

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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WHITEHOT
MAGAZINE

Mark Bloch on Ray Johnson at Matthew Marks



Janis Joplin's Mother's Hat 1972-88 Ink and collage on board in artist's frame 20 1/8 x 16 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches 51 x 41 x 4 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

by **MARK BLOCH**, JUN. 2017

The opening of the Ray Johnson show at Matthew Marks felt a little momentous. Not because of the awe-inspiring work presented. In fact, this collection of images were many of “the usual suspects” but balanced by some wonderful surprises. But despite the fact that many of his older friends are no longer with us, a Ray Johnson show is always packed to the gills with Ray Johnson, so the uninitiated should run, not dog paddle, to the gallery and feast your eyes on the overtly overwhelming output of the “witty master of the dead pan spoof,” as he was once described by Grace Glueck of the New York Times. No, the reason this show felt momentous at the opening was because “The Ray Johnson Industry” has entered a new phase.

Ray was a friend of mine and he once told me, referring to one of his chosen media, “Mail art is an industry.” Since his death by water in 1995, I have often said that, “Now, Ray Johnson is an industry.” This show is momentous because it feels like Matthew Marks and

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the contemporary art world have now pushed Ray out on the gangplank at center stage where he will no doubt become a favorite for the sea gulls and other birds of prey of the collector class to peruse. Good luck, Ray, old chum.



Bee Stings 1973-94 Ink and collage on board 15 x 15 inches 38 x 38 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

At the time of his Whitney exhibition, organized by the Wexner Museum in Columbus, Ohio, (don't miss *Bee Stings* in this show, featuring an image from his famous "Tit List" as well as his familiar refrain, "Dear Whitney Museum, I hate you.") I wrote for ABCNews.com that the late Ray Johnson was "finally ready for his close up." It has been delivered many times in the 20 plus years since. Johnson has been well-represented by the Richard L. Feigen & Co. gallery but it was recently announced that Feigen has relocated to a new space and Frances Beatty, now President Emerita of Feigen, is establishing a new firm, Adler Beatty (with her son, Alexander Adler) in the old building at 34 East 69th Street. Furthermore, "they will share the space with David Zwirner" now as Adler Beatty takes over representing the Ray Johnson Estate.

So while changes are afoot, by "the usual suspects" I refer to works like the John Cage saddle shoes or the always fun, 1967 work, *2-Year-Old Girl Choked*, which features a childhood pic of Fluxus artist Dick Higgins. When Ray died, the latter work appeared in his first memorial exhibition at Feigen, and many of his friends who were present knew who it was in that picture and why. As time progressed, such mythology has faded into the background but this has not stopped this from becoming an oft-seen Johnson image. After all, it does feature Death, one of Johnson's two favorite topics; the other one being the aforementioned Water.

The 1977 John Cage shoes, called *A Shoe*, (perhaps a reference to Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze?*) visible through the windows on West 24th Street, have also been a big hit since Ray's death. It was largely unknown until the contents of his home in western Long Island were trotted out, that Johnson did his familiar lettering and bunny heads on several 3-D objects including these shoes, a wooden chair, a buoy (labeled as a portrait of Josef Beuys, of course), and a volley ball, creating instant sculpture out of his familiar tool kit of unique tropes.



LEFT: *A Shoe (John Cage Shoes)* 1977 Mixed media 4 x 9 x 11 inches 10 x 23 x 28 cm RIGHT: *Candy Darling Cast* 1970 Plaster, paint, and eyelashes in plastic carrying case with artist's label Bag: 17 1/2 x 16 x 3 inches; 45 x 41 x 8 cm Cast: 3 x 8 x 5 inches; 8 x 20 x 13 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Speaking of reaching into kits, another usual suspect is *Candy Darling Cast*, a clear purse and plaster mask adorning the center of Room 2. Johnson frequented Max's Kansas City with the Warhol crowd and was an early colleague and influencer of Andy and friends. As Frank O'Hara scholar David Gooch confirms in the book for this show, Ray "experimented with Benday dots before Lichtenstein, or with Elvis and other celebrities before Warhol." In fact, the two were friends, Ray from Detroit and Andy from Pittsburgh, sharing a campy love of photos of glamorous movie stars and spending their early careers spreading their fine art chops around in the New York's graphic design world of the 50s and early 60s. Ray was also a friend of Darling and other Factory Superstars.

