

ART REVIEW; Famous for Being Unknown, Ray Johnson Has a Fitting Survey

By ROBERTA SMITH
Published May 19, 1995

Make room for Ray Johnson, whose place in history has been only vaguely defined. Collagist extraordinaire, correspondent of the first rank and founding father of mail art, Johnson was often called the most famous unknown artist in the art world. Perhaps the stunning memorial exhibition at Richard L. Feigen & Company, the largest survey of Johnson's work so far, will precipitate a belated change of status.

Belated because Johnson ended his life in January at the age of 67 when he was seen swimming away from shore after jumping from a bridge at Sag Harbor, L.I. He had always kept himself out of the spotlight, and the propensity grew with time. Born in Detroit in 1927, Johnson arrived in New York City in 1948 after three years at the legendary Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he studied with Josef Albers, Mary Callery and Lionel Feininger and got to know John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

The first work in the show, which has more than 120 collages and three vitrines full of smaller collages, handmade books and mail art, is an abstract painting from around 1949. It speaks clearly of Albers's influence. Moreover, its richly colored grid of intricate geometric patterns -- variations on stripes, grids, checks and concentric squares -- looks back to Mondrian and Klee, forward to Frank Stella and Lucas Samaras, compressing a few seasons' worth of abstract paintings onto a single surface.

The obsessive fastidiousness remained a Johnson hallmark, especially in the rubbed and tinted surfaces of his collages with their small, mosaiclike building blocks of images and words. But by the mid-1950's, Johnson was taking another tack, in rose-tinted collages of Elvis Presley that presaged Pop Art. And from there he was off and running, slicing and splicing, drawing and printing, operating with the greatest of ease in the gap between painting and poetry, high and low, East and West and, of course, art and life.

Johnson's exhibition record was surprisingly brief. His first New York one-man show took place at the Willard Gallery in 1965, his last in 1973 at the Betty Parsons Gallery (where he exhibited a work titled "The History of the Betty Parsons Gallery"). In 1968, after his friend Andy Warhol was shot, he abandoned Manhattan for Locust Valley, L.I. His new home, he wrote to Mr. Feigen on July 26, 1968, on a collage in the current exhibition, was "an old white farm house with a Joseph Cornell attic half a mile from a sound. . . . This nothingsville will help my future work. I won't be doing much of it in August."

By the early 1970's, Johnson was keeping most of his art for himself; the rest he continued to disperse as he always had, mailing it to friends, acquaintances and famous people he admired. These letters, collages and small assemblages formed what he called the New York Correspondance School, although he later sometimes spelled correspondence the normal way. He was its president; one had only to respond to enroll.

In this manner, Johnson conducted his career one to one with a hand-picked audience, perpetuating the private side of making art by carefully controlling exposure and avoiding most conventional art outlets. His methods also questioned the uniqueness of the art object. In addition to the omnivorous recycling of images and materials from all levels of culture, he frequently used stamps and stencils, dotting his collages with little repeating shapes or images, most frequently a cartoonish duck, a squishy rabbit face that he considered a self-portrait or the words "Collage by Ray Johnson."

Although Johnson kept dealers, collectors and curators at arm's length, it is hard to imagine an artist who attended to the art world more devotedly, or wove its personalities, rituals and trends more resolutely into his art, along with much else. Like Cornell, Johnson chose his icons from a wide spectrum of artists, writers, critics and movie stars. (What other artist could claim to have started both a Marcel Duchamp Fan Club and a Shelley Duvall Fan Club?) And he always kept up with art's latest twists and turns, chronicling the emergence of new artists and ideas. In the 1980's, he had a stamp made that read "Collage by Sherrie Levine," playing off the younger artist's practice of appropriating the images of others.

His homages run the gamut from sweet to pungent, slapstick to reverential. A 45-r.p.m. record of Conway Twitty's "Heavenly" boasts a photograph of the grave, mustached face of the Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman. The collage titled "Mondrian" includes a carefully worn photograph of the painter, who loved jazz, adjusting the knob of a radio. Its caption, in robust block letters, reads "She Wore an Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini," evoking by means of rock-and-roll the famous optical "pings" triggered by the crossing lines of Mondrian's paintings. "White," a collage from 1965, has at its center a tiny, partly buried reproduction of one of Myron Stout's rounded geometric shapes, while "Portrait of Chuck Close" is adorned with giant fingerprints, in keeping with the subject's early painting technique.

An artist who pays repeated homage to other artists is rare, and one who does so with visual distinction is rarer still. Johnson's beguiling, challenging art shows the true complexity of such an achievement. Parasitical, edgy, irreverent and infatuated, it nonetheless has an exquisite dexterity and emotional intensity that makes it much more than simply a remarkable mirror of its time, although it is that, too.

"Ray Johnson: A Memorial Exhibition" is at Richard L. Feigen & Company, 49 East 68th Street, Manhattan, through June 16.