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A Familiar Story: Be Careful What You Wish For

A visually rich fairy tale for adults stars Tilda Swinton and Idris Elba.

Three Thousand Years of Longing
Directed by George Miller

THERE ARE STORYTELLERS, and then there is Scheherazade, the savvy bride who in “One Thousand and One Nights” entertains her husband, the king of Persia, by telling him stories. The king has a nasty habit of killing his wives, so to keep her head Scheherazade practices narrative interruptus: Each night, she relates wondrous tales without finishing them, keeping him hooked on her cliffhangers so that she can live another day. For her, storytelling is life.

The stakes are far lower for Alithea Binnie (Tilda Swinton) in George Miller’s “Three Thousand Years of Longing.” A self-described narratologist, Alithea has meaningful work, reputational standing, a movieland dream house and a potential new chapter in a mysterious being (Idris Elba). She is also a storyteller. But unlike Scheherazade, Alithea risks nothing meaningful when she spins this yarn, a problem for a movie that insists on the importance of storytelling. Despite Miller’s talent and feverish enthusiasm, and the gravitational pull of his stars, the movie’s colorful parts just whir and stop, a pinwheel in unsteady wind.

The movie begins with a promising, char-

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Fine Art

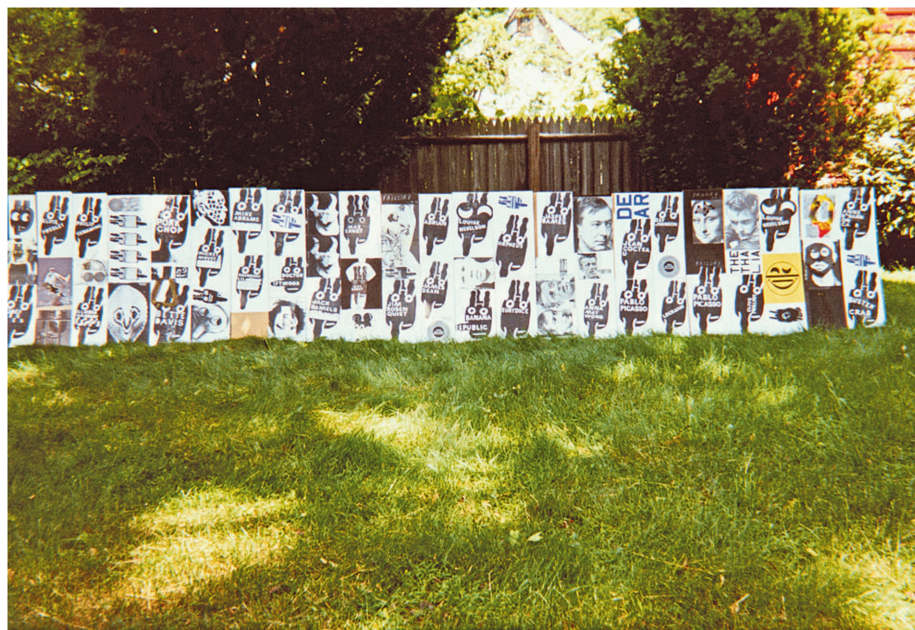
MARTHA SCHWENDENER | ART REVIEW

From above, "Bill and Long Island Sound" (1992); "RJ With Please Send to Real Life and Camera in Mirror" (1994); Elisabeth Novick's "Untitled (Ray Johnson and Suzi Gablik)" (1955); "Outdoor Movie Show in RJ's Backyard" (1993); bottom left, "Headshot and Elvises in RJ's Car" (1993); and "Outdoor Movie Show on RJ's Car" (1993).

PHOTOGRAPHS VIA RAY JOHNSON/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

Disposable Camera, Unforgettable Photos

A show raises questions about whether images document reality or create it.



THE AMERICAN ARTIST and downtown New York figure Ray Johnson (1927-95) might have become a household name if he hadn't burned his early abstract paintings. Instead, Johnson set out on a different course, creating collages, sending mail art through the postal service and exploring photography — but not as a high-end "art photographer" or darkroom practitioner. Johnson was fascinated by vernacular photography. He copied photographs from magazines, used disposable cameras and treated photo booths as ad hoc art studios. In the end, he left behind about 3,000 color photographs, many made in the last three years of his life and virtually unexamined for three decades. Dozens are on view in the terrific, densely packed exhibition "Please Send to Real Life: Ray Johnson Photographs" at the Morgan Library & Museum.

