# Notes to the World (or Bend, Fold and Spindle)

**BY HOLLAND COTTER**

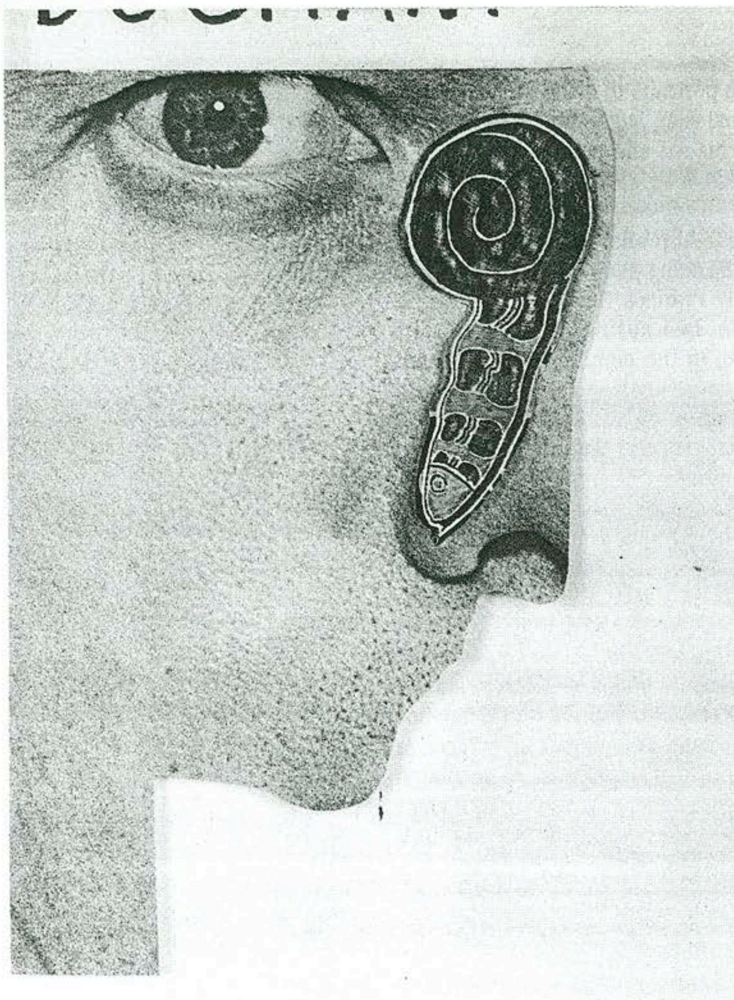
The little note from Ray Johnson, shaped like a poem and set high on the page, is dated Dec. 21, 1990.

Dear Holland,

I just found out that poet
May Swenson died a year ago on
Dec. 6th. She had just got a
$$$$$MacArthur Grant. She lived
in a nearby town
and I once sent her a card-
board box full of flicker feathers,
which I want to borrow for an
exhibition.
It was good to hear from you.

It was signed with two bean-shaped, skull-like faces, one drawn in black magic marker, the other in blue pencil, both vaguely resembling Johnson himself. It was accompanied by several pages of photocopied collages.

One combined dozens of Betty Boop-style faces labeled "Anita O'Day" (the object of one of Johson's innumerable fan clubs) interspersed with drawings of burnt matches, a Nancy cartoon, and a phallic two-headed snake titled "Sonny and Cher." Another offered a "Ray Johnson Egyptian Snow Shovel" patterned with a checkerboard of little pyramids. A third had a drawing of a round-eyed, roguish, rabbitlike creature (Johnson regarded it as a self-portrait) divided by dotted lines into sections, each with the name of a New York art dealer to whom the section should be sent. And yet another bore a profile head shot of Johnson himself as a young man—blond, brush-cut, child-



*Drawing on a wide range of influences—including Albers, Cage, Warhol and Rauschenberg—and inspired by figures as diverse as Marianne Moore and Twiggy, Ray Johnson produced wry, formally inventive paintings, drawings and collages attuned to every nuance of pop culture and the New York art world.*

like, a bit extraterrestrial, bent with his face over a pad of paper, a pen in his hand. Whether he was in the process of writing or painting was hard to say.

