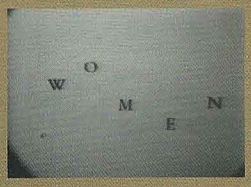
LARRY JOHNSON

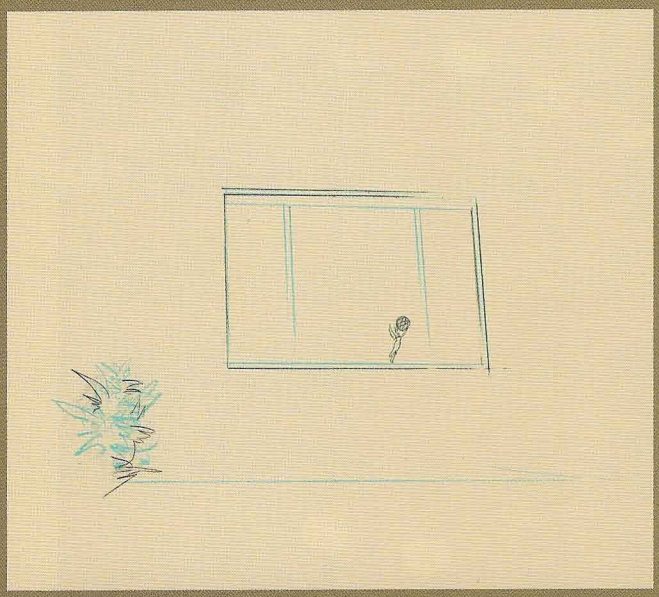
Hammer Museum | Los Angeles, California

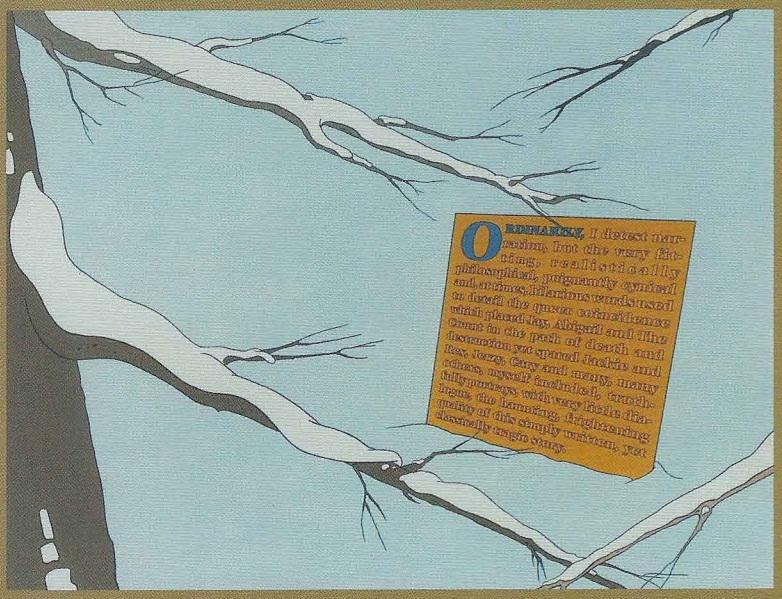


The Hammer Museum's comprehensive survey of Larry Johnson's career to date (through September 6), curated by Russell Ferguson, makes a strong argument for Johnson's inclusion in the pantheon of iconic L.A. artists. It begins with the 1984 work that brought Johnson to prominence—a series of small photographs of celebrities' names floating in a fake sky (*Movie Stars on Clouds*)—and proceeds via casual chronology, ending more or less with a 2009 photo depicting a hasty sketch of an Emmy award in an anonymous window (*Achievement: SW Corner, Glendale + Silverlake Blvds*). The 50-odd works in between are tightly related in theme and identical in medium: color photographs Johnson made using techniques he gleaned from a day job producing television graphics and later crafted through digital manipulation, for an appearance as utterly handless as advertisements. All are untitled, identified by brief parenthetical descriptions.

Central to many works is the concept of packaging—at times literally, as in *The Perfect Mensa Man* and *Why Say High School?* (both 1994), which borrow the multicolor stripe motif designer Paul Rand (1914-96) created for the boxes housing IBM's first personal computers—but more often figuratively, drawing on the slick, cunning packages of language and design engineered, in the era of mass communications, to slide straight into a consumer's unconscious. Invoking the names of famous people, who function as universal shorthand for various character traits and fragments of cultural narrative, provides a similarly direct route to mass numbers of brains. Johnson's images constantly exhort us to pay attention not just to content but to its wrappings: the lettering in many works, for example, changes colors randomly, at times nearly blending into the background. Even as we read, our attention gets forced back continually to the surface of the words.

