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ART PICKS OF THE WEEK



Johnson's Antonio Gaudi's Fingernails, 1973

RAY JOHNSON, ROY DOWELL

Part monk, part prankster, part ringleader, part outsider, self-effacing and egoistic, as populist in his tastes as he was hermitic, Ray Johnson was one of the New York art world's most beloved eccentrics and favorite enigmas. Johnson played paterfamilias to an international network of defiantly anti-commercial mail artists (so-called because their medium was, and is, the postal service); but he was also friend, even virtual mascot, to some of the biggest names in the art biz. His own work brimmed with Pop art — even pop star — references, celebrating celebrities and their celebrity well before his pal Warhol (not to mention *People* magazine) got around to doing so. But Johnson did not recapitulate the glossy splash of media imagery; his approach to the high profile was to miniaturize it, make it delicate and quirky and even tactile. In its intricate, obsessive, hand-rendered and highly personalized manner, Johnson's collage-drawing style seems more the scrapbook notations of a starstruck fan than Pop-cool ruminations on celebulation. In the current show hang busy, crazy, stuttering, non-sequitur-filled, entirely brilliant illuminations on the personas of Gary Cooper and Shelley Duvall, Jackson Pollock and Ed Ruscha, William Burroughs and Montgomery Clift, Ginger Rogers and opera singer Kathleen Ferrier, James Dean and Antonio Gaudi. And the list goes on. For all the dropped names, though, the real allure of Johnson's art is its baroque bumptiousness, undergirded with a powerfully rhythmic sense of composition, and its infectious love of texture — and, of course, word.

Roy Dowell is a bit more conventional a collagist: While Johnson's work seems to come out of left field, Dowell's comes straight down the middle — a pitch by Kurt Schwitters to Robert Rauschenberg, whose line drive is snagged by James Rosenquist. But the formal pleasures in Dowell's art are many and powerful. The 40 collages here are all relatively small, would work spectacularly if bigger, and don't need to be. Each flexes its muscle without resorting to histrionics: Sprightly compositional counterpoint propels these lively, unpredictable, but dignified and slightly mysterious structures. In one sense, Dowell has pre-empted Pop art's sway over his work — or at least over our understanding of it — by incorporating the Ben Day dots that constitute the chiaroscuro of billboard imagery, of old movie posters and of countless other printed pictures. The Pop-ness of such imagery pervades Dowell's artwork, but has failed to lure him out of his abstraction. All the better.

Ray Johnson at Manny Silverman Gallery, 619 N. Almont Dr., W. Hlywd.; Roy Dowell at Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., W. Hlywd. Both thru July 15.

—Peter Frank