Referring to Presley, Gooch writes of Ray, "his celebrities emote in a less brash mode. In *Untitled (Elvis with Scarface Bunny)* (1993), Elvis sheds a violet tear." In fact, this image is a reprise of an important early Johnson work known as *Oedipus*. It was a composition created at the apex of the AbEx era, 1956, of Elvis with his eye appearing gouged out and turned into a red paint drip running vertically. Johnson said at the time, referring to the title, "I am the only painter in New York whose drips mean something."

On April 17, 1992, Ray told me that an LA museum trying to reach him was "having a Pop Art show. I'm so sick of it" and that "this whole... Pop Art phenomena is so boring... they all want the same two 'movie star works'." Combining an Elvis image similar to his famous one with the name "Scarface" a year after expressing this exasperated sentiment and two years before his suicide, pierced a hole through his own legacy while inflicting another ironic cross-generational wound to "The King."



L to R: *Untitled (Elvis with Scarface Bunny)* 1993 Ink and collage on board 21 x 8 1/2 inches 53 x 22 cm; *Untitled (River Phoenix/Please Send to Jackson Pollock)* 1994 Ink and collage on board 32 x 8 inches 81 x 20 cm; *Untitled (Self-Portrait/Dance Diagram) [recto] Dali's Crucifixion [verso]* 1992 Collage on board, double-sided 19 3/8 x 10 inches 49 x 25 cm; *Untitled (Ray Johnson and Wall Street Urinal Bunnies)* 1994 Collage on board 32 x 7 inches 81 x 18 cm; © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

In fact, this work provided fresh perspective when I saw it at the Noho gallery, Karma, a couple of years ago accompanied by several other late collages that are also in this show. Though seen before, these are not in the “usual suspects” category. A room in the back at Matthew Marks housed several of these—the latest—collages. They each provide a glimpse into what Ray was doing at the very end of his life and a peek at what the earliest versions of his collages must have looked like because they feel truncated by his suicide in mid-sentence. All are 8 1/2 x 11 Xeroxed pages glued directly onto cardboard. These particular pieces happen to be elongated rectangles that cannot be contemplated long enough.

One work reminds me of our June 17, 1994 conversation in which he panned the Gus Van Sant film “Even Cowgirls Get The Blues.” Ray said, “It’s the worst movie I’ve ever seen in my entire life,” but then added, “You know what I liked? At the beginning when it said ‘For River.’” River Phoenix had died just prior to that, allowing Ray to drop clues about both water and death into our phone call. The work, called *Untitled (River Phoenix/Please Send to Jackson Pollock)* also reprises mysterious “moticos” glyph shapes from earlier in his career.

Untitled (Jackson Pollock Fillets) from 1973 is a beautiful work in this show I definitely do not remember seeing before, despite having seen a show of much Johnson’s Pollock-related work at the Pollock-Krasner house on the end of Long Island at least a decade ago. Johnson has been paired in shows with masters like Pollock and Kurt Schwitters since his death, the former for his many references; the latter for a comparison of style.

One 2009 show at Feigen took on Johnson’s takeoffs of Warhol and others but most importantly, for me, it explored Johnson’s relationship with Salvador Dali and interestingly, four crucifixion works from that exhibit are in the front room of this show, each based on Dali’s 1954 work *Corpus Hypercubus* (renamed *Crucifixion* when sold to the Met in New York) and each uniquely skewered by Ray.



