

ART'S IN THE MAIL

*Asheville exhibit
pays tribute to artist
known for many
collages and painting*

By Tom Patterson
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

ASHEVILLE

When Ray Johnson plunged off a bridge to his death in New York's Long Island Sound on Friday the 13th in January 1995, he left his friends and admirers with a lot of questions.

He also left behind an extraordinary life as one of this country's most unusual and influential contemporary artists, and a body of work that spans almost 50 years and includes countless drawings, collages and paintings.

Johnson's life and work are celebrated by the Asheville Art Museum in the exhibit "Ray Johnson: Conversations," which opened late last month and continues through June 29. The exhibit, containing about 60 works, was organized by guest curator Richard Craven, an artist who formerly was an associate curator at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem.

Craven said he became interested in Johnson's work in the early 1960s, when Craven was a student at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee. An article in *The New York Times* alerted Craven to Johnson's practice of making small artworks and sending them to friends and acquaintances through the mail.

"After I saw that article," Craven said, "I sent him a letter, and a few months later he did respond. It was a very bizarre missive I got from him,



LETTERS: *Ptown Collage* is among about 60 works in the show.

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RAY JOHNSON

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or at least I thought it had a sort of strange feel about it.

"Johnson in turn introduced me to a whole network of mail artists that was just amazing. He would write and say, 'Send this to so-and-so,' and of course, I immediately did, in hopes of getting something back.

These people responded, and they responded in unique ways."

Going by his abbreviated moniker, Richard C., Craven himself became an active participant in what was then jokingly referred to as the "New York Correspondence Art School." But he said that Johnson was the "catalyst" and "instigator" of that loosely defined movement and the still-thriving international mail-art network into which it grew. He also said that Johnson was the first artist who used the postal system as a medium — a technique that was considered revolu-



COLLAGE: *Pinkling*, from 1968-70, is included in the exhibit.

tionary in the 1960s.

After corresponding with Johnson and many other mail artists for more than 10 years, Craven organized a show of Johnson's mail art in 1976 for the N.C. Museum of Art in Raleigh. Titled "Correspondence: The Letters of Ray Johnson," that show is commemorated in the Asheville exhibit by a display of photocopied mail-art items by Johnson that were included in the unusual catalog that the state museum produced for the occasion.

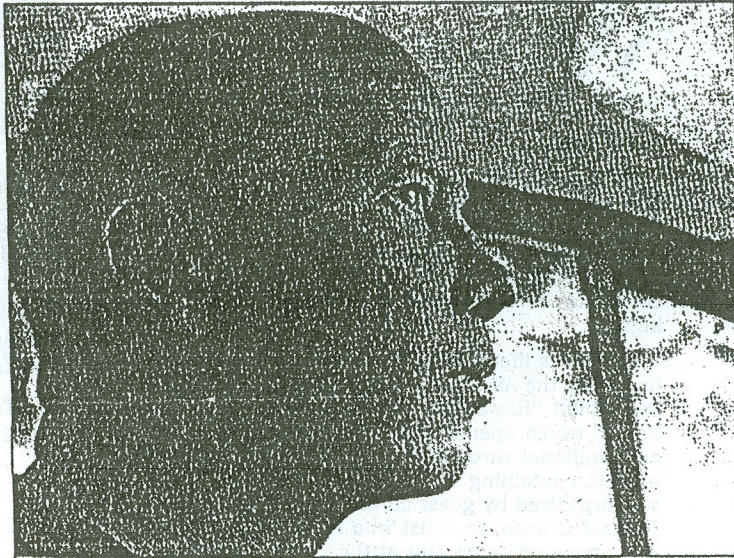
Johnson's first contact with North Carolina came much earlier, in the 1940s. He came down from his hometown of Detroit to enroll at Black Mountain College, a small experimental school that has been defunct since the late 1950s but is more famous than ever.

At Black Mountain, a few miles from Asheville, Johnson studied with well-known German artist and designer Josef Albers, whose influence can be seen in the Asheville exhibit's earliest works — a couple of geometric-abstract paintings Johnson made in 1949, the year after he left North Carolina for New York.

It was also at Black Mountain that he met composer John Cage, dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham and such fellow visual artists as Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly,

all of whom influenced his work in various ways.

A relatively new organization known as the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center collaborated with the Asheville Art Museum to produce the catalog for this show, which features an essay by William S. Wilson, a literary scholar, an art critic and a friend of Johnson's. Wilson began collecting Johnson's work in the late 1950s, and early this month he came to Asheville to lecture on Johnson at the museum.



RAY JOHNSON: He attended Black Mountain College in the '40s.

In his essay, Wilson wrote that Johnson "used odd or stray scraps from his past, not as souvenirs functioning as tokens of who he had been and where he had been, but as materials brought to bear upon an emerging construction which, if it succeeded, would hold those scraps of paper in place, and show him where to go next."

As that passage suggests, Johnson worked most often in a collage format, so it's not surprising that collages dominate the exhibit. In explaining Johnson's approach to collage, Wilson wrote that "Ray's images became, as they responded to their combinations with other images, networks of references and cross-references." Certain images recurred over the years in Johnson's collages, as did puns and other forms of wordplay. The latter characteristic motivated New York critic Holland Cotter to write that Johnson was "as much a poet as an artist."

Johnson's anticipation of pop art can be seen in the celebrity photographs and commercial product labels that he incorporated into a number of the collages shown here. But Johnson never enjoyed the kind of success and notoriety bestowed on such pop-art contemporaries as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

In 1965, in the *New York Times* article that first alerted Craven to Johnson's work, critic Grace Glueck described Johnson as "New York's most famous unknown artist,"

maintained true of him for the rest of his life. Might this have had something to do with Johnson's apparent suicide? Or was his death really a suicide after all? Might it not have been an accident?

These are just a few of the questions that linger two years after Johnson's death. Wilson believes that it was suicide. In his catalog essay, Wilson wrote: "When Ray dropped himself from a bridge between two opposite shores on a dark winter night, he dropped himself as he would drop an envelope into

a letterbox. He was sending a message as he surrendered himself to organic absorptions which would overwhelm differences, at last losing his consciousness, which was necessary because consciousness kept him from being one with the Cosmos as he understood it."

But another friend of Johnson's, critic David Bourdon, isn't so sure. In an "open letter" to Johnson published in *Art in America* several months after Johnson's death, Bourdon said that Johnson "sounded perfectly fine" when

he talked to him on the phone a few days before he died. And he listed some more of those "unanswered questions," addressing them directly to the deceased artist: "Why you withdraw a couple of thousand dollars from your bank that morning? Why did you have several days' worth of clothing in your car?" Bourdon also asked why Johnson bothered to check into a nearby motel for an overnight stay if he intended to drown himself.

We will probably never know the answer to these questions. But for those who care about the aesthetic and social values embodied in Johnson's art, much remains to be learned about him from the many artworks he left behind. Frank Thomson, the director of the Asheville Art Museum and a longtime fan of Johnson's art, estimated that Johnson created millions of pieces of art during his career. "You could keep whole graduate schools full of art-history students busy with dissertations on Ray Johnson's work ever," he said.

But Thomson also said, "There were really just a few simple things at the core of his work. It was as much about communicating and sharing as it was about creating an object."

■ Ray Johnson: Conversations with... display at the Asheville Art Museum in Place in downtown Asheville through 29. For more information, call (704)...