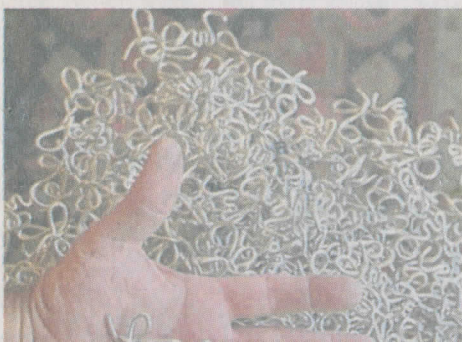
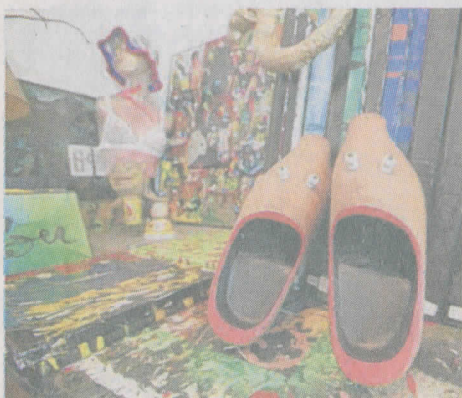


Arts & Entertainment



BOB BROWN/RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

Martin Johnson has been a prolific artist for decades, and much of his work features the word "for." "I've been using the word as my matrix for 37 years," he says.



FOR ART'S SAKE

Martin Johnson's show features a survey of his work, which incorporates his signature word

BY ROY PROCTOR
Special correspondent

Artist Martin Johnson is obsessed with the word

"I met Marty in 1976," recalls artist Ray Kass, who is organizing a Johnson show to open in 2013 at Roanoke's Taubman Museum of Art. "I was in Chapel Hill for a fine arts festival, and Marty was one of the graduate students

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Special correspondent



Found objects make up much of Johnson's work, top. What appears to be a pile of chain is a collection of metal "fors." The piece above was the first to use "for" (in the lower left corner of the artwork).

Artist Martin Johnson is obsessed with the word "for."

It embellishes the gate leading to the courtyard of the antebellum building at 107 E. Cary St. that Martin bought to house his private gallery and studio. He moved to Richmond from Virginia Beach four years ago.

The first two floors, dubbed the Forinstance Gallery, and third-floor studio present "for" in countless guises in a mind-boggling, emotion-churning profusion of drawings, paintings and found-object sculptures that Johnson has created since the mid-1970s.

"For" also figures in "Martin Johnson: past, present, FORward ...," the title of the survey of Johnson's work since 1974 that will open Friday at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond.

During a recent studio chat, Johnson points to a 1974 painting titled "First For Painting," in which a head seems to float in an indeterminate space.

"At the bottom I scratched the word 'for' impulsively," he says. "That's how it began. It was an encapsulation of the direction my life was trying to go in philosophically. 'For' is force for us. I've been using the word as my matrix for 37 years."

The exhibition will be Johnson's first one-man show in more than two decades — his work last appeared here in "Uncommon Ground: Virginia Artists 1990" at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts — and it represents an attempt to re-establish himself as an artist in the public arena.

Proud to be a new grandfather at 60, Johnson may be Richmond's best-kept art secret.

He's hardly an unknown quantity to people with long memories in Richmond's art community, however.

Johnson was born in New Jersey and moved here with his family when he was 5. He graduated from Henrico High School in 1969, earned a degree in architecture at Virginia Tech, then picked up a master of fine arts degree in studio art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I met Marty in 1976," recalls artist Ray Kass, who is organizing a Johnson show to open in 2013 at Roanoke's Taubman Museum of Art. "I was in Chapel Hill for a fine arts festival, and Marty was one of the graduate students ... I was very impressed with him. He was so prolific."

Johnson moved to New York from Chapel Hill. He was offered studio space in the prestigious PSI, now an exhibition site for the Museum of Modern Art. He had successful one-man shows at the Phyllis Kind Gallery. He grabbed ink in art journals. He attracted the attention of Herb and Dorothy Vogel, who collected his work and recently donated it to 35 major American art museums.

Then, 10 years after he arrived, Johnson moved to Virginia Beach to join his father's business, Virginia Marketing Associates, which sells plumbing products to wholesalers. "I had a family to support, and I wasn't making enough with my art," he says. Johnson eventually bought the business and moved its headquarters here in 2007.

"I haven't sold anything in 25 years, but I've never stopped making art," he says. "I didn't have to sell work to survive, but making art has always been my meaning and purpose. I see everything in these rooms as one work. They blend together, just like notes in a song."

Johnson estimates he has created 10,000 works involving hundreds of thousands of found objects. They fill every closet and back room in the gallery-studio building. They're stored in three sheds in Virginia Beach. They decorate his homes on Church Hill here, and in Virginia Beach and New Kent County.

Kass calls Johnson a "visionary surrealist."

"When Marty confronts the unknown, he laughs in the face of the abyss, the cosmic abyss, the void, the things we can't know about. That's the way he's a surrealist. He tries to express the unknown. I think his work is intimately involved in sex and death, and he brings a genuine sense of humor to them."

In addition to the word "for," the upcoming show will offer red smiling lips at every turn.

"Turn those lips upside down," Johnson says, "and they become a frown. It all depends on your perspective."

If you go

What: "Martin Johnson: past, present, FORward ..."

When: Opens Friday; reception 6-9 p.m. Sept. 9; closes Oct. 16

Where: True F. Luck Gallery at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, 1812 W. Main St.

Info: (804) 353-0094; www.visarts.org



One-man show

Making art has always been Martin Johnson's purpose. See more of his work at TimesDispatch.com, search: slideshow.