

## INSIDER/OUTSIDER

*Don't miss this if you've a penchant for puns.*

Linda McGreevy

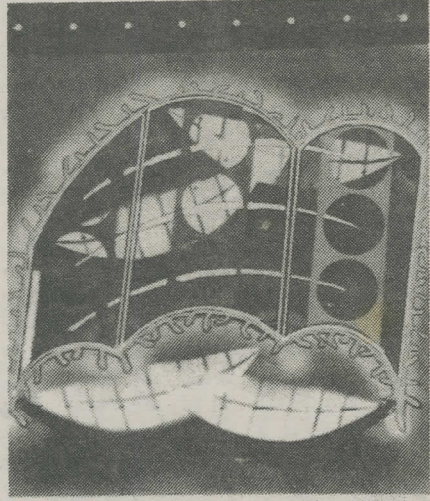
**M**artin Johnson is one wild-and-crazy-guy, no doubt about it. If art can be made out of chaos, he's the one to do it. And, if the Chrysler's Precious exhibition raised your hackles with its funky trash aesthetic straight from the pavements of the East Village, Johnson's will give you apoplexy. But, if you're a viewer with an open mind, a loose sense of "what art is," and a penchant for puns, run down to the Virginia Beach Arts Center and get a load of *Insider/Outsider* (through the beginning of June). Johnson, lately a denizen of the Big Apple and one of Phyllis Kind's stable of artists, is sharing the space with Catherine Fuitko, a naive artist with a vision. (She deserves a column of her own.)

Johnson's installation reflects his childlike approach to experience. Like the big kid he is, *everything* he thinks, sees, or dreams becomes art. There's no separation here. And no sense of formal beauty. Johnson's life is obviously one long riot — with stimuli impinging from all directions. And he throws them right back at us as fast and jumbled as they come in.

*"Johnson's installation reflects his childlike approach to experience. Like the big kid he is, everything he thinks, sees or dreams becomes art."*

What you'll see is a room full of regulation easel-size canvases, row after row. The top of each canvas is striped with a black band, looking for all the world like a negative strip from an old camera — or a torn notebook page. That's all that unifies the imagery — beside the scrambled words on the bottom of each rectangle. This is the funniest grid series imaginable, making a joke out of the pure systems touted by formalists.

**A**nd the work inside these little frames resembles several things — none of them fine or high art, however. They're schizo like



**LET LAST LAUGH LIFT.**

Martin Johnson's work is on display at the Virginia Beach Arts Center through June 9.

psychotics' drawings, full of doubled-up linear images of faces and wheels, and what-all. The use of airbrushing makes many of them look like the sides of vans. Van art? Van art with heart! They're a lot like pinball machines, too, full of absurd visual *non sequiturs*. The application of rhoplex to all this sets the work in a kind of slimy amber that is both disconcerting (like bad glazing) and hilarious.

The puns race across the bottoms of dumb images. A smiling red tree says, *Circula Prestigum*. What? They're not all unrelated: *Sexual Desire's* image takes off on Judy Chicago's erotically centralized paintings and lightning bolt slices through the rhoplex goop on *Worst Than This*.

Sometimes his distracting "normal" life creates an image, as in *Dwellsearch* with its collaged home ads and the stylish *Sears and Bikinis*. Artists have to live, too.

Oh, Martin Johnson's got a definite way with words, like kissing the blarney stone. My favorites, though, are the most coherent visually, like the ironic *Structureface*. This big foolish head has lost its tiny grin, which floats at the side, waiting for a chance to sneak back past the ears. And the delightful *Fear Unknown Bye's* baby talk with its pink horse just makes me want to join the artist and play in the mud. Too bad there's no sandpile.

For those who'd like to hear the artist Explain Himself, a slide presentation is scheduled for May 26. Whether you hear him or not, do go see him. Johnson's a trip!

Linda McGreevy, an associate professor of art history at ODU, is a contributor to various regional and national arts magazines and has published a book on German Critical Realist Otto Dix.