L to R: *Untitled (Dali/Courbet/Dear Marilyn Monroe)* 1975-94 Ink and collage on board 15 x 12 1/4 inches 38 x 31 cm; *Untitled (Dali/Dear David Smith/Barbra Streisand)* 1974-94 Ink and collage on board 9 3/4 x 13 3/8 inches 25 x 34 cm; *Untitled (Crucified Nancy)* c. 1977-80 Ink and collage on board 20 x 15 inches 51 x 38 cm; *Untitled (Dali/Buddha)* c. 1977-80 Ink and collage on board 20 1/2 x 15 inches 52 x 38 cm; © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

The first says “Dear Marilyn Monroe” and features *Woman with Red Hair Asleep*, an 1864 painting by Gustave Courbet, who liked to paint women sleeping, a snake and a red bunny head that is covered up by a small typical Johnsonian stage scene. These I call the “proscenium arches” that Johnson appeared to have taken up towards the end of his life. They were little ink drawn scenes with curtains pulled back to show floorboards that might feature anything “center stage” from “Bill De Kooning’s house” to “Louise Nevelson’s Foot,” as in this case. The Courbet woman replaces the head of and shares an arm with Jesus, possibly as a stand-in for Johnson. The head of Dali’s wife Gala, playing the role of witness, barely makes the cut at the bottom left of the appropriated image but is a strong presence nonetheless and an echo to what has become a contorted female figure above.

A second crucifix, (*Dali/Dear David Smith/Barbra Streisand*) dated 1974-94, contains a larger snake, an Islamic or some such pink-colored exotic image of a man riding a horse covering Jesus’s solar plexis in the cross-hairs of a scrawled 7 on his chest and an 11 off to the right—the top half of the crucifix. When Johnson committed suicide he left his car at a Seven-11 and soon after backstroked his way to hypothermia. What should we read into this, Ray?

A favorite of Johnson, Nancy, from the all-American comic strip created by Ernie Bushmiller, is the subject of crucifixion in the third “Dali” work previously seen, and this image, with a section literally cut out of it, reminiscent of the chopped *Sofia Loren* work discussed below, was used as the invitation to the 2009 “**Ray Johnson...Dali/Warhol/and others...Main Ray, Ducham, Openheim, Pikabia**” exhibit at Feigen.

The final and most complete Dali scene is also chopped, but not to create an irregular negative space but, rather, separated into two. It also contains a “proscenium arch.” In this case, the messiah’s gut and groin are covered by 3 cartoony figures or images, the most prominent one resembling something like a snowman wearing a Devo flower pot hat, i.e. a series of imperfect spheres stacked up to create a vector that doubles as an erection pointing upward from the holy crotch.

I realize that calling these “the usual suspects” while describing them ad infinitum and featuring them here yet again I am complaining out both sides of my mouth. But such are the paradoxes of a Ray Johnson show. I dare say that no amount of art world meddling will be able to defeat the meta-mega-phony-proof-ness of the deadpan spoof master. So what here was *not* among the usual suspects? Well, to start with, two wonderful David Bowie portraits begun in the late 1970s .