Although Johnson and I were barely acquainted—I had met him briefly in the 1970s and we corresponded for a short time in the late '80s and early '90s—I knew there was a lot of him in these pages, with their puns and jokes, codes and cross-references, all of which seemed to proliferate the longer one considered them.

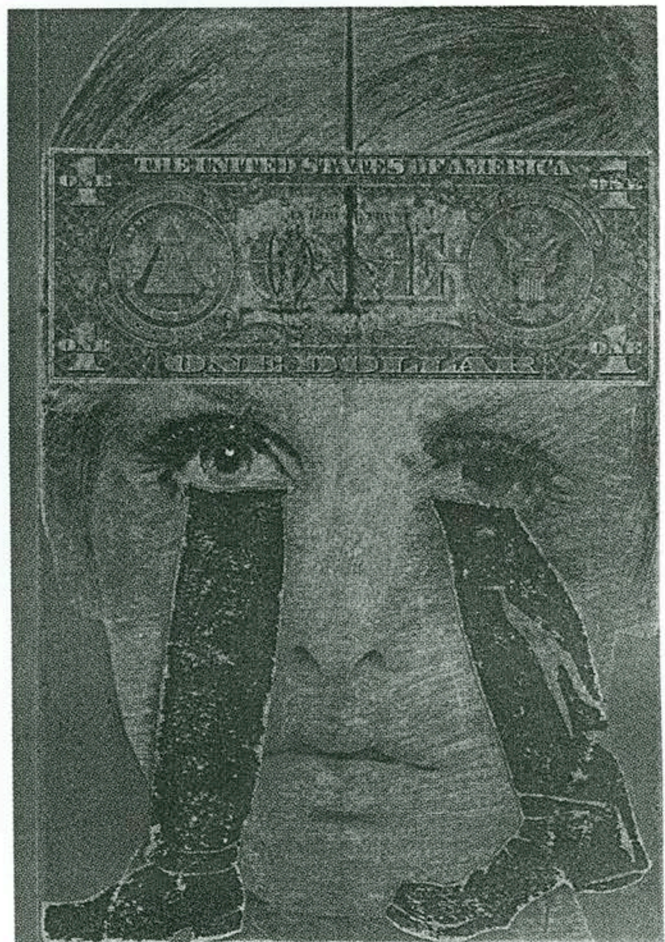
The shovel, for example, might be a little bow to Duchamp, though its geometric patterning recalled Johnson's beginnings as a student of Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in the 1940s and his early membership in the American Abstract Artists group. The cartoon and the Pop star citations suggested his reputation as a precursor of Pop art (and like any great bricoleur of popular culture he was both a total fan and a waspish critic).

The divisible picture embodied at least two of the articles of faith—collaboration and physical inconsequentiality—on which much of his art was based. The envelope was emblematic of his role as the founder of the New York

*Above, Ray Johnson:* DUCHAM, *1977, collage, 17 by 13½ inches (with mat). Collection Christo and Jeanne-Claude, New York.*

*Right,* Twiggy with a Dollar Bill, *1969, mixed mediums, 17 inches square (with mat). Collection Lois and Georges de Menil.*

*Opposite,* Keep Mouth Closed, *1966, collage, 22⅞ by 14 inches (with mat). All photos this article courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co., New York.*



**The sense of childlike play is never far from Johnson's work, any more than it is from the work of Joseph Cornell. It is subtly present in a kind of infantine fascination with hoarding curious images.**

Correspondence (or, sometimes, Correspondance) School. And while the return address—44 West 7th Street, Locust Valley—confirmed his sequestration on Long Island, the list of dealers targeted to receive what would be literally a piece of art attested to his minute attention to every tic and flutter of the New York art world.