Johnson was born in the postwar "instant city" of Lakewood and has lived in L.A.'s Koreatown for over two decades. In his images, the city—particularly gay Hollywood of the 1980s and '90s and specifically the hustler turf of Santa Monica Boulevard—is omnipresent. Hustler figures, with their seductive, solicitous, insinuating language, are objects of fascination for Johnson. "I honestly believe my work is different for gay men of my generation than it is for other people," he has said. Indeed, camp figures like Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland, the Kennedys, certain restaurants, bars and intersections, and gay porn stars Leo Ford





Larry Johnson (clockwise from top left), stills from *Paul Rand's "Women,"* 1948, 1984. *Untitled (Ass)*, 2007, color photograph, 57.5 x 62.5 in. Courtesy MOCA, Los Angeles. *Untitled (Classically Tragic Story)*, 1991, color photograph, 61 x 75.4 in. *Untitled (Achievement: SW Corner, Glendale + Silverlake Blvds.)*, 2009, color photograph, 40 x 28 in. Courtesy Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

and John Sex all make appearances in his photographs. Many of his appropriated and invented narratives dating from the last two decades have an undercurrent of death.

The show's centerpiece is a large gallery hung with ten of Johnson's "winter landscape" works (1990-92). Whereas earlier photographs displayed text on solid backgrounds, here panels are stuck into desolate snow scenes as if waiting for wanderers to stumble across them. In contrast to previous blurbs lifted out of media sources like *TV Guide* and celebrity bios, these texts—snippets of confessions, testimonials and rants—are largely Johnson's fictions. The surrounding cartoon winters seem colored by pathetic fallacies: double mountain peaks rise behind a story about twins; spiky branches converge around musings on the Manson Family killings—the world as viewed through warped first-person lenses. Behind the photographs, the gallery wall acts like a field of snow, ringing the viewer into this echo chamber of needy, disembodied voices. Despite the affected coziness of their phrasing, greased with easy-to-swallow clichés, and the warm colors of the placards bearing their messages, the texts often betray a vacuity that matches the barren scenery. At once tragic and affectless, these thorny images might also be read as metaphors for Los Angeles and its culture of fame, which tends toward a strange mixture of exhibitionism and isolation.

Given his habit of "exposing" the machinery of language and aesthetics, it may seem that Johnson has cast himself in the role of benevolent unmasker of truth, but the reality is more complicated. Johnson uses the devices he critiques to his own benefit: we're drawn to his candy-colored images as surely as we're reeled in by advertisements and are easily hooked by his fast-talking, hedging, wheedling narrators. Most of his designs, which, like advertising, liberally co-opt ideas from past art, are crafted to captivate our eyes. *Land w/o Bread* (1999-2000), which borrows the characters of a donkey and goat from the Luis Buñuel film of the same title, is a four-part work in which two panels are partially obscured by the artist's fingers interfering with the camera lens. What seems like a revelatory gesture—the hand behind these handless photographs brought into plain sight—is also a demonstration of the artist's power to meddle and hide things from view. Similarly, in a series of photos from 2007 in which Johnson's pencil penetrates various orifices of pencil-drawn cartoon creatures—a kangaroo, an ass, a giraffe—an outward display of puncturing illusion serves also to heighten it, by endowing the cartoons with an even more illusory interior dimension. And far from vilifying the master genius behind some of the most powerful commercial design of the twentieth century, Johnson reveres Paul Rand; the exhibition even opens, fittingly, with a short video piece paying homage to Rand's typographical work, *Paul Rand's Women, 1948* (1984). The dynamic between hustler and john, like that between advertiser and consumer, salesman and sap, even artist and viewer, in Johnson's work is nothing if not mutually parasitic. The donkey in *Ass* (2007) grins helplessly, lifting his tail for the eraser that threatens to undo him: obviously, despite the prospect of negation, the creature likes it. *-Katherine Satorius*

Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Why Say High School?)*, 1994, color photograph, 63.25 x 45.75 in. Private collection. Courtesy MOCA, Los Angeles.