

that were broadcast throughout the world in real time.

Mario Cutajar

RAY JOHNSON

(Manny Silverman Gallery, West Hollywood) Enigmas are only enigmas until they become understood, well known, or even famous. So it is with Ray Johnson (1927-1995), whose death is still a puzzle, and whose life is now the subject of the recent and absorbing documentary portrait *How to Draw a Bunny*, by John Walter and Andrew Moore. Perhaps we may call it his last best performance, but we shall never know if Johnson swam away to his death in Long Island Sound as his final happening, or in fact it was an accident. Those who knew him are still provoked by the known facts. In a strange way, his drowning death has allowed the public to assess Johnson's considerable body of work as part of art history. There are those who feel that his collages are effective and remarkable (especially the early ones which have a rubbed-away quality) precisely because he was not embraced by the museum and gallery world: He danced to his own music. Then there are those who received his mail art (this writer included) and saw his correspondence art as a life's artwork in itself.

This exhibition presents selections from the *Joseph Cornell* series, another series of portraits seen for the first time in Los Angeles, and still another series featuring celebrities, those Hollywood stars and other famous people that Johnson used as raw material. An "inspiration board," or the wall of Johnson iconography, serves up an insight into the basic tools of his trade. What one sees is his insignia, the bodiless bunny which resembles a genetic mutant Mickey Mouse engineered to be a rabbit. What Johnson claimed was that these were personal self portraits varied by the daily mood changes in his life. He drew *How to Make Ray Johnson Bunnies step by step*, a parody of the advertisements for correspondence art school that chal-



Ray Johnson, "Untitled (Joseph Cornell Bunny with Sand and Swan)," no date, mixed media collage, 11 1/2 x 8 1/2".

lenge readers to "draw this portrait." In fact, one of the great themes of Johnson's mail art was for recipients to "add on" to one of the bunny heads, altering them, then returning them to RJ. Then, too, some of the bunnies were assigned the names of persons either public, unknown, or known only to Johnson and his circle, collectively known as the New York Correspondence School, which he founded in 1950.

The myth that surrounds Johnson is cloaked in mystery not only as to the nature of his death, but also through a career that was difficult to know and understand. He is known as the "founding father of mail art" and as a "collagist extraordinaire." But unlike Pop era contemporary Andy Warhol, who could manipulate the world around him, Johnson was considered a reclusive and enigmatic figure, referred to as "New York's most famous unknown artist." He really desired celebrity, but shunned it, or was unable to invoke the tactics which might have brought this about. What is surprising in light of this is that Johnson was well known for his "spontaneities, his immediacies, and his improvisations" (as recalled by former *L.A. Times* art critic William S. Wilson). He combined people and events into collages which remained only so long as they were of interest, but Johnson had no compunction to evaporate them from the image. He would return to a given object repeatedly as he branched off to new

interests and lines of thought.

In the *Joseph Cornell* series, *Untitled (Dear Marianne)* a Joseph Cornell inkblot found in his garbage can is enhanced and added to by a yin yang symbol, among others. As in so many of his collages, Johnson called attention to a surface by scratching it with sandpaper, or by adding stuff like tar to the surface. In *Untitled (Bunny with Sand and Swan)*, a tar texture is adhered to the bottom half of the collage with a lovely swan in the upper level. A kind of hard and soft surface delights the eye. Another *Untitled (Joseph Cornell)* visually crosspollinates rubber erasers, tiles with images of fish, hands, tree limbs and a German stamp with Hitler's face on it.

Johnson's self portraits are included here, some of which have never been exhibited publicly. This is a treat, for Johnson's bunny alter-ego receives eyes as the artist's own insight. Art and life become one in his portraits. *Bunny-Ray*, shows a vital, youthful Johnson, whose shaved pate was decades ahead of present fashion.

Portraits of celebrities such as Holly Solomon, Paloma Picasso, and Marilyn Monroe (which also features artist Agnes Martin) are all enigmatic portraits of these women that involve many other facets of the artist's collecting. An individual collage might be worked on and then revised and reworked over a course of as many as ten years before Johnson was satisfied with it. Or was he playing with our sense of ambiguity? Creating fan clubs for many artists such as Elvis, James Dean or Marilyn, he also advanced his own obscurity. Using the U.S. postal system, he sent these works of art through the mail, which obviated any role for galleries and museums, which seemed to be avoiding him anyway.

There are four works from the series of portraits on masonite which show a different, more reductive and painterly side of Johnson's art. In these the emphasis is on the use of drawing and monotone brushwork to create likenesses of celebrities, including Paloma Picasso, William de Kooning, Tab Hunter and William Burroughs, who engaged his imagination.

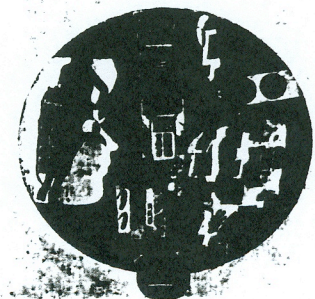
The vitrine has two vintage *Potato Mashers* that were from a series which

Johnson showed in Milan, Italy at Arturo Schwarz' Galleria Schwarz in 1972, and again, in the 1973 *Famous People's Mother's Potato Mashers* held at Angela Flowers Gallery in London. These are old fashioned, hand-held potato mashers that Johnson flattened into two-dimensions, a nod to the upturned table-tops of Picasso and Matisse. The manipulations of Picasso and Matisse, "flattening" of three dimensional objects, was an extremely important concept for Johnson. In his collages it was often his intention to break the two-dimensionality of the flat canvas and confuse our perception of objects in space.

The vitrine also contains "bunny" buoy, "bunny" baseball, "bunny" narrow pointy piece of wood, a small wood "L" with a bunny, bunny rock, bunny wavy wood, bunny mask & pot holder, pages of mail art and "flyers" that Johnson sent out from the New York Correspondence School, photos and more.

The film is itself a collage of photographs, art works, interviews, letters and home movies that flow together like a jazz ensemble. It conveys how the work of the reclusive Johnson was ahead of its time in terms of both its conceptual approach and challenge to the commercial and critical establishment. Incorporated, too, are interviews with Roy Lichtenstein, Christo, Chuck Close, James Rosenquist, Warhol factory participant Billy Name, as well as footage of Johnson himself. This show is a feast of material by and about Johnson. The growing visibility and fame would have delighted him. And it would have been Nothing to him. But that's part of his enigma.

Judith Hoffberg



Ray Johnson, "Untitled (Holly Solomon with Lynda Benglis and Etant)", 1975-94 collage on illustration board, 15 x 15".