

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Tactile Temptation of Ray Johnson's Assemblages

Ray Johnson's exhibition at Matthew Marks is proof that the eccentric collage and mail artist's works were never meant for gallery walls.

Megan N. Liberty May 26, 2017

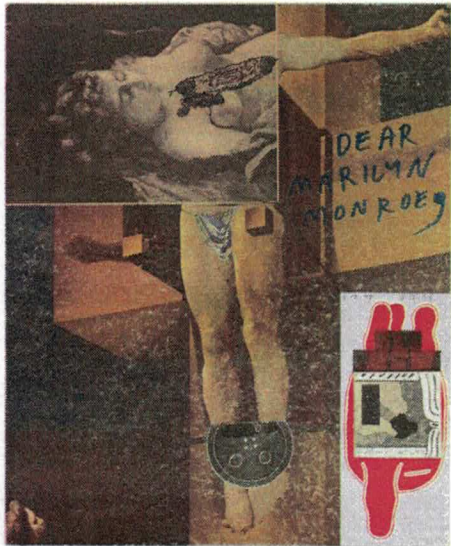


Ray Johnson, "Untitled (Sophia Loren)" (1975-84), ink and collage on board, 12 3/8 x 11 3/8 inches (© the Estate of Ray Johnson, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

What does one expect from a [Ray Johnson](#) exhibition? Johnson was an eccentric collage and mail artist, friend of the [Black Mountain](#) crew, once upon a time assistant to [Ad Reinhardt](#), and recluse. He's perhaps most famous for his sudden suicide — which some in the art world [believe he staged as a final performance](#) — in 1995, by jumping off the Sag Harbor-North Haven Bridge. His collages, risograph flyers, and other assemblage pieces that he'd send to friends and artists are packed with literary and popular culture references, as well as the phrase "Please add to and return to Ray Johnson" with a silhouetted bunny figure.

He scribbled notes along the edges of images that were already covered with notes. Many of the works [on view at Matthew Marks](#) have been consistently added to and worked on over the course of years, sometimes even decades. Such is the case with "Untitled (Gertrude Stein Urinating/Dear Marilyn Monroe)," which has a date range of nearly 20 years: 1976–94. This collage includes nine visible dates (to my count) written neatly in pencil along the bottom and top edges and smack

in the center, where it's also written "DEAR / MARILYN / MONROE," with the full lowercase script alphabet written in ink above it. The collage is also marked by various ink circles that look like coffee rings, thick black lines, stamped animal shapes, a teal postage stamp from Nepal, and what looks like the iconic bunny peaking down from the top-left edge. The work is dense.

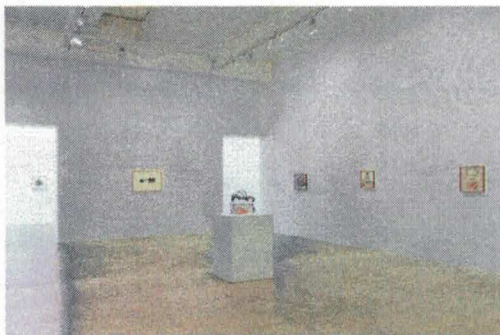


Ray Johnson, "Untitled (Dali/Courbet/Dear Marilyn Monroe)" (1975-94), ink and collage on board, 15 x 12 1/4 inches (© the Estate of Ray Johnson, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

Perhaps that is why I expected the current exhibition of his collages and two three-dimensional works to also be crowded. But instead I encountered a series of mostly empty galleries with collages in matching frames, evenly hung on the walls. It is the opposite of dense.

In some ways, the installation choices are understandable. Johnson's works might need room to breathe to be fully taken in and unpacked. It's hard to keep up with the figures he references, which range from literary to celebrity, including Andy Warhol superstar Candy Darling, Sophia Loren, Jackson Pollock, Marcia Tucker, William Burroughs, the cartoon character Nancy, and Alice B. Toklas and

Gertrude Stein. The works have innumerable visual and verbal puns, juxtaposing high culture references like Salvador Dalí, Gustave Courbet, David Smith, and Louis Nevelson, against allusions to pop celebrities Marilyn Monroe and Barbara Streisand.



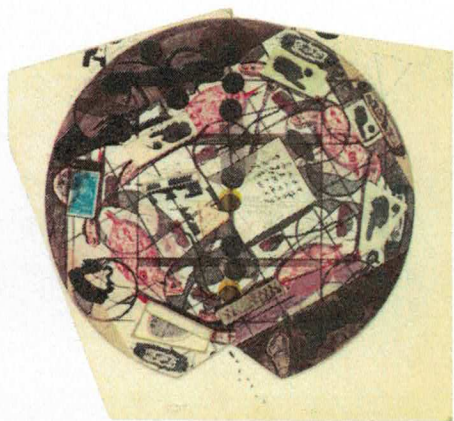
Installation view of Ray Johnson at Matthew Marks Gallery (artwork © the Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

Yet the display seems against the works' nature, which is to always be smashed together, passed around, and stacked — in envelopes and mailboxes, in people's homes, and on doors and walls. Of course the specific works in the show, which are more three-dimensional and often include wood blocks and artists' frames, were never mailed. But they still carry this ethos. The titles and text often feature the letter address "Dear" or the

bunny icon with the block text "PLEASE SEND TO," followed by various names or handwritten notes such as, "Please send to Peter Hujar." Johnson's works literally

beg to be shared again and again. Even the [catalogue](#) essay for the show addresses the tension in stagnant gallery displays of his work. Brad Gooch writes, “Johnson’s creations hover at last between two persons rather than being fixed permanently on a gallery wall.”

For many artists, it can be argued whether a biographical approach to their work is best. But for Johnson, whose art is so intimately personal, it demands it. For such a private and reclusive man, his works are extremely social, and the minimal display at Matthew Marks limits this, spreading them out and reducing the conversation between the works and the viewers. His works were meant to be touched, and while that cannot be replicated in a gallery, it could be partially remedied with cases of his letters to peruse or a selection of his published writings and correspondence available, returning the texture back to his work.



Ray Johnson, “Untitled (Gertrude Stein Urinating/Dear Marilyn Monroe)” (1976-94), ink and collage on board, 13 7/8 x 14 3/4 inches (© the Estate of Ray Johnson, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

What distinguished Johnson from other assemblage artists, such as [Joseph Cornell](#) or [Jasper Johns](#), was his passion for circumventing the system, for finding inventive ways to share his works and words that suited his private disposition and animosity for art commerce — ways that were both performative and personal. Though undoubtedly deserving of gallery attention, his works were never meant for gallery walls and the challenges faced by Matthew Marks in displaying them demonstrate that Johnson is still playing us all, leaving behind a legacy that will never fit neatly into spaces or categories.

[Ray Johnson](#) continues at Matthew Marks Gallery (523 West 24 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 24.

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