

April 30, 2004

## Review from Seattle: 'How to Draw a Bunny': A pop-art revolutionary whose weapon was snail mail

Full story: <http://archives.seattletimes.nwsource.com/cgi-bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=bunny30&date=20040430>

By Jeff Shannon Special to The Seattle Times

If there was any question that Ray Johnson would achieve immortality in the art world, John Walter's fascinating documentary "How to Draw a Bunny" puts all doubt to rest. One look at Johnson's life and legacy is enough to convince even skeptical critics that Johnson's name will echo with those of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and other luminaries of the pop-art revolution. And yet, many reading this paragraph are probably wondering, "Ray who?"

Johnson never went out of his way to provide an answer. His death by drowning in January 1995 was ruled a suicide, prompting fellow artists to suggest that death was merely his final performance piece, as mysterious as the 67-year life that preceded it. When authorities videotaped the contents of Johnson's rarely seen studio in Long Island, N.Y., they found a neatly organized archive of Johnson's works and works-in-progress; in his chosen obscurity, he'd never stopped creating. A large portrait of Johnson faced out from one wall of boxes, one of several indications that Johnson had meticulously planned his demise, leaving clues for those best equipped to decipher them.

In life, Johnson was baffling to his contemporaries, but "New York's most famous unknown artist" was a captivating presence to all who knew him. His art — most notably the playful collages and "mail art" that Johnson is best known for — reflected his prankster personality. "How to Draw a Bunny" takes its title from the rabbit-eared doodle that was Johnson's trademark and recurring motif, as identifiable to Johnson as soup cans are to Warhol.

Combining home video of Johnson, visual surveys of his work and testimonials from artist friends (including Christo, Chuck Close, Morton Janklow, Lichtenstein and others), Walter and producer/cinematographer Andrew Moore craft a documentary portrait that asks at least as many questions as it answers, tracing

Johnson's trajectory from his bright youth in Detroit, to his art study at the legendary Black Mountain College, to his emergence as a "collagist extraordinaire" who shunned the gallery scene that would surely have earned him a fortune.

Instead, Johnson used the postal system to distribute his art and, perhaps, to ensure his immortality. It's only fitting that a postal clerk is among Walter's interviewees, having known Johnson as well as anyone through his mountains of mail.

Johnson's star has posthumously risen, along with the value of his "Chop Art," as he preferred to call his collages. Without forcing any guesswork or passing any judgment on a man who by all accounts was engaging but unknowable, "How to Draw a Bunny" serves as worthy tribute to a true original, an "artist's artist" for whom life itself was a singular mode of expression.

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