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Martin Johnson stands in the back yard of his Virginia Beach studio while his daughter, Kit, plays with a ball near one of the artist's sculptures. *Staff photos by DENIS FINLEY*

ART AT HAND

Artist transforms found objects to help grasp the meaning of life

By Teresa Annas

Staff writer

IT WAS 1974 WHEN Martin Johnson heard the word.

FOR.

The word reverberated in his brain, mysteriously becoming a means to connect so much that he knew and felt — about life, about art. The word almost became a talisman or perhaps a mantra.

And he saw that it was good.

So the Virginia Beach artist, whose works recently went on view both in Portsmouth and New York City, made sculptures and paintings using every manner and type of FOR — large cut-out FORs to trunkfuls of tiny FORs hand-wielded of wire. He'd scrawl the word in his paintings and scatter FORs beneath his weblike alien sculptures.

Witnesses would query: FOR whom? FOR what?

He'd try to explain, but few understood.

So he built a FOR'T and wrote a manifesto he called FORTEXT — all in a classroom he rented in New York's now-famous P.S.1 studios — an elementary school converted into a gallery. And then a reigning royal among New York art dealers came into his FOR'T and screeched aloud.

Eeeeeeeek! said Phyllis Kind, who subsequently drew Johnson into her elite stable of brilliant, quirky artists. She sold his work to major artists and collectors. The association with her helped place him in shows alongside other well-known artists. And major critics like Donald Kuspit, who has mused over Johnson's original vision for hotshot art journals like *Artforum* magazine, began to

pay attention.

"Each work is a tease, like a penny arcade game," Kuspit wrote of Johnson's work in 1985, "and the exhibition as a whole was a carnival scenario, the stage set for some gala punk masque of fortune."

Last weekend a 10-year retrospective of Johnson's art opened at the Portsmouth Museums' high-ceilinged main gallery space. In these works, visitors can trace the movement of his art and note a constant throughout: He uses found objects, from grocery carts to wire baskets.

On April 23, an equally extensive installation of his recent work opened at the Newhouse Center for



Johnson works in his Oceanfront studio. A 10-year retrospective of his art is on view at Portsmouth Museums through June 12.

Contemporary Art on Staten Island in New York. The installation is mostly made up of reworked paintings and objects he found in junk shops and at yard sales. Like tacky, big-eyed children paintings Johnson overlays with painted imagery.

That makes several hundred works plucked at one time from his latest studio, a small house at Virginia Beach's south end. Yet weeks later in mid-April, the two-story frame structure with the large, art-filled yard seemed as packed as ever. Remaining were what appeared to be several thousand works — tucked in corners and cluttering the walls.

There were wire frame forms skinned with sinewy swatches of stiffened cheesecloth. And a zillion paintings, from minuscule to very large ones. Most of these were trimmed with a recurring motif: across the top, black strips (representing time) punctuated by white dots (moments in time) and below, white strips with nonsensical, poetic phrases that may

or may not have related to the painting.

The phrases occur to Johnson in a stream-of-consciousness:

"The Thang Meet Tha Thang"

"Boom and it is gone—"

"Its Childish to Kid is It"

There was a Cheshire cat smile (Was it a grin or a grimace?) that popped up in surprising places; there was one aloft a post, another imbedded in a pitchfork handle. Also, a maelstrom or tornado form, agitated and powerful, that showed up in his sculptures.

Please see **JOHNSON**, Page **B3**

JOHNSON

continued from Page B1

And there stood Johnson, a figure no less riddish than the ones he creates.

'A crafty guy doing crafty stuff'

Ask him about his art and he'll say, "The whole issue is communication, as with anything. How do you communicate something you deeply feel and sense?"

"But it's just an activity, too. I'm just a crafty guy doing this crafty stuff."

Yet, in less time than it takes him to open a window, this 37-year-old Richmond-reared artist will become esoteric. His usual perpetual movement will come to a halt, his grinning eyes go sober, as he glances upward to observe:

■ "I don't think you can provide a map to the world of art. You can give people some snapshots, but there is no map."

■ "I believe my things are very realistic. Photorealistic in terms of my consciousness."

Then he laughs — a rambunctious belly laugh with a distinct "ha ha ha." That such statements are both simply true and pretentious-sounding makes him howl.

And it's that dark, raucous sense of humor that pervades much of Johnson's art. "I'm making fun," says the artist, hearing the phrase freshly as he utters it. "Ma-king fun. It's kind of a mean thing and a fun thing."

He's forever rolling words around in his head and on his tongue. A witness might sense he's searching for secrets in words. Sometimes he finds them: Metaphor becomes "met a FOR." Mysticism becomes "missed his ism."

He calls it "doing jazz. It's very much like music."

Johnson also likes the phrase, "Life is a found object." He's talking about taking things as they come. If life consists of objects or events crossing your path, then Johnson's way is to accept and transform them.