The typed note was revealing too. The reference to May Swenson made sense for two reasons. First, I had always regarded Johnson as being as much a poet as an artist. And I had always been struck by the campy morbidity that pervaded his work. Obituary tributes to various heroes and heroines are everywhere, and even his portraits of living friends had an oddly funereal cast, suggesting a dark side to his art that his wit and pop erudition tended to obscure.

All of these threads came together in a dense, dazzling show of Johnson's work organized by Frances Beatty at Richard L. Feigen & Co. last spring; it closed in late August. Long in the planning (the artist, as was his habit, kept saying yes to the project, then kept saying no), it ended up being a posthumous tribute. Johnson died last January at the age of 67, reportedly a suicide, in the sea off Long Island.

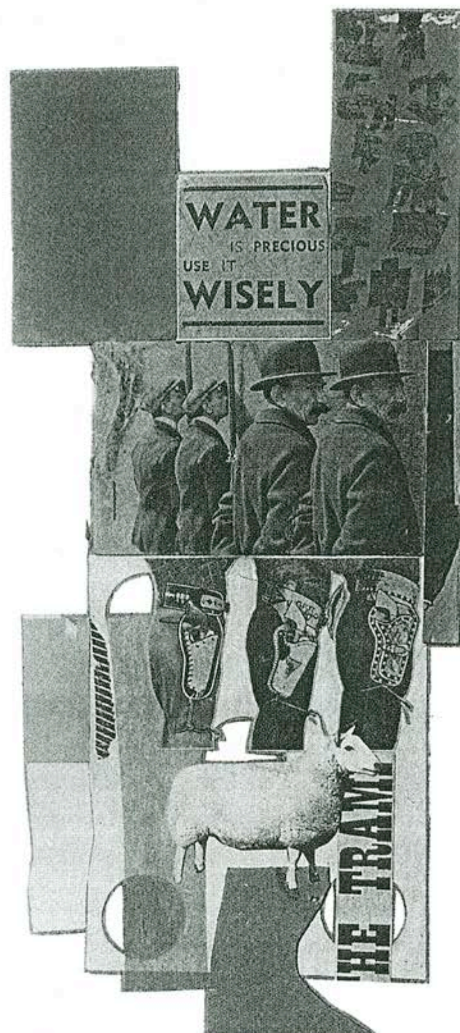
The exhibition brought together two different but related bodies of work: 125 highly polished collages and a representative selection of the mail art for which Johnson was most widely known. Pieces packed into two tablelike vitrines included postcards, letters, annotated magazine clippings and shoebox assemblages sent to friends and strangers alike, some of which were meant to be altered by the recipients before being passed further along the vast communal network which Johnson moderated from afar.

The very earliest work on view, though, was a painting titled *Calm Center* (1949) and executed the year after Johnson left Black Mountain for New York. It is a bright patchwork of angled stripes and squares, equally reminiscent of Klee (whom Johnson admired), geometric abstraction (the mandala-like patterns of Charmion von Wiegand come to mind) and Bauhaus fabric designs like those produced at Black Mountain under the tutelage of Anni Albers.

The effect of Black Mountain on Johnson's work appears to have been crucial. It is hard not to see in the collages a debt both to Robert Motherwell, who taught there for a while, and to Josef Albers, who impressed the value of nonart material and popular design on his students by having them make assemblages from found objects. From Black Mountain Johnson also knew Robert Rauschenberg, who was producing Dada-inspired collages as early as 1950, and John Cage, whose Zen and Taoist-inspired belief in the relativity of forms and the nonlinear logic of chance and process contributed to the conceptual character of Johnson's work.

Blood, *1958, mixed mediums, 11 by 7¼ inches. Collection William Kistler.*

Black Mountain produced poets as well as artists. The Black Mountain "school" defined by Donald Allen's influential *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* included Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, Jonathan Williams and Joel Oppenheimer. Their work from the 1950s was post-formalist and pre-Beat. Poems by Creeley, Dorn and Oppenheimer tended to be short and elliptical and composed with an eye to the physical shape of lines and stanzas on the page.