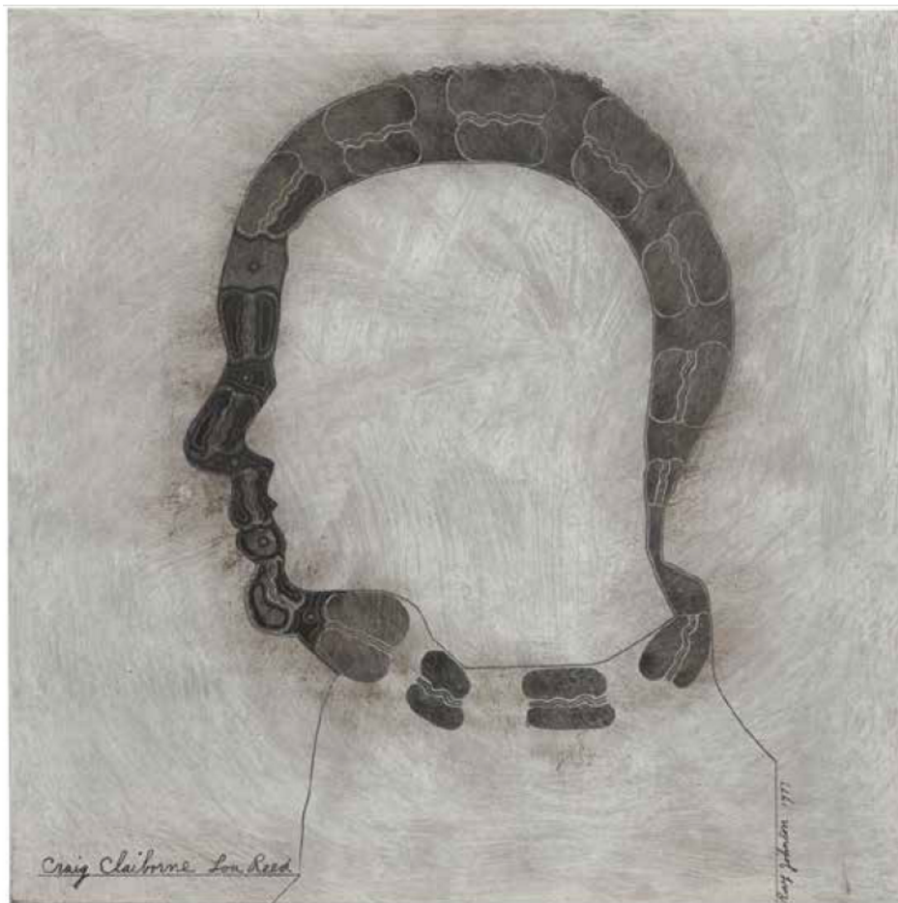


Untitled (David Bowie) 1979-94 Ink and collage on board 8 1/2 x 9 1/8 inches 22 x 23 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



William Burroughs 1978 Acrylic, ink, and collage on panel 15 7/8 x 15 7/8 x 1 1/4 inches 40 x 40 x 3 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Adjacent to the “For River” back room, another amazing back room, called Room 3, showed a Warhol silo, the two Bowies, an exquisite 1978 William Burroughs silhouette and one of Lou Reed from the same period in a double portrait technique used frequently by Johnson. He would create silhouettes, a process explored in greater detail by a familiar work of his in the same room, *Silhouette University*, with some 119 names of subjects listed repeatedly. The double portraits would “mash” two of these 119 people together for reasons understood only by the artist, one “inside” the other, creating concentric facial features, necks and skull shapes and then adorned with various familiar Johnsonian elements.



Craig Claiborne Lou Reed 1977 Acrylic and ink on panel 15 7/8 x 15 7/8 x 3/4 inches 40 x 40 x 2 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Here, Lou Reed is merged with Mississippi-born Craig Claiborne (1920-2000) a gay food journalist, cookbook author and restaurant critic for *The New York Times* and a fixture on the Hamptons social scene. In 1975, his winning bid at a charity auction led to a scandalous \$4,000 tab for a thirty-one-course Paris meal of foie gras, truffles, lobster, caviar and pricey wine that he flouted in the *Times*, resulting in controversy, no doubt delighting Johnson.

The checklist revealed that in all there were six works in all from the 1960s, 20 from the 70s, seven from the 80s and six from the 1990s, the decade Ray checked out. And so while some were started in one year and finished much later in true Johnsonian style, there was plenty to enjoy here from all of his constantly transforming periods, many not seen previously.

In the 1968 work *Issa*, a black and white 1960s-ish snapshot of a tough, large-busted, rib-baring vixen with bangs staring defiantly at the camera is combined with a tiny brick pattern of beige and grey “tessarae”—the small pieces of sandpapered cardboard that is a Johnson

trademark—to huddle around the hand-lettered label “Issa (1763 -1827)” in the middle. Kobayashi Issa was one of the four great haiku masters of Japan who actually died in early 1828. (Johnson was born in 1927.) Issa, a pen name meaning “one cup of tea,” wrote over 20,000 popular haiku but is said to have suffered monetarily. Ray’s love of early Asian spiritual texts coupled with his ambivalence toward money figures here, but what are we to make of the unidentified female image straight out of a Russ Meyer film plopped into the starkness of the Haiku-like layout? Gooch correctly reminded us in his informative essay that Johnson claimed to live a life of “voluntary poverty” when he was younger. Decades later during our many conversations dancing around Buddhist and Taoist ideas, he expertly advised me to “Simplify. Clarify.”



