and their obsessions with the fame of others, as a kind of lingua franca.

At the same time, his references to them were highly coded. His collages often seem to be addressed, like his mail art, to particular recipients. His deliberate misspellings and use of anagrams and double entendres reinforce the inside-joke sensibility.

Mischievous collages engage the likes of Warhol, Dalí and Duchamp.

Mae West's famous line becomes "Come Op and See Me Sometime," a reference to Op Art. Likewise, Meret Oppenheim's surname is rewritten as "Openheim" and her most famous work — the fur-lined teacup — conjured with a patch of plush leopard-print fabric.

Some jokes he kept for himself, like the image of Rogier Van der Weyden's 15th-century "Portrait of a Lady" onto which he collaged an image of a male model with a suggestive bulge in his swimsuit. There are two versions of the Van der Weyden portrait, one in London's National Gallery and the other in Washington's. Johnson chose the London version, which is known to have an image of Christ on its verso. The layering is more sophisticated than it first appears: male over female over male, sex over art over faith.

The subject of Johnson's collages is, most often, a female celebrity — strategically modified with cartoon phalluses or otherwise masculinized. In two variations on the theme of Monroe, the siren's face is obscured by a squiggle representing a fist.

Many of Johnson's invocations of Dalí fixate on the painter's wife, Gala, and her supposedly emasculating role in his career. In one collage, he attaches the fingertip from a rubber glove to Man Ray's photograph of the Dalís. Placed between husband and wife, it's a thinly disguised prophylactic.

Another famous female, the Mona Lisa, makes an appearance: Johnson masks her face, piggybacking on works by Warhol and Duchamp. The gallery provides a copy of a contemporaneous article from Vanity Fair on the efforts by Jacqueline Kennedy, first lady at the time, to arrange the American tour of the original portrait by Leonardo.

Not all the celebrities in Johnson's art were female. He made an entire series of collages over reproductions of Dalí's "Corpus Hypercubus" (1953-54), an image of Christ on a futuristic cross from the painter's much-ballyhooed "nuclear mysticism" phase. The painting was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in 1954, but Johnson's response came some two decades later — around the time of "Jesus Christ Superstar" on Broadway, as Ms. Joseph-Lowery notes.

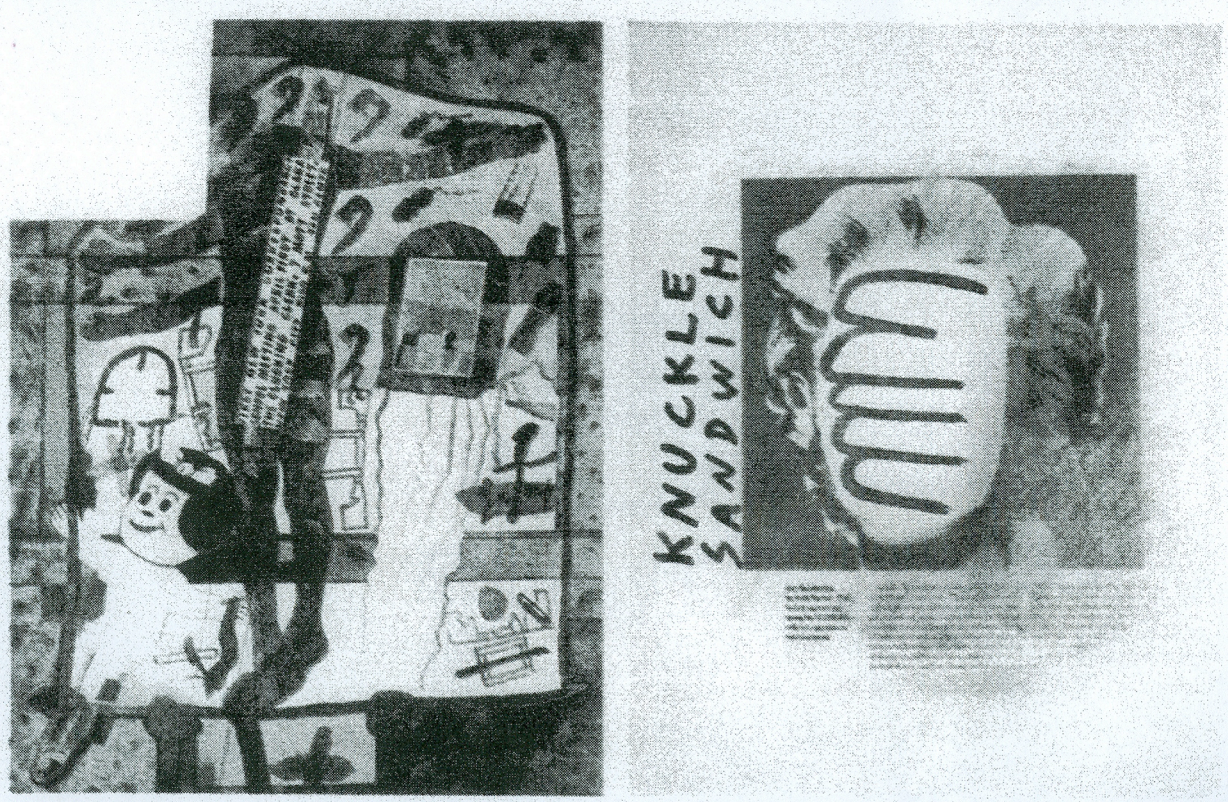
In the most interesting of these works, "Untitled (Dalí Crucifixion With Nancy)," Johnson substitutes the impish comic-strip character for the image of Gala Dalí in the lower left corner of the original painting. Christ is headless and surrounded by snakes and spermatozoa. The result is just as blasphemous as Dalí's version, but far less turgid.

The show makes you think about the relationship between Surrealism, Pop Art and popular culture. Conventional wisdom has it that a neo-avant-garde of Rauschenberg, Cage and others revived Dada in the 1950s and '60s, and Surrealism was reborn as Abstract Expressionism.

The triumvirate of Dalí, Warhol and Johnson suggests a different theory: that Surrealism went underground. You might say that Johnson reoriented it away from heterosexuality and Freud, and toward camp.

Yet he retained the original Surrealists' sense of art as a coded, nuanced exchange. His collages, like his mail art and the scene at Studio 54, are all about openness within a closed system.

The exhibition "Ray Johnson . . . Dalí/Warhol/and Others . . . 'Man Ray, Ducham, Openheim, Pikabia . . . ' " continues through July 31 at Richard L. Feigen & Company, 34 East 69th Street, Manhattan, (212) 628-0700.



Ray Johnson
Richard L. Feigen & Company

ESTATE OF RAY JOHNSON, RICHARD L. FEIGEN & COMPANY

Left, "Untitled (Dalí Crucifixion With Nancy)," from around 1980, and right, "Clipping of Shot Red Marilyn by Andy Warhol (1964) With Knuckle Sandwich on Marilyn," from 1992, both among the Ray Johnson works at Richard L. Feigen & Company.