Lester Johnson: In New York and P-town

BY BURT CHERNOW

A Provincetown of the past is in Lester Johnson's blood and in the paint that drips from his brush. "I really loved the place," he said. Beginning in 1954, for a string of formative summers, Provincetown's dunes, water, light and the joie de vivre of restless emerging artists helped shape his unique vision. By the time Johnson arrived in the celebrated art colony, he had learned to trust his intellectual intuition and the natural physicality of painting. Yes, artists like Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell roamed this small, idyllic outpost, but what attracted Johnson and other artists was the place and its spirit. The art classes of Hans Hofmann, teacher extraordinaire, offered an added attraction. Art critic Irving Sandler, who washed dishes during the early '50s in P-town, quietly slipped

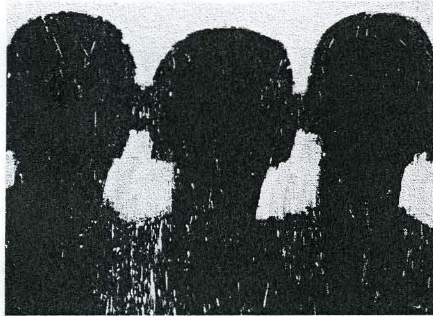
into Hofmann's Friday critiques, since "everybody *knew* that Hofmann was the best teacher anywhere (and they were right)." Hofmann had a way of convincing students that they could and should succeed his generation as the vanguard of a new fraternity of vital artists.

Born to a large Lutheran family in Minneapolis in 1919, Johnson studied at the Minneapolis School of Art, the St. Paul Art School, and later at the Chicago Art Institute. He was introduced to Hofmann's teaching approach, particularly the "push and pull" effects of form and color by St. Paul teachers Alexander Masley and Cameron Booth, both of whom had studied with Hofmann in Munich. In 1947 Johnson moved to New York and became one of the first downtown loft-dwellers. He shared a lower East Side studio with Larry Rivers and attended some of Hofmann's New York classes. Rents were cheap but Johnson was broke much of the time as he tried to support his painting through a variety of part-time jobs, including teaching art. In 1950, he and Philip Pearlstein shared a studio space; Lester's wife, Jo, had introduced the two artists at a time when she and Pearlstein were studying art history at New York University. Johnson's various studios, on the Bowery and elsewhere, were always one flight up with a view of Manhattan's active street life. No wonder, for almost 50 years now, street scenes have been a dominant part of his art.

During the early 1950s, Johnson became associated with the Hansa Gallery Group, the 10th Street Co-op Movement, and had his first one-man show at Artists Gallery. Johnson became a member of the famous 8th Street "Club" which met weekly. There, at the Cedar Bar, and at openings he became acquainted with artists who were to play historic roles in Irving Sandler's classic

LESTER JOHNSON (RIGHT) WITH WILLEM DE KOONING
PHOTO BY DOROTHY BESKIND

book of the period, *The Triumph of American Painting*. At the Club, an exchange of ideas often turned heated. Johnson became a target for dogmatically abstract painters because of his persistently figurative work. "You're a good painter," they would admit, "too bad you're on the wrong side of the fence." Johnson called to mind his long experience with action painting, a format associated with non-figurative abstract expressionism in its heyday. In an interview in 1988 he said, "I thought it very quickly became a cliché, . . . it was too easy, they could make the



LESTER JOHNSON, "BOWERY SILHOUETTES," 1963

drips, the gestures—it was so beautiful and everybody loved them but they were empty. I was into human content so I used it, and I found it a very, very exciting thing to do. I did a lot of paintings at the time where you can hardly see the figure, but it's there."

Johnson adopted the working techniques of action painting. He used a great deal of paint. A tube of oil paint might be expended in seconds as he, like Pollock, physically projected himself into the work. The images that Johnson produced were not decorative, but stubbornly confrontational: oversize, brooding, thickly encrusted, scarred surfaces that were alive with recognizable objects and figures. Even today, few realize how difficult Johnson's choice of subject was in an adamantly pro-abstract art climate. Sculptor George Segal recalled, "The Abstract Expressionists were legislating any reference to the physical world totally out of art. This was outrageous to us." Rebellion came naturally to Lester Johnson. He would tenaciously remain outside the mainstream. Nonetheless, he produced a body of work that influenced several generations of younger painters and confounded an art establishment in need of neat categorization. The most common phrase used to describe Johnson: "One of the most respected and influential second-generation Abstract Expressionists." Indeed, he remains so. In fact, it is hard to find a serious painter of any persuasion who does not respect and follow the remarkable evolution of Johnson's art. He is one of the few painters whose work holds significance for both abstract and figurative artists.

In 1954 Johnson hitchhiked to Provincetown. He described the experience in an exhibition catalog, "The Sun Gallery," published by the Provincetown Art Association and Museum in 1981: "I found a place and Jo came up afterward. There were many spaces that had been converted into beautiful studios close to town. One summer I worked at Pablo's, a Spanish restaurant. I painted all day and washed dishes at night. Another summer, Mary Oliver hired me as a bartender for her restaurant/inn. Jimmy Simmