

RAY JOHNSON

In the very first place it all goes back to Dada and Surrealist art and Duchamp, Man Ray, Magritte, Schwitters, Breton, Ernst, and Arp. But even before that, it all goes back to Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1537-1593), a Milanese by birth who made stained-glass windows for the cathedral in Milan before he became the court painter for the Hapsburgs at the Imperial Court of Prague. Arcimboldo's portraits were surreal, satyric parodies, composed of fruits, vegetables, tree root systems, rabbits and snakes, a bizarre offshoot of the formal tradition of profile portraiture embodied in the bronze plaques and paintings of Van der Weyden, Ambrögio da Predis, Alberti, Della Francesca, Pisanello, Fra Bartolomeo, and Piero di Cosimo (who coiled an enamel snake around the vulnerable neck of the beautiful Simonetta Vespucci).

In the second place it began a little while back when Holly Solomon sent Ray Johnson a tiny silhouette portrait of herself that she had made in Disneyland. It was exact to the last detail and Ray Johnson loved it. Before you could say "Butterfly McQueen" he was off and running, making silhouettes of everybody you could possibly imagine, a lot more you would never have thought of and a few you've never even heard of.

The silhouette, while allowing precision down to the eyelashes, also encourages ambiguity. You're not tied down, or indeed distracted by factual details (eyes, mouth). The silhouette captures the essence, without being explicit (in terms of expression), allowing Johnson room to roam around his visual and verbal gardens of associative fancy filled with tortoises, white rabbits, flies, ducks, cows, snails, and double-headed snakes. Each portrait is specifically them (the subject) and indirectly him (Johnson) with all the opaque (or perfectly clear) visual clues and word analogies at his command.

Visually, the portraits are exquisite, jewel-like, three-dimensional icons, for the most part the same size and all quite small. He places the

actual completed silhouette on a masonite plaque. Some, like totems, are extended above and below by appendages. All are built up with protruding blocks: rectangles, triangles, cubes. They have been painted, sanded and rubbed, giving them a soft, translucent, textured surface. He sometimes embellishes his essentially black and white drawings with touches of sky blue, sweet pinks, dull greens, and multi-textured patterns: tortoise shell, snakeskin, and star grounds.

Many of the silhouettes are double portraits. Some obviously so: Andy Warhol/Arakawa, Roy Lichtenstein/Andy Warhol, Paula Cooper/Arakawa, Craig Claiborne/Lou Reed. Some not so obviously so, especially Amei Wallach/Duchamp. The symbolism of his ongoing iconography and referential relationships is complex, not to say oblique. David Bourdon is covered in Shirley Temples. Peter Beard and Jim Rosenquist sport snake-deco VWs as does Jackson Pollock who also has a Mickey Mouse and the cryptic message "Please send to Robert Indiana." Gertrude Stein is lettered across the bottom of Giuseppe Arcimboldo. Large clocks and the name Michelangelo Antonioni decorate Larry Rivers' portrait. William Burroughs is a huge tortoise, Harold Rosenberg has a Marilyn Monroe card, Lawrence Alloway spits out bird and crocodile stamps, Paloma Picasso is joined by Nancy and Sluggo and a Pillsbury Buddha and Ray Johnson himself. The humor is, as always, deadpan. Jayne Mansfield, upside down with a stretched neck, lies near Jim Rosenquist's VW. "Please Don't Touch The Charman" says a brightly embroidered levi patch on Tab Hunter.

Although there is a strong sense of unity throughout the show with all the pieces of an extraordinarily high quality, some are nevertheless outstanding: the simple double portrait of Craig Claiborne/Lou Reed with one white head superimposed on the dark head and the snakeskin pattern enveloping both; the tender love portrait of Leslie Close like a delicate Victorian Valentine; the complex Amei Wallach/Duchamp with double blue ground, double pyramid staircases, and a fat white rabbit; above all, the

magnificent Louise Nevelson looking like Isak Dinesen out of Da Vinci's extravagantly helmeted *Condottiere*. Beautifully stylized, subtle and controlled, the work is at once humorous, playful, elegant, and serene.

While you are studying one portrait, Johnson has zoomed on to the next and the one beyond that, ideas tumbling over each other, seizing a thought or a question and guiding you to the heart of an intricate Chinese maze of interconnected images and ideas, each leading naturally, effortlessly to the other. He flies to the peak of anecdotal hyperbole and visual communication and while your head is spinning in a maelstrom of cryptic and sometimes even "dopey" analogies, he says: "Oh, yes. Let's recapitulate." You of course have long since forgotten the beginning, enthralled by the sheer daring of his ramifications. And Johnson follows the thread back to the source and spins his shimmering web of enchantment off again in another direction.

Making the silhouettes was originally a complex undertaking which Johnson has simplified to the point where all he needs is a dark corner, a wall, and a 40-watt bulb. His initial drawing is very tentative, a light tracing. The first line is like a psychic recording, an emotional cardiogram, fragile and apprehensive as he begins to slowly feel out and delineate the person. At his first session Andy Warhol was

not impressed: "You call that a drawing?" A friend of Louise Nevelson's said, looking at the preliminary sketch, "the mouth is wrong." But Nevelson, never bothering to glance at the drawing, said, "He's the artist. He knows what he is doing." Rosenquist and de Kooning were "saints" standing with the immobility of statues. Even so it is difficult for people to stand still and Johnson has come to the conclusion that he must draw a corpse. That would be the perfect subject.

Perhaps less "accidental" than the earlier collages, the silhouettes are an open-minded part of a continuing process of evolution wherein Johnson wants to make not one definitive statement about each subject, but thirty momentary images to capture and record the many changes of each person. He is off in pursuit of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and Richard Avedon, Shirley Temple Black, Diana Ross, Dione Warwick, Lily Tomlin, Keith Carradine, Virgil Thomson at the Chelsea, Dali at the St. Regis, Ultra Violet, International Velvet, Jacques Cousteau, Yosuf Karsh, President Carter, possibly Bella Abzug, certainly Jean Seberg in Paris, and Ruth Ford at the Dakota who is not to be confused with Ruth Gordon, the witch at the Dakota in *Rosemary's Baby*, whom Ray Johnson would also like to do. Someday—if he has the time! (Brooks Jackson Iolas, April 11-May 6)

Nina French-Frazier

