

GALLERY VIEW

GRACE GLUECK

# A Witty Master of The Deadpan Spoof

ROSLYN HARBOR, L.I.

**G**aspara Stampa was a 16th-century Italian poet known for her brilliance and beauty. She is also one of the stars — along with Marilyn Monroe, Marianne Moore, Greta Garbo, Gael Greene, and countless others — who twinkles in the artist Ray Johnson's crowded pantheon. He discovered her through reading the poet Rilke, and such a hold on him does she exert that he once had her paged at the Port Authority bus terminal on Eighth Avenue to see if a contemporary woman would answer to the name. (None did.)

Like all of Mr. Johnson's obsessions, Gaspara Stampa has worked her way obliquely into his collages, now appearing in force at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art (through April 8). The collages, about 100 strong, and labyrinthine in their punning verbal and visual references, include some impressive specimens, some in famous collections. Eventually, Mr. Johnson's fame as a collagist should equal his prominence as dean of the New York Correspondance [sic] School, the international postal network he founded as an art student in the late 1940's. Its members are friends and acquaintances who exchange words and objects through the mail with him. ("Once someone sent me an elephant dropping from the Sacramento Zoo," reported the egg-bald artist the other day, clad in a holey blue sweater with the red of a T-shirt showing through. "It was beautiful, almost a religious object. I put it on a Victorian table and made drawings of it.")

But, not to digress, back to the collages. Like many who've worked in this vein, including the influential Joseph Cornell, Mr. Johnson combines in these deadpan reliefs drawing, painting, lettering, parts of real objects, snippets of magazine reproductions, and so forth. Often, he also includes abstract mosaic elements, built with tiny rectilinear "tiles" made from strips of cardboard glued together, painted and sanded to give them a patina of age. One impressive collage, "Jan-Feb, 1966," the largest

work in the show (at that, it's only 30 inches square) is constructed wholly from these tiny tesserae — colored, scratched, scrawled on, lettered, battered, incised and otherwise adorned — to form what could be read head on as a ramshackle architectural structure in itself, or — seen from the air — a village of tiny, colorful abodes in, say, Southeast Asia.

But that's Mr. Johnson's work at its most — well, formal. More intriguing are those collages composed of funny, freely associative verbal and visual play that make the fullest possible use of serendipity. They involve sight gags, put-ons, sendups of other artists, obsessive lists of names, homages to celebrities, calligraphy, private jokes and bits of concrete poetry. A clever early work, "Piano" (circa 1956), knocks off the Cubists by means of a classic flattened-out tabletop of washy pink cardboard, with still-life shapes cut out of it — three rum bottles and a lemon. In "James Dean" (1957) Mr. Johnson has added Mouseketeer ears — cut-outs of the red circles that read "Lucky Strike" on the famed cigarette package — to a fanzine photograph of this cult movie star, who died in 1955 at the age of 24. A tribute to two brand names, so to speak — Dean and Lucky Strike — it's also maybe a sendup of the idol worship inspired by the actor.

"Cervix Dollar Bill" (1970) suggests the similarity in smile between the Mona Lisa and the George Washington of the dollar bill; don't ask about the rest of it. And in "Corinne Marilyn" (1967), one of several homages to Marilyn Monroe, a drawing of her curvaceous lips is also intended to evoke the tricorne shape of the poet Marianne Moore's hat. ("Some Like It Hat," the artist has lettered under them.) "Poster" (1967), one of his more inscrutable pieces, incorporates rabbit pellets and other artifacts found on a Long Island beach to which his former dealer, Marian Willard, once took Brancusi, and a hand-printed note, signed Virgin Wool (Virginia Woolf?) announcing, "Dear John, I have found four birds in my barth tub."

Asked about the inspiration for  
*Continued on Page 31*



the collages, Mr. Johnson does not engage in lengthy exegesis. "I'm the founder of the Deadpan Club," he says, and plunges instead into an account of how he keeps occasional watch on the home of the late Joseph Cornell on Utopia Parkway in Queens, now occupied by another family. And he tells of other works that currently command his attention — his drawings, maybe 300 so far — of the shadows cast by well-known personages, and a cluster of collages relating to the underwear of art world personalities, including Mondrian, Kandinsky and the dealer Paula Cooper.

A piece of underwear, in more generalized form, also looms in the foreground of a repetitive collage of artists' and critics' names from Impressionism on down, entitled "Monet's List" (1969). Each name on the list — naturally including that of Monet — is embellished with a tiny bunny head that trails a long, wriggly



New York Times/Nik Kleinberg

The artist Ray Johnson, left, and the banner — with a quintessential Johnson symbol — which announces his current show of collages at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art



tail. It is a quintessential Johnson symbol that, translated into larger size, becomes a cartoony drawing of a Kilroy head with bunny ears. A huge one of these is emblazoned in black and white on a banner that's a sort of trademark for the show. Told of the art world's burning curiosity about the bunnies' symbolism, Mr. Johnson related them to Mickey Mouse, by whose ear-y presence he was haunted as a child. "The larger ones are self-portraits," he explained, noting that — perhaps by extension — the smaller ones "are used as stock symbols for people."

Although the New York Correspondance School is played down in this show, a sampling of its mailouts are on view in a hall gallery, black-and-white drawings that include a progress report on Andy Warhol's hair since babyhood, and instructions on how to draw "tender buttons" (à la Gertrude Stein). The school and its members, Mr. Johnson confirms, are still an important part of his life, and the arrival of his mail each morning is cause for celebration. "It's a little meditation ritual for me."

Queried on other details of his life, Mr. Johnson tends — like his collages — to be irrepressibly digressive, although certain facts do come out. An only child, born in 1927 to parents of Finnish descent, he grew up in Detroit, winning artistic fame in grammar school by covering the entire surface of a drawing sheet with crayon (thus anticipating the "all-overness" of Jackson Pollock). Given two art scholarships on his graduation from high school, he went to the Art Students League in New York and then did a three-year hitch at the famous Black Mountain College, where his teachers included Josef Albers, Lyonel Feininger and Mary Callery. There were also important summer visitors, such as John Cage, from whom he absorbed ideas about the esthetic uses of "chance" and "randomness."

Settling in New York in 1948, Mr. Johnson — still under the influence of Albers — at first turned out oils of diligent geometry, exhibiting with Ad Reinhardt, Leon Polk Smith and Charmion von Wiegand in shows mounted by the American Abstract Artists group. But in the mid-1950's, undoubtedly cued by his neighbors Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg, he turned to collage. Over the next 10 years he produced hundreds of small works that he would casually "flash" in impromptu displays on sidewalks, in railway stations and in the offices or living rooms of collectors, whom he visited "like a Fuller Brush man" with bundles of the stuff under his arm.

His first gallery show took place in 1965, and since that time he has devoted himself primarily to the collages, refining their garrulous imagery to a state of advanced cryptology. But their humor, combined with clever formal invention, has certainly stretched the — admittedly elastic — boundaries of this capacious medium. Now back, for a minute, to Gaspara Stampa. A very macho work entitled "Midnight Cowboy" (1970) is dominated by a large black kimono-like form, derived from the body of a tattooed man seen in a poster. It bears in its upper-right corner a postage stamp. Stampa, turned around reads "a stamp." Get it?

The exhibition has been organized and handsomely deployed by Janice Parente and Phyllis Stigliano, curators of the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, and David Bourdon, a Ray Johnson friend and collector, has produced an erudite introduction for the catalogue. ■