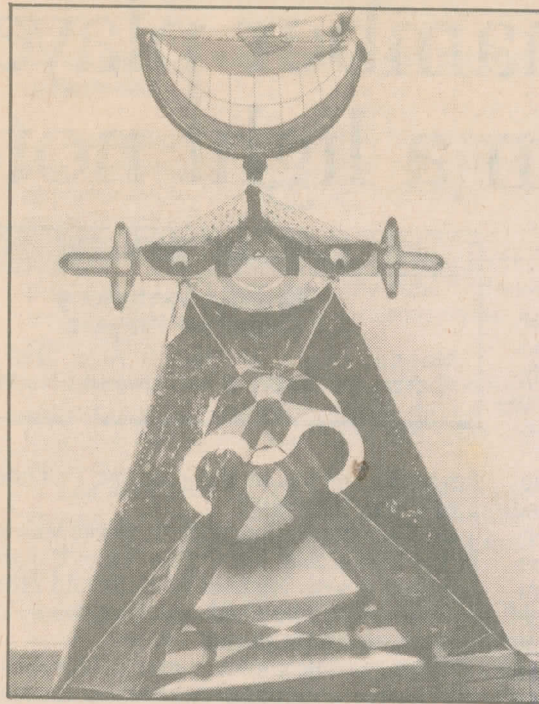
In a way, it's like placing bits of real life in his art, too. Sometimes more than he bargained for. Years ago, he retrieved a wooden crate from a Manhattan pier. He didn't know he was bringing lice home, too.

"That," he says, "is the down side of found objects."

■ Above all, Johnson does not want to come off like some philosophizing kook. There's a real world side to him, after all, that includes a regular job and home life.

"I'm really not a reflective person. I detect, inspect, project. . .," insists this Muhammad Ali of Artspeak.

In 1984, the artist, his wife Fran and daughter Kittle Caprice left their small Upper West Side Manhattan apartment and moved to a nifty bungalow near the Oceanfront, where



"Wepants Fors, Pace" by Martin Johnson.

Johnson likes to mow the lawn and plant azaleas. He moved here so the family could lead a more normal life in a peaceful neighborhood and so he could make some decent bucks working as a manufacturers' representative for plumbing supplies.

"So I'm very involved in business world specifics. But at the same time, I'm involved in metaphysics, poetry, creativity. . . It's simplistic to say it's divided but it is."

There's also his family. A fourth member, Kevin Paul, was born Feb. 23.

"Son. Son," coos Johnson to the crying babe in his arms on a Saturday afternoon. "Why don't you put him down, honey," Fran, his wife of 16 years, calls out from the kitchen where she's busy making lunch.

"Son down," says Johnson, placing the infant in a crib. "Son down. Sundown."

Even Johnson's home bears his mark. The painted canvas covering the sofa is his: stenciled onto the seats are the 'living room' instructions: "VISIT ME. . . WATCH TV. . . PLAY A RECORD. . . TALK."

Above the couch is Johnson's first sculptural wall piece made of found doodads. Kittle Caprice, 8½, explains the work: "My dad made it when he was 21. He found some things around the house and glued it on."

In the couple's bedroom is a painting Johnson created while an architecture student at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg in the early '70s. Over the mantle is another painting he was working on when he had his FOR epiphany. It's a cloudy image with a man's head in one corner, the word FOR scrawled in another.

For Johnson, that moment is now a sketchy recollection. But he recalls the gist: "I saw it

like a cry in the wild. I was heavily into philosophy and religion, trying to extract and get to the essence." The word he happened upon — FOR — "has a significance that doesn't have to be explained. It's a system I developed based on that peak experience."

'Hard to categorize'

Art world experts also have found a peak experience in Johnson's creations.

"I really love the work," says John Perreault, the nationally eminent curator/critic who organized the Newhouse Gallery show. "He's quite original, so he's hard to categorize. To me, that's a good sign that the artist is really doing something."

"I tend to spend hours in his 'room.' There's so much to look at, and you can approach it on so many levels. I particularly admire his ability to transform all this raw material."

Bill Copley, a well-known artist also represented by Phyllis Kind Gallery, has collected more than 100 works by Johnson in the last decade. "You could analyze his work," he says, "but that's no fun. If you just react to it, that's instant communication directly to the subconscious."

"It's all based on a string of associations, rather close to the techniques some of the Surrealists used. Sort of manipulating chance in order to create positive accidents. You make accidents happen in your favor, you know."

The art "may seem illogical but there's a logic there," says Tim Close, curator for the Portsmouth show. "He's made order out of a seeming chaotic thought pattern. What he's doing is communicating his private reality. And he's allowing the viewer to be a kind of voyeur. These are Xerox copies of his mind, copies of what he thinks about."

Johnson is back in his wood-paneled studio now, perusing his art stash and pondering the creation of new works.

"This place is humming with potential toward the future," he blurts out, inhaling the atmosphere. "It's a good feeling to have the stuff here."

He motions to the art that surrounds him. "This is my team. And these are my team players. I came over here to do the sport. The sport of art."

Pause.

"This is my pine box, too. The fingerprint I'll leave behind. No big deal, though," he says, eyes darting mischievously. "It's been done before."

"(Retro)Active Art Work(s)," a show of work by Martin Johnson, continues through June 12 at The Portsmouth Museums, Court and High streets, Portsmouth. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. Free. 393-8543.