

MARTIN JOHNSON

VIRGINIA BEACH ARTS CENTER

May 9-June 9, 1985

When you walk into Martin Johnson's installation, imagine you are meeting a charismatic individual with both menacing and compelling traits. He is an exotic, wild dancer, teasing you with ironies, bombarding you with nonsense that just might contain some truth. A cosmic jester, his high-voltage aura overwhelms you. You may feel like running or averting your eyes.

It can be frightening to delve into the vortex.

In the vortex, everything exists in an uncensored, seemingly chaotic state. The vision is dizzying. Too much to absorb at once. Johnson chose what he wanted to paint.

He chose to paint his life in riddish puzzle pieces, and the rhythmic and gridded installation underlines the notion of a puzzle. Only a few sections remain to be filled. The rest of the images are unreasonably packed.

The environment should feel both familiar and foreign. Reconciling the pattern within the images, and making meaning of the images, is a journey parallel to the life process. Getting to know yourself. Johnson prods us in our lethargy. Disdain and affection, intellect and intuition, cynicism and belief all can be found in these works.

Johnson's Cheshire grin, one of his trademark motifs, is both a menacing grimace and a mere grin. The phrases stenciled below the images make sense and no sense. You can speak the words aloud until they communicate, just as you can repeat a familiar word until it escapes its definition.

The black upper borders are time; the white, equally-spaced dots are moments in time. It is a format that bonds the images, a structure he turned upside down for the entire main gallery to create formats within a format. Even when turned upside down, time looks the same.

Calligraphers turn words upside down to more clearly see the pattern of the letters. Right side up, we are too caught up in content to see pattern. In our conscious, "upright" state, we are

too caught up in apparent reality to recognize the truth of what we do, say, see, hear, are.

Like all powerful artists, Johnson makes the invisible visible. His works remind us of the incomprehensibility of a given life. How much within us is buried, numbed by the constant barrage of external/internal information. He charges us to look again even at our more "trivial" experiences and find meaning where none seemed to exist.

Teresa Annas

Arts Center Curator

Note: Price list available upon request.