Untitled (Water is Precious/Use it Wisely), *1955-58, mixed mediums, 13½ by 6¼ inches. Collection William S. Wilson.*

Poetry seemed an intrinsic ingredient of the collages seen at Feigen. In some cases it took the form of homages. There were three pieces from the mid-'50s dedicated to Rimbaud. One, titled *Row of Little Boys Rim/Baud*, combined cut-out words to form the poet's name along with a reproduction of a vintage photo of four children lined up front to back, a mildly salacious reference to a homosexual writer who was himself barely out of childhood when he completed his life's work.

There were also two pieces, early and late, dedicated to Marianne Moore, that fastidious creator of shaped, footnoted, satirical, collagelike poems (and a friend of May Swenson through the poet Elizabeth Bishop). Surely

Johnson appreciated the determined idiosyncrasy of Moore's personal style (he makes an icon of her signature black tricorne hat); her combination of independence and retirement (she lived with her mother for most of her adult life but learned to drive a car at the age of 78 by taking three driver's ed lessons a day for weeks); and her passionate attachment to the popular and the arcane, from the Brooklyn Dodgers (for whom she wrote a team anthem) to exotic species of animals and plants.

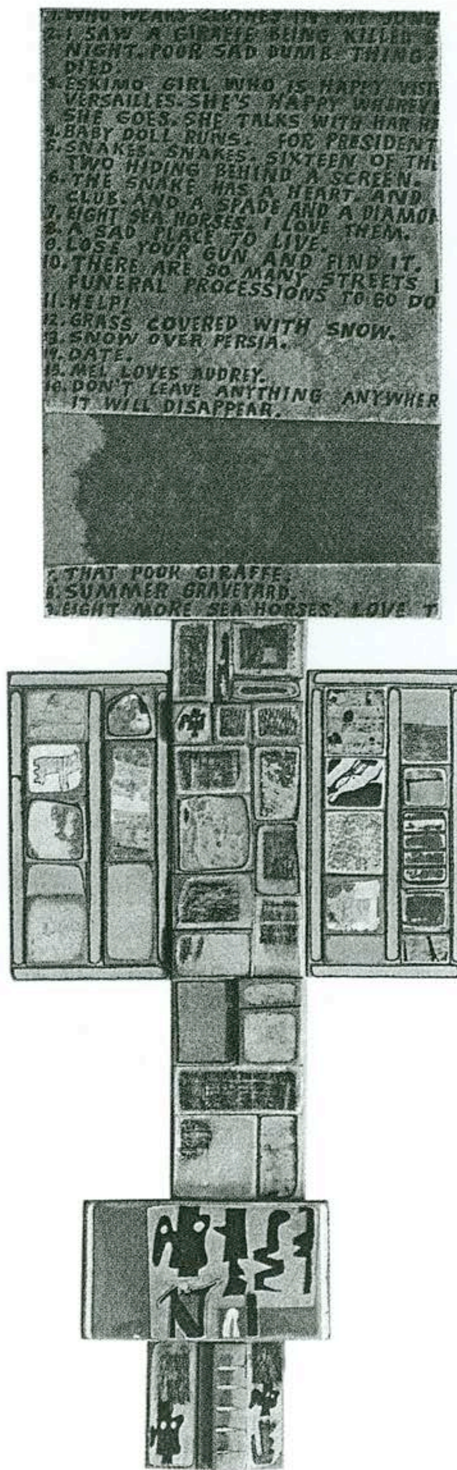
Johnson recycled her presence in other work. Her tricorne hat became one of his stock of Rorschach-type images, changing form and meaning depending on the context and the disposition of the viewer. It ended up, for example, as a pair of detached lips labeled "Some Like It Hat" in a collage about Marilyn Monroe titled *Corinne Marilyn* (1967). His distribution of such motifs through work spanning decades gives his overall output a remarkable textural cohesion.

But many of Johnson's collages go beyond referring to poetry to become poems themselves. In some, words predominate. The odd, cruciform *Snake Has a Heart* (1966), for example, has as its main element a sad absurdist poem which begins with the words "I saw a giraffe being killed . . . poor sad dumb thing . . . died" and concludes "That poor giraffe . . . . summer graveyard . . . . eight more seahorses, love."

In the 1955-58 *Untitled (Water is Precious/ Use it Wisely)*, the haikulike admonition is both deflated and expanded by a turn-of-the-century photograph of men in homburgs facing a wall, their bodies completed by cowboys' legs along with guns in holsters. The implication is that they're urinating in public. The result is silly, but as in the case of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, it's silliness as an art form, and in Johnson's work it is embodied in a concrete poetry in which images become the equivalent of words, as in "I (picture of an eye) love (picture of a heart) you." Even when the means are primarily visual, one has a sense of verbal syntax at work, bristling with similes and metaphors.

Although the earliest collage in the show, *Yellow* (1953), is abstract, by 1955 pictures of movie stars started to appear and the most interesting of these works have an expressive tone at odds with the sly, brittle whimsy that was Johnson's stock-in-trade. *Elvis Presley #1* (1956-57) is a newspaper close-up of the singer's face, but it is streaked with red ink in a way that suggests both blood and tears. In *Marilyn Monroe* (1958) the actress appears three times in silhouette against a gray institutional floorplan—a prison, maybe? A piece simply titled *Blood* (1958) is the most disquieting of all: in it a human figure is impaled on a pen-shaped instrument set against a background of strips of white paper from behind which red liquid seems to ooze.

In the section of the show devoted to the '60s, Johnson's obsession with other artists comes to the fore. The rectangle-within-rectangle *White* (1965) recalls Albers. *Large White Shape* from the same year may refer to Malevich: its odd-shaped white field is punctuated by a small Myron Stout-ish form turned into a sharp-nailed, pointing finger, an appropriate emblem for the Russian artist's proscriptive esthetic. From 1967 comes an image of Mondrian listening to the radio, captioned with a line from a 1960 pop song: "It was an itsy bitsy teeny weeny yellow polkadot bikini," which offers an aural rather than visual equivalent to the title of the Dutch artist's jazz-inspired painting, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*.

