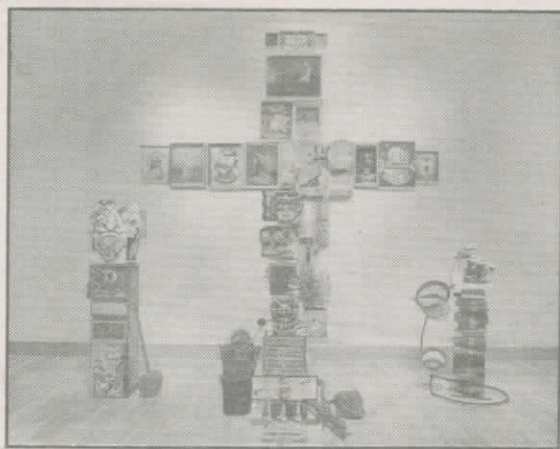


Walking into Martin Johnson's installation at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center (through Feb. 18) is like entering culture gulch. Consistent with Johnson's wacked-out aesthetic, the gallery is chock-a-block with recycled imagery and reconstituted objects. Aligned to the cardinal points on the compass are the artist's signature grins, doubled on floor and ceiling, implying the pervasive nature of Johnson's sources — and his unflinching good humor.

It's impossible not to laugh at the walls packed with appropriated cast-offs, each one adapted — or adopted — into the Johnsonian ethos by a dizzy kind of accessioning. Haunting the region's thrift shops for Aunt Edna's paint-by-numbers canvasboards or Uncle Harry's strange affinity for embellishing slices of pine trees, Johnson takes pieces of *kitsch* and subjects them to his own Dada/Surrealist intentions. Gauguin once told a persistent follower to "dream before nature." Martin Johnson puts the spin on Gauguin; he dreams before the least natural objects he can find. And what dreams they are — collective consciousness *in extremis*.

Given that his source is almost entirely found objects, the installation (reflective of his entire output) is remarkably coherent. It is tied together



*The Last Upper* is a wry, oddly ecstatic vision/version.

## Culture Gulch

Johnson's fun found objects at PFAC

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by his accessioning technique, in which each 2-D work is bordered by a strip of words serving as a "title" or commentary at the bottom. Within each image, be it Tweety Bird, WWI-vintage battleship, Durer's Praying Hands, or Spanish dancers, Johnson adds

touches of paint, a directional line or two, and/or the ubiquitous smile. One of the most recent pieces on the wall, which is hung salon-style floor to ceiling for an art-by-the-yard effect, is the superb naive painting of a dog driving a car (!), plastered with the red-lipped

grin and "titled" *Be Driven By Animal Urges*.

While Johnson has been utilizing this appropriational imagery for several years, his approach has become more focussed. In former shows the "titles" have seldom referred specifically to the images' content, being much more related to the stream-of-consciousness techniques beloved of Surrealism (and actually based on a systematic spacing of letters produced in stage two of the "dream"), but now they're often pointedly pertinent.

But the works are not entirely on the walls. The end of the gallery is taken up with a take-off on a *barrio* shrine, a cruciform construction composed of found images of Christ produced in saccharine popular prints (though one is an elongated homegrown offering on black velvet) which literally emerges into a 3-D floor extension flanked by smaller altar-columns and footed by a cheap plaster 3-D repro of the *Last Supper* (minus a couple of Apostles' heads). Titled *The Last Upper* and filled with pre-ruined semi-religious objects, this is a wry — and oddly ecstatic — vision/version of high Church art under the popular culture/kitsch filter.

In fact, Johnson is an oddly ecstatic filter himself, one who cannily focuses the cultural glut of our era. No small feat — and fun.