DETAIL: *Untitled* (Cage, Picasso, Magritte, Donald Tru) 1972-90 Ink and collage on board 17 3/8 x 17 inches 44 x 43 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Easier to understand is *Pipe* from 1969 which features a disturbing photo of a woman biting or sucking her own breast to create a shape similar to a star-covered pipe juxtaposed to the left, all a reference to *The Treachery of Images* in which Magritte famously painted, “Ceci n'est pas une pipe.” Johnson himself previous had played with this in his moticos-adorned “movie star work” of James Dean, one of the two that annoyed Ray for being in such demand. One of collages in this show features a reminder of that endeavor with the pipe or the pipe-shaped motico being replaced by a Coke bottle with Jasper Johns serving as a witness. How appropriate this is since it was the caption in the January 1958 *Art News* cover story (Vol. 56, No. 9) that said about the up and coming art world superstar, “(Jasper) Johns' first one-man show... places him with such better known colleagues as Rauschenberg, Twombly, Kaprow and Ray Johnson.” You see, Johnson was already a prolific, well-respected and industrious artist's artist back half a century ago, but only to “industry” insiders.

I could say so much more about what is or is not a pipe or what is or is not indicative of the ever-evolving Ray Johnson Industry in this show but I will close with this observation: A round work called *Sofia Loren* is an outdoor Italian domestic scene featuring the movie star in a leopard skin coat joining her husband, presumably, in lifting a young girl, her daughter, presumably, whose arms extend upwards. Across the child's body is a slightly menacing homoerotic image of a naked man in a similar pose. The publicity photo is labeled “La Carita (The little face) of Sofia Loren.” “Please send to Peter Hujar” was written underneath

by Johnson in pink marker. Pink bunny ears were also scratched out atop the young girl's head. As mentioned above, a healthy one fifth of the circular image has been cut away to create something like a backwards C shape. This reminds me of a much bally-hooed incident in which Peter Schuyff asked for 25 percent discount for a collage he wanted and when it arrived, Ray had rewarded him with only 75 percent of it, the rest probably recycled elsewhere. But upon closer examination of this Loren work, we see that the "Please send to..." script at the bottom also appears to have been partially cut away—to create the original circle. Who knows what was there before or what the original shape of this work was?



Untitled (Gertrude Stein Urinating/Dear Marilyn Monroe) 1976-94 Ink and collage on board 13 7/8 x 14 3/4 inches 35 x 38 cm © The Estate of Ray Johnson, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Ray Johnson left us in 1995 and when he did, he took with him so many secrets about what he was up to. Fortunately, on April 20, 1988 I asked Ray, "Do you discern between your collages and the stuff you send in the mail?" His reply was a definitive no. I wrote down that he said they are all "original heartfelt artworks." He then went on to explain that his letters like, "Dear Whitney Museum," were original drawings, exactly the same as if one bought them: "You can pay X number of dollars for it. But I'm uniquely involved in direct communication with people" so he also gives some of the work away. But he considers his "words and actions" to be the same as his drawings. He concluded by saying that he does not differentiate between "sitting, throwing, driving my car, or the drawings I do when I'm driving through Ohio." He then said, "Does that answer your question?" He seemed bent on making sure this Ohioan understood the answer.

Gooch concludes his essay by writing, "No sharp line exists between the mail art and the collages." He goes on to discuss the significance of the "Dear Marilyn"s and the "Dear Jacques Derrida"s. I am here to report that no sharp lines exist between the media he used

nor between any of Ray's work, his creating it and the process of us looking at it today, 22 years after his death. Perhaps there are no sharp lines anywhere, not even between his life and his death. Perhaps Ray's "correspondents" whether they were Monroe or Derrida or Mr. Gooch or me, all overlapped in his mind. There are certainly no sharp lines between the "art world" and any other world, though some of us are better than others at pointing out curious little treasures among clumps of toxic waste washing up on the shore. Ray was certainly one of those people. The witty man at the center of the Ray Johnson Industry is constantly eating away at the shoreline and I have the feeling he will continue to do so. **WM**