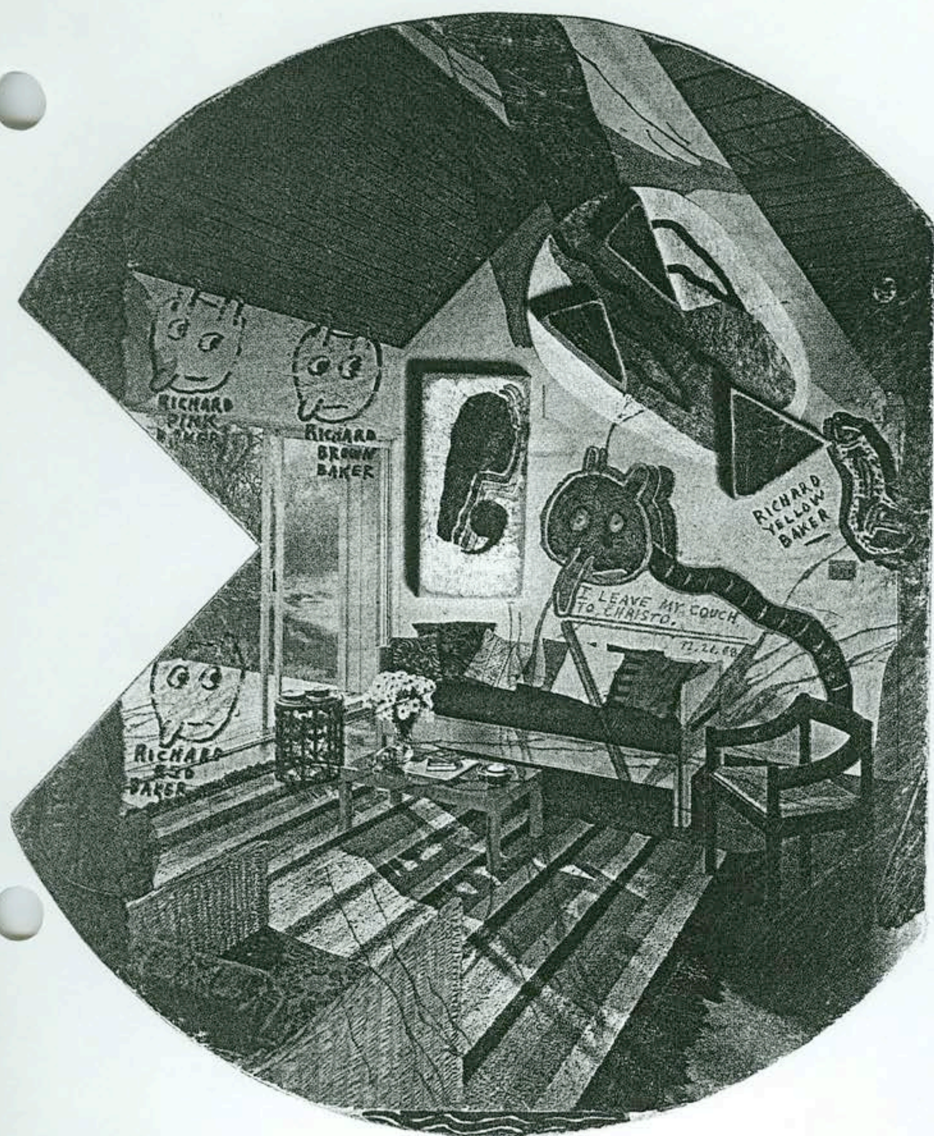



**Snake Has a Heart,** ***1966, mixed mediums, 27 by 13½ inches.***
***Collection Lois and Georges de Menil.***

These historical tributes only hint at the exhaustive database of people Johnson referenced in his work. The Who's-Who lists in the collages *Pen Pals* and *Monet List* (both 1969) are like time capsules both of the New York art world and of American popular culture at a particular moment. The names include Andy Warhol, Joseph Raffael, May Wilson, Peter Hujar, Gregory Battcock, Jill Johnston, Grace Glueck, R.B. Kitaj, Billy Sullivan and William S. Wilson (a close friend of Johnson's who has written extensively on his work), interspersed with artists of other stripes like Kim Novak, Julie Andrews, Tab Hunter and Phyllis Diller.

The '60s also brought a distinctive, labor-intensive technique of creating collages from mosaiclike tesserae which Johnson made by painting, sanding and repainting bits of thick cardboard. From a distance these tesserae appear to be covered with fine writing; up close it seems that the writing has been smudged or erased but, tantalizingly, might still be deciphered if only one looked long enough. The pieces were glued to a larger surface, sometimes forming foursquare architectural shapes or odd, top-heavy monuments. Graceless, awkward and unpretty, they recall the paintings of Jean Dubuffet, though their overall effect is strangely inorganic, like a jigsaw puzzle underway or carefully stacked children's building blocks.

In fact, the sense of childhood play—albeit of immense precocity—is never far away from Johnson's work, any more than it is in the work of Joseph Cornell, another artist whom Johnson admired. This is obvious in a collage that includes the self-admonishing repeated-on-the-blackboard phrase "I must keep my mouth closed when a visitor enters" and also subtly present everywhere in a kind of infantine fascination with hoarding curious images—women's shoes, keys, bunny heads, half-obscured abstract calligraphic notations. And one senses it in the imaginative elasticity that allows Johnson to read forms he found or produced—like the dark squiggle which becomes, with the addition of a label, a urinating Buddha—as if they were tea leaves or clouds, full of meanings simply waiting to be isolated and named.