Born in Detroit, Johnson came up in the avant-garde world of American art in the 1940s and '50s. He attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina, studying with Josef Albers and later living in the same building in New York with the composer John Cage and the choreographer Merce Cunningham. A photograph in this exhibition by Hazel Larsen Archer titled "Ray Johnson at Black Mountain College" (1948) shows the back of Johnson's head, rather than his face — a typical expression of how Black Mountain artists tried to look differently at everything from painting to portraiture.

Later, Johnson was an assistant to the painter Ad Reinhardt and worked as a graphic designer. Despite making commercial art (he designed book covers for New Directions press, among other jobs), Johnson retained that experimental approach, favoring scruffy poetic and conceptual gestures over glossy objects. Photographs like "Bill and Long Island Sound" (1992), in which the artist held the blue bill of a cap over the shoreline, mimicking a crescent moon, are evidence of this. Other works feature shadows, silhouettes, writing in the sand or Johnson's collages and cardboard signs inserted into phone booths, public monuments or natural settings.

Johnson has often been labeled a Pop artist, and you can see overlaps with people like Warhol in his obsession with the booming culture of celebrity of the 1950s. Johnson's long-running project, called "Movie Stars," consisted of photomontages and collages made with cardboard, about three feet high, that featured faces of celebrities — or his signature absurd bunny. These works also served as a kind of archive, a vast catalog of performers and politicians, like Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and Bill Clinton. Johnson even treated brands or their mascots as celebrities: Mickey Mouse, Ronald McDonald and Pepsi-Cola appear in texts and images.

Johnson would also frequently put himself in conversation with a celebrity. A wonderful photograph here, "Headshot and Elvises in RJ's car" (1993), captures two cardboard works, one with a photograph of Johnson's face and another with two of Elvis Presley, propped next to each other in the passenger and driver seats of Johnson's car, as if they were about to head out for a drive. In other works, Johnson appears alongside the poet Arthur Rimbaud or the singer David Bowie.

In the same way Johnson burned his early paintings, renouncing the most reliable route to a successful art career in mid-20th-century New York, he exited the fray of Manhattan. In 1968 he moved to Locust Valley, Long Island, and after 1978 he had only two solo exhibitions — the last one in 1991. He continued to make art, though, and looked to artists like Joseph Cornell, famous for his box assemblages, who lived on Utopia Parkway in Queens. Many of Johnson's works take Cornell's idea of the display box filled with quirky objects and expand it to tableaus staged for the camera, using the suburban environment, the woods or the seashore as found theatrical sets.

Elisabeth Novick's photograph "Untitled (Ray Johnson and Suzi Gablik)" (1955) shows Johnson playing with a cutout silhouette — a kind of early performance photograph — while photographs taken by Johnson and titled "Outdoor Movie Show on RJ's Car" (1993) and "Outdoor Movie Show in RJ's Backyard" (1993) capture lineups of cardboard "Movie Stars," suggesting that anywhere can be an art gallery — even your own lawn or driveway.

Please Send to Real Life: Ray Johnson Photographs
CRITIC'S PICK
Through Oct. 2 at the Morgan Library & Museum in Manhattan; 212-685-0008, themorgan.org.

Johnson's presence in many of the photos could be called self-portraiture — but the photos also feel very much like ancestors to the ubiquitous cellphone selfie. The photo "RJ With Please Send to Real Life and Camera in Mirror" (1994) is an obvious selfie precursor. It includes a number of conceptual twists, however: Johnson appears in a mirror, holding a disposable camera and one of his cardboard signs with an alter-ego bunny and the words "Please Send to Real Life" partially printed in reverse — a reminder of how the camera doesn't merely document reality, but shapes and potentially distorts it. (This photo might also be a reference to his mail-art practice or the New York art magazine REALLIFE, published from 1979 to 1994.)

What would Johnson think of our present moment, in which virtually everyone with a cellphone is a photographer and the selfie has come to dominate? Johnson died — by suicide, jumping from a bridge in Sag Harbor, Long Island, in what has often been seen by his friends as a kind of enigmatic performance gesture — in 1995, so he missed the digital revolution and the so-called image flood of nearly infinite photographs. Yet he predicted these things with his series "Movie Stars," in which anyone can be a celebrity — or join one in a photograph — and with the staged works that create situations, like going out for a drive with Elvis, or gazing at a paper moon over the ocean.

What is art? What is real? Does the image document reality or create it? "Please Send to Real Life" raises some of these questions and shows how Johnson predicted the growing fuzziness between the realms of photography and IRL (in real life) — from snapshots to social media — suggesting that the relationship between them is porous but also ripe for creative intervention.