

Ray Johnson: inside an outsider's world

THE film *How to Draw a Bunny* is a 90-minute biography of artist Ray Johnson, an elusive figure dubbed "the most famous unknown artist in America."

The documentary by John W. Walter, which will screen this month at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is quirky, intriguing and a little sad.

The narrative begins with the police chief of Sag Harbor, N.Y., talking about the artist's suicide there at age 67, in 1996. It moves backward to trace Johnson's life from childhood in Detroit through studies alongside artists Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg at the revolutionary Black Mountain College, through Pop Art experiments in Manhattan of the 1950s and, finally, the studio in Long Island where he lived in seclusion for some 40 years.

As he cultivated the role of outsider, he also maintained a presence in the art world through his New York Correspondence School, a loose network of writers and artists who exchanged art and myriad other items by mail.

"What can you do with (art) after you've done it?" Johnson asks rhetorically in the film. "That's why I stuffed it into envelopes and mailed them to people."

The film, like Johnson's life and art, is a collage. Walter splices color images of Johnson's compulsive, Dadaist art and rare video footage of the artist with interviews of his friends and colleagues, filmed in black and white.

It's a star-studded cast — art dealers Richard Feigen and Frances Beatty, artists James Rosenquist and Chuck Close among them — who draw a loving, if fragmented, picture of the Ray they knew.

Johnson withdrew from Manhattan art life after cohort Andy Warhol was shot and wounded in 1968, settling in a small farmhouse "with a Joseph Cornell attic," he wrote. He left behind a houseful



This scene of Ray Johnson from John Water's film *How to Draw a Bunny* offers a glimpse into the artist's enigmatic life.

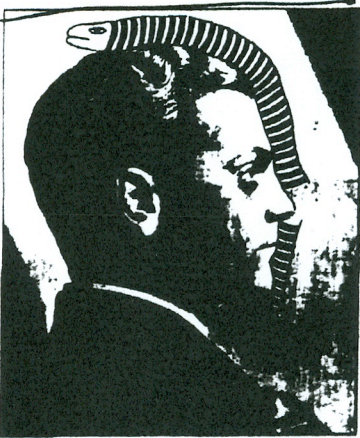
of neatly boxed and stacked material for his collages, and his original art works — an "envelope" of his own.

"(Robert) Rauschenberg was a person making art, (and) so was Andy (Warhol)," says Billy Name, a member of Warhol's Factory, in the film. "Ray wasn't a person — Ray was art."

That, and the acknowledgment that no one really knew him, are the only things everyone agrees on. The police chief says it best: "Everyone had a story about Ray Johnson. But no one had the whole story."

How to Draw a Bunny will be shown at 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, and May 28-30, in Brown Auditorium at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet.

— PATRICIA C. JOHNSON



Ray Johnson's collage *James Cagney* is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.