Untitled (Richard Brown Baker's Couch), *1979-89, mixed mediums, 15½ by 13½ inches. Collection Peter Schuyff.*

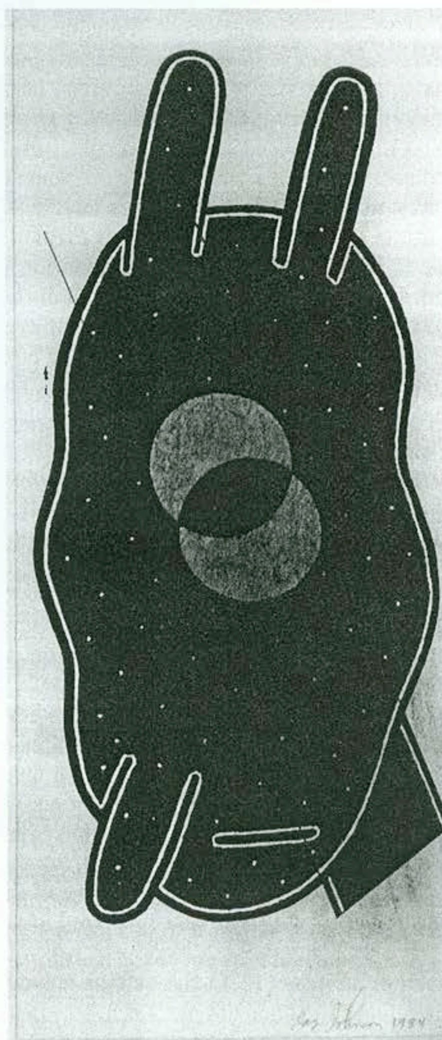
**Johnson's portraits feel like urbane, satirical versions of Victorian mourning emblems, whose dried flowers and locks of hair say more about the maker's intent than about the subjects per se.**

Although Johnson carried many of his familiar motifs and techniques into the '70s, the collages from this decade at Feigen felt different from what had come earlier. They included a handful of his portraits of friends and art-world figures, among them Andy Warhol and Chuck Close. The portrait of Warhol, like the others, was based on a black cutout profile and was ornamented with cartoon snakes, white patterns of dots like constellations and blocks of tesserae. The results are cluttered and overproduced in a way that Johnson, for all his love of incremental accumulation, usually avoided. And rather than portraits taken from life, they feel like urbane, satirical versions of Victorian mourning emblems, those framed assemblages of dried flowers, locks of hair and other relics, which say far more about the memorial intentions of the maker than about the subjects themselves.

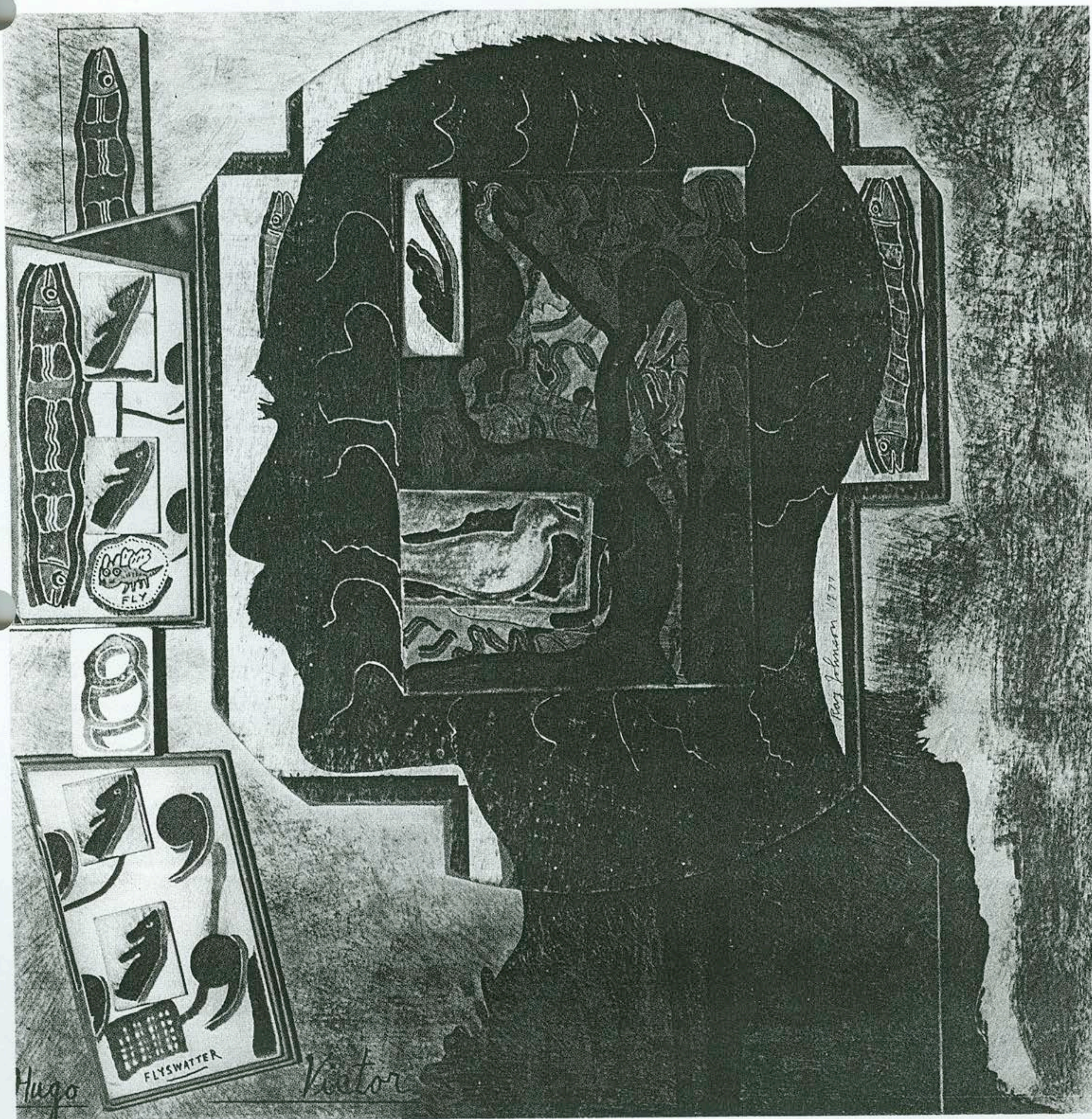
By contrast, there were few works in the show of greater delicacy and wit than Johnson's commemorative tributes to dead stars from this decade. One was an austere black-and-white piece dedicated to the actor Boris Karloff and another to the singer Janis Joplin the year after she died. The latter is especially striking, with its ornamental field of white roses meticulously drawn on a black ground, and the addition of detached phrases, among them "She clutched $4.50 in her hand," written in a shaky scrawl, and "forlorn isolation of pieces."

Forlorn isolation may or may not have been what Johnson felt at the end of his life. I'd always thought of him as a connoisseur of distance, a virtuoso of removal, a kind of spooky Dada version of Emily Dickinson. Not the Dickinson of sentimental lore, of course, but the keen, ambitious artist who assiduously tracked the world through newspapers, village gossip and a sharp-eyed view from the window; who was terrified at the possibility of rejection, so armed herself with eccentricity and kept saying no; who turned impossible subjects like love, death and fame into mind-twisting conceits; who sewed her poems into little envelopelike packets and sent out enigmatic gifts—a bird's nest in a box, a cake lowered from a window—to remind the world she was different, she was a genius and she was there. □

Author: *Holland Cotter is a New York-based critic.*



Master, *1984, mixed mediums, 18 by 13 inches. Collection Toby R. Spiselman.*




**Portrait of Hugo Victor, *ca. 1977-78, mixed mediums, 16 inches square. Collection William Kistler.***