

A Hare-Raising Experience

CITIZEN RAY

BY DENNIS LIM

Crazy-quilt portrait and red-herring murder mystery, *How to Draw a Bunny* revels in the sheer elusiveness of its subject: the late pop/performance/mail-art provocateur Ray Johnson. Indeed, filmmaker John Walter says that Johnson's enigmatic silhouette portraits were a structuring motif: "You feel a mysterious presence at the center of Ray's story. Whatever people say about him, they're inevitably saying more about themselves. I thought if I did enough interviews and got these multiple points of view, I could trace a silhouette of Ray, go along the perimeter of the story. But at the center, there's still a lot of space to be filled."

The center of Johnson's story would appear to be his apparent suicide by drowning, but as *How to Draw a Bunny* unfolds, "the mystery of his death," as Walter puts it, "becomes dissolved in the larger mystery of his life." The film effectively extricates Johnson from the clichés of posthumous celebrity. "A lot of people still think he committed suicide as a way of making himself famous," says Walter, "but it seems to me that he created art, he lived, and he died by the same aesthetic principles. He lived a highly stylized life in an extremely principled manner—like Proust, or Jarry, where you can't separate the life from the work. The work ends up being an extended autobiography."

Like Johnson, whom he never met, Walter was born in Detroit. Biographer and subject

crossed paths as frequent patrons of the same bookstore in the '80s, when Walter was in a teenage punk band and Johnson was in town to care for his ailing parents. Walter was dimly aware of the artist's work then, but notes, "It was presented to me as a footnote in art history—here's the guy who first did Elvis and James Dean in collages. It's like if all you knew about Duchamp was that he'd drawn a moustache on the Mona Lisa." When Walter was in Detroit in January 1995 to shoot a documentary about Thomas Edison—he had dropped out of college and worked steadily as a film editor after getting his first break on *Evil Dead II* (as boom operator, sound-effects recorder, and "crawling hand")—he visited the bookstore and learned from the owner that Johnson had died the previous day.

Back in New York, Walter was compelled to research Johnson's life and his immense, far-flung, densely coded oeuvre: "When you see the body of work, this constellation of objects, you start to make the connections. What I hope the film shows is that for Ray, it was all a performance." Walter wanted to make a documentary that was not just about Johnson but true to his sensibilities, where "the form is constantly reflecting back onto the subject." His methods grew more spontaneous ("I stopped preparing questions after a while") and he adopted the laterally associative riffing that characterized Johnson's work. The bunny-head self-portrait was one jumping-off point: "In Ray's drawing *How to Draw a Bunny*, which I took to mean *How to Do a Portrait of Ray Johnson*, the first step is to draw a circle," says Walter. "So I wanted a circular structure, and I thought of *Citizen Kane*—the story of a central, ultimately mysterious character told through interviews, beginning with the death

and ending up full circle. During this journey, the man's death takes on different meanings for the audience." Not only was the film made in Johnson's spirit; there was an impression that he remained the ringmaster: "You almost had the feeling that Ray had set it all up. It was uncanny how there always seemed to be somebody in his life acting as the documentarian. The amount of material was overwhelming."

Walter says he's drawn to "documentaries that have a strong storytelling sense and fiction films that have a documentary energy" (not

surprisingly, Agnes Varda is a favorite filmmaker). He's planning a project about Brecht in Hollywood: "Brecht's film treatments are often dismissed as humorous examples of someone who was completely out of touch. But looking back, they could have made great movies. He had one called *Boy Meets Girl—So What?*" And under the auspices of John Malkovich's company, Mr. Mudd (which produced *Bunny*), he's developing a movie about New York lawyers, inspired in part by Balzac: "It'll be a record of lawyers talking off the record." **V**

FILM FORUM

A NONPROFIT CINEMA SINCE 1970

HOW
TO
DRAW
A
BUNNY

DIRECTED BY John Walter
PRODUCED BY Andrew Moore
MUSIC BY Max Roach

A RASHOMON-like portrait of
Ray Johnson — "New York's
most famous unknown artist"

—GRACE GLENN, NY TIMES

WINNER!
SUNDANCE 2002
SPECIAL JURY PRIZE



WITH
Christo
Chuck Close
Richard Feigen
Ray Lightbustain
Judith Malina
James
Resonquist

STARTS TODAY
2 WEEKS ONLY!

FILMMAKERS IN PERSON
THURS 10/10 6:30

See the RAY JOHNSON EXHIBIT at FEIGEN CONTEMPORARY 535 W. 20 ST. L. 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, 10:10 (WED 6:30 SOLD-OUT)