



Ray Johnson, *Hat with Red Eyes*, 1966

collage on board  
26 7/8 by 17 1/2 inches  
signed, dated, lower center

note:

Ray Johnson's *Hat with Red Eyes* is an important collage from an exceptional group which features Marianne Moore's tricorne hat as the central image. These works were produced for Johnson's major solo exhibition "Duchamp Combs" in the Spring of 1967 at the Willard Gallery, however, *Hat with Red Eyes* was instead lent to Finch College Museum of Art for their concurrent exhibition "Art in Process: The Visual Development of a Collage" (March 9-April 25) and hung alongside Robert Rauschenberg's *Short Circuit*. Johnson was represented by Willard Gallery for a brief period from 1965-1967, while also showing with Richard Feigen Gallery. His 1965 exhibition with Willard featured forty-one works and led to a review by Grace Glueck in the New York Times that dubbed Johnson "New York's most famous unknown artist". One work from the exhibition, titled *Ladder Whirled* - a particularly abstract

geometric composition - was purchased by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller for her personal collection and another *Balshazzar's Feast (John Martin)* is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This breakthrough exhibition marked the beginning of a period of refined and composed works, which have subtle, more covert references than later compositions but still embrace the complex network of themes and cleverness true to Ray Johnson's oeuvre.

In anticipation of the consecutive spring exhibitions with Willard and also fall exhibitions with Richard Feigen Gallery, the second half of 1965 and all of 1966 were very productive years. 1965 is dominated by splendid tesserae filled compositions with a keen awareness of formal qualities. The balanced compositions are most distinguishable by Johnson's tesserae - small blocks which he made by meticulously gluing layers of cardboard together, from two to as many as 10 layers deep. Each block is a finished composition, often containing richly colored biomorphic or simply eccentric abstract imagery. Johnson packed these tesserae together to form a richly textured assemblage of "puzzle pieces". In 1966, Johnson began to spread these tesserae out over the surface of large format collages and covered them in ink wash, drawings, and text. In the works from 1966, Ray Johnson plays with slight subversions of geometric forms and dimensionality, while introducing some of his most signature motifs/moticos, including Duchamp Combs, Potato Mashers and Marianne Moore's Hat. In these collages, Johnson perfected a sophisticated but eccentric formalist play when many artists were concentrating on reductive work and pure geometric form. The eccentric compositions reflect Johnson's attention to subtle surface texture, scrupulous artistic practice and his provocative shift from the then contemporary formal order with geometric variations and fluid forms.

The most recognizable form in *Hat with Red Eyes* is the poet Marianne Moore's tricorne hat, which Johnson transformed into one of his signature moticos by flattening it into a large black amorphous shape. This shape also morphs into a stingray. As seen in *Black Hat with Figures* below, the "hat" is fluid and ever evolving. Johnson used the word moticos to describe the small ink silhouettes he produced that loosened and changed in shape until they retained only a familial resemblance to their original forms; he used moticos repeatedly, often in rows, to suggest his own personal language or writing.



*Black Hat with Figures*, 1966, collage on illustration board, 29.25 x 18 inches. Collection of the Ray Johnson Estate.

Before the sixties formal, "gallery" works, Johnson's earliest collages from the 1950s were composed of long thin strips cut from magazines or other ephemeral sources stacked alongside each other in tight rows. Below, *Gasoline* demonstrates this detailed process and the beautiful layered quality of each work. This linear technique reflects his early training with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College; his first works after leaving Albers's class were paintings made of fine lines of color laid down with a knife or razor blade in geometric patterns. An example of this process is the work *Ladder Whirled*, which was also shown in Johnson's inaugural Willard Gallery exhibition in 1965. These abstract paintings gradually gave way to collage that incorporated representational subject matter in the mid-fifties and into the sixties, including some of the earliest Pop images together merged with his older, nonfigurative techniques. The fifties cut paper strips and more minimalist mid-sixties works represent a stage between the flat paintings and the later collages with more three-dimensional elements including his *tesserae*, made of thick layers of painted cardboard. Johnson's palette often reflects the colors used in the four-color printing process—black, fuchsia and a cyan blue, however in *Hat with Red Eyes* we see a panel of yellow paper strips, which he recycled from an earlier work.



*Gasoline*, 1958, collage on cardboard panel, 14.5 x 11.5 inches. Collection of the Ray Johnson Estate.



*Ladder Whirled*, 1952, collage on board, 30 x 30 inches. Private Collection.

Marianne Moore visited Ray Johnson's Dover Street studio in the 1950s through a mutual friend and shortly after Moore and Johnson became correspondents. Moore also became one of the celebrities Johnson incorporated most often in his work. In 1967, he offered to show her a piece (from the same series as *Hat with Red Eyes*) he produced that featured her moniker hat as a "moticos", but she politely declined the invitation claiming she "must compress, not expand" her activities. This was a phrase Johnson must have enjoyed as compression and/or flattening was another one of his central concerns (highlighted in the *Potato Masher* series from 1972 where Johnson mashes or flattens the masher itself). In his collages, it is clear that his intention is to break the two-dimensionality of the flat canvas and confuse our perception of objects in space. Johnson said he used the human foot, most useful when it is flat on the ground, to indicate flatness, but also perhaps alluded cheekily to the 'flatness of the picture plane', a concept which dominated mid-century art criticism.

Johnson's interest in Moore is part of his lifelong love of words and poetry. Many writers, and especially poets, make guest appearances in his collages including Frank O'Hara, Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, Rimbaud, and others. Johnson was published in many avant-garde poetry magazines during the sixties and seventies including *Mudfish* and *The Unmuzzled Ox*. This love of words is seen through the repetition of motifs in Ray Johnson's collages, which create a private language, with its own grammar, etymology and - like Marianne Moore - precise wit.