

V

magazine

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ON THE COVER:

Shirt painted
by Joey Coakley.

Tie from
Metropolitan
Museum of Art
Collection
from Davidson's.

photo by
james cubby

June

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Suddenly one of the latest art movements doesn't look all that new. Or, at any rate, it reveals its political antecedents in the flow of art history. When Marcel Duchamp first exhibited his ready-mades, a snow shovel or a urinal, as works of art, he was rebelling against both social and artistic conventions. Many years later, so is Martin Johnson.

"Forty-Four Four by Fours," Johnson's solo show at the Art Museum of Western Virginia, covers the walls of the Bridge Gallery almost from floor to ceiling. The constructions—using mostly tacky, cast off and manufactured objects—raise Picasso's art of collage to a crude and brutal degree. The intervention of the artist's own marks and choices amplifies chance with intention.

Johnson approaches his materials and process with a post-modern affinity for Dadaism, a Surreal disregard for rational control and a **Chicago School** disdain of anything academic. His work is material and conceptual, physical and literary, and **assumes meaning from a manic accretion of words, painted images and incongruous objects.** Each of the 44 panels are meant to be read, not individually, but as an accumulation. The more the pieces, the more room in between for personal associations and interpretations. The revival of used objects invokes their past histories and endows them with the additional meaning of transitory, or shifting life.

The **barrage**, or as someone else described it, the **"assault" of material** produces a disturbing impact and a slow afterthought. Visually, everything is on the surface and immediately available, leading the viewer to believe that it is also not beyond the mind's capacity to readily comprehend. But it is not only inclusive and open. It is intentionally paradoxical, polarized and enigmatic.

An imperative **system of order**, imposed on the intuitive conglomerations by the grid of the heavy-edged square panels, keeps chance and accident from dissolving into total chaos.

Each of twenty-two of the panels are stenciled either **"HE"** or **"SHE."** A convention of classical mythology, **"HE"** equals the sun, Jimmy Hendrix and trousers, while **"SHE"** equals the Moon, a variety of pink, *pink boobies*, an upside head and toothsome mouths/ vagina. The HEs seem to be more mechanical; the SHEs flowering and organic. But mostly the panels are genderless. It is hard to tell whether this androgyny sympathizes with **contemporary thought** on gender **classification** or rues the loss of traditional sexual identity.

In addition, heads, painted on bicycle cartons, range from a **satire** of the Mona Lisa to a generic **Madonna**; from Christ to a Draculian anti-Christ; from Mr. T and Little Richard to Billy Martin, to a sinister Warholian death's head, to family portraits, to a two faced **Yassir Arafat**, one up and one upside down. A side-ways seascape, with an Incan pyramid, overlaid with a (sort of) smiley face seems meant to stand us on our own heads. Nothing, from art icons to **political icons** to media icons to pop culture to stereotypes **to religion** to family seems to be sacred.

A sense of humor (**whether funny/ha ha or funny/ominous**) infuses a recurring motif of a Cheshire cat grin with wit, a sense of the absurd or the ultimate in dislocation.

Words and texts are another kind of symbol which convey the artist's notions and carry their own accrued weight. Among his ironic observations are the spelling of **"FOOLK ART"**—although Johnson claims Howard Finster as an influence—and the saying, "nothing is as beautiful as everything." **Johnson likes to make** audio/visual plays on words and cuts and shapes the word "for" repeatedly in mounds of different colored coated wire. Among the many dictionary definitions of "for" are "instead of. . .in behalf of. . .supporting. . .indicating motive. . .expressing duration of time or extension of space. . .proportion (**which doesn't compute at all**). Whatever Johnson's take, "for" has an optimistic tone.

Several people have remarked that Johnson's work reminds them of William Dunlop's. Perhaps, to a very limited **degree**, in form: but Johnson's work lacks coy-

and cute-ness, while Dunlop's work lacks weight. More valid is the comparison to Brian Sieveking's recent exhibit in the same space. Johnson, working in an even less refined technique, mines many of the same icons. But, instead of **referring to a specific, isolated culture**, he documents a generic society.

Aggressively non-high-falutin, the manic proliferation of objects derived from industry, high technology and mass production leaves oils and bronze to high art. **Playful, tough, mocking and bona fide,**

this is a post-modern style for a contemporary time of unsettled—some might say deteriorating—values.

I first saw Johnson's work at the Danville Museum when Tom Jones, the newly arrived director, curated the exhibit "Sculpture Now." He

promised—and delivered—"the opportunity to view. . .some of the most daring and original sculpture being produced today by contemporary artists from across the state." That was in the spring of 1989, followed, more than a year later, by Johnson's solo sculpture/installation in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond. And finally—five years late(r)—by this installation at the Art Museum of Western Virginia, in Roanoke. (Through June 26.)

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Fritz Bultman's work, also at the Museum, is as elegant as Johnson's is boisterous, and as representative of its own time. Along with such artists as Pollock, de Kooning and Rothko, Bultman was a first generation **Abstract** Expressionist. Rebelling against regionalism, their work was mythological, spiritual and formal.

This small but 50 year retrospective, **from the mid 30s** to the mid 80s, reveals a lot about Bultman's influences: A spikey Picassoid shape in "Spectator Red and Black"; the **Japanese calligraphy** of Morris Graves in "The Hunter"; the sensuous brushed surface of Philip Guston; the asymmetrical balance of Hans Hoffman's **push-pull** throughout; Cubist space and collage; Matissean color and cutouts.

Bultman remained true to many of his formal themes. But his lifetime thrust across the span of his career was *toward simplification and an attendant serenity.*

Restless, jumbled movement yielded to a more deliberate, monumental tempo. Grainy textures and stressed, angular shapes yielded to flat surfaces and lyrical, **interconnecting** shapes eliminating distinct figure/ground relationships. Like a diagram directing the eyes, lines earlier drawn with either paint or holes torn from a spiral pad, eventually become a more integral part of the formal structure of the imagery, either as **floating diamond shapes** or the contour of the shape itself.

The torn edges and rough surfaces of the of earlier collages (directly related to the irregular edges and surfaces of his sculptures) **evolved into the large, highly controlled, mature collages of painted papers** precisely cut—and incisively drawn—with scissors. **"Hope,"** a 1973 sculpture with a rising organic shape and arc of human supplication anticipates the black arc in **"Aurat,"** a 1982 collage. The strong, circular, sweeping shape in the oil **"Blue Wave"** is reiterated, earlier and later, in a *bronze sculpture* and in a series of free-flowing ink drawings done between 1961 and 1985.

Bultman saw the rounded forms and loose flow of the female figure as **"a vessel of energy."** His drawings, progressing from 1961 to 1984, became less gestural and more muscular. Their incisive lines look as if they, too, could have been drawn with a scissor.

Although Bultman lived his adult life in **New Jersey** and P-town, he was born and raised in **Louisiana**, and the only southerner in his artistic group. His show is titled **"From Mardi Gras to Manhattan."** But, while Bultman left Louisiana, it never left him. The viewer has only to compare the bright clarity of his 1978 "Mardi Gras" collage with the gritty, Ashcan reality of New York.

(Through July 10).

Art In View

by Ann Wienstein