

MARTIN JOHNSON

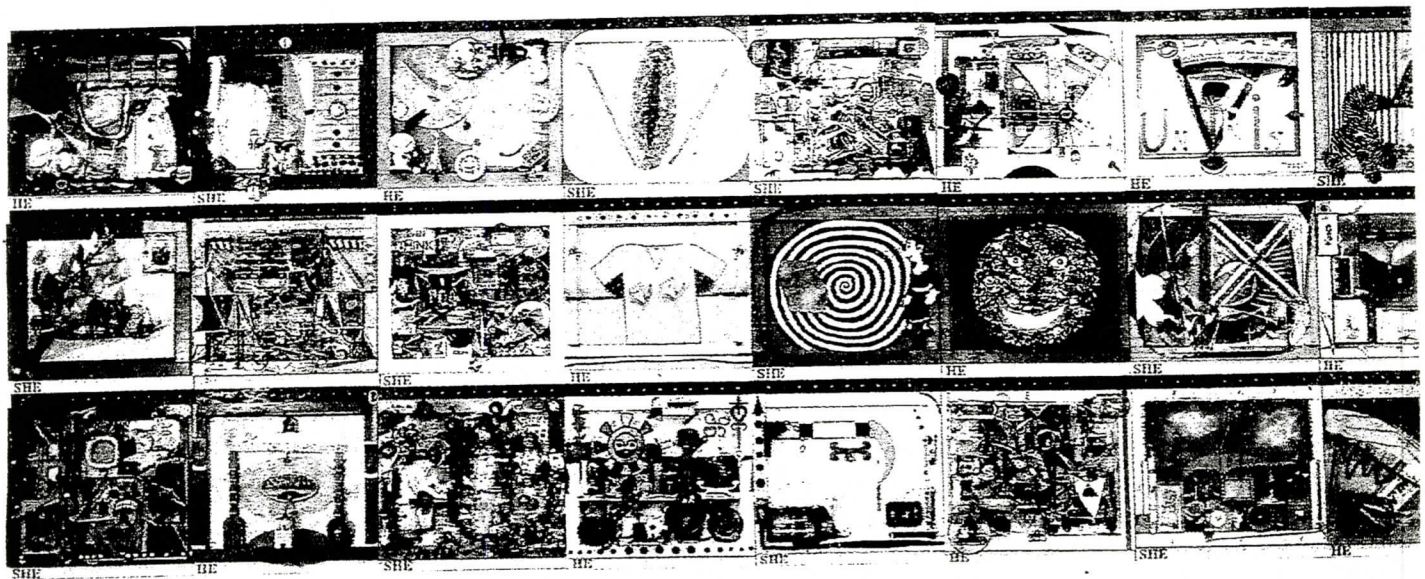
Martin Johnson's Virginia Beach studio is near the oceanfront, a small house that has been transformed into a total environment for creating works of art. It is filled, wall-to-wall, with objects Johnson has created, as well as with found objects to be used in future projects. All visible surfaces are covered with trinkets, toys and interesting artifacts, clippings, photographs and novelty items that become players in Martin Johnson's artistic productions.

Theology and philosophy, a desire to distill the essence of existence, form the basis of Johnson's work. He studied architecture at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in the early 1970s, and afterward pursued an MFA degree at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. During this period

his work married the principles he had studied in architecture with the art of assemblage and use of found objects. He created sculpture he dubbed "Unis," a compound of the negative prefix "un" and the adverb "is." For Johnson, this implied that the sculpture was constantly in a state of "becoming" or could always develop further. He began the work with an underlying grid system and various found objects which were often obscured by the addition of a tensile webbing created from stretched canvas. The addition of bright, often neon-colored, paint and other found objects completed the sculpture. Word play, such as the title "Unis," continues to function as an integral part of Johnson's work. Stenciled letters and phrases appear throughout, some phrases nonsensical, some full of meaning, all of them flowing in a stream-of-consciousness chant

from the artist into his work.

Johnson lived and worked in New York City in the early eighties and assimilated multiple influences into his work. Some of these influences include commercially-driven pop art, and the impulsive nature of the graffiti movement, which reflect Johnson's interest in popular culture. Cubism, minimalism, conceptual happenings, surrealist stream-of-consciousness strategies, and Dadaist theory have also been cited as sources of inspiration and support a broad knowledge of aesthetic movements. Similarities to Navajo sand-painting and the heavy patterning of Eastern mandalas suggest a fascination with the mystical symbolism of other cultures. Within this extensive assimilation of styles, tempered by Johnson's peculiar language-based focus, mysticism is translated by him to "missed his -ism," a fitting reference by an artist whose work



incorporates so many modes of expression.

Glimpsatone, an installation exhibited at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 1990, illustrated Johnson's seemingly undisciplined glut of images and ideas. Hundreds of kitsch images, including paint-by-number horses, dime store pictures and reproductions of famous paintings were hung floor-to-ceiling in the style of an eighteenth century salon. Johnson altered each object with cryptographic title/captions that sometimes include nonsensical words.

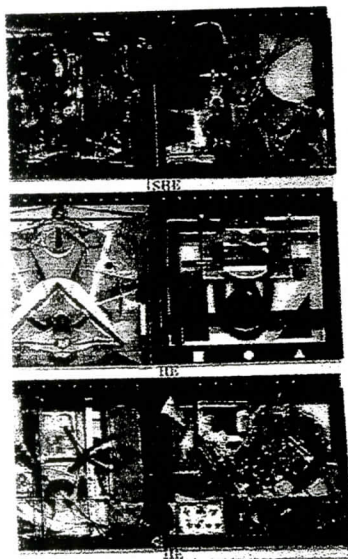
Johnson's melange of styles and influences is even more evident in *Forty-four Four by Fours*, 1991-93, an installation consisting of forty-four four by four foot panels. Labeled alternately "he" and "she," the panels represent the dualistic nature of cosmic unity, the yin and yang, the passive and active in existence. Each panel has a black

strip at the top that denotes time; holes along that strip represent moments in time. The panels, installed floor-to-ceiling around the perimeter of the Norfolk Southern Foundation Gallery, surround the viewer with relief sculpture of found objects acquired from a number of sources, including yard sales, Johnson's own attic and basement, and even trash heaps by the roadside. This collecting instinct provides the artist with materials, but it also recalls the nature of the folk artist in utilizing whatever materials may be at hand to satisfy a deep need to create.

Martin Johnson plays the part of alchemist, helping objects transcend their material properties by combining associations with other objects to create a subliminal narrative. His theory of cosmic unity and continuity, that all things have equal significance and value,

is evident throughout *Forty-four Four by Fours*. Contemplating the work, panels may seem disjointed or incoherent. Each is a complete unit, but is not intended to be viewed in isolation. As one moves from panel to panel, relationships between images or objects are recognized, and the meaning becomes clearer. Like the ongoing conversation between people, there is a continual exchange of ideas between the artist, the work and the viewer.

Carissa South
Assistant Curator
Art Museum of Western Virginia
1994



F O R T Y - F O U R F O U R B Y F O U R S

Body Politic Of The Simple Little Object Or The Complex Big Subject For (44 4 x 4's).
1991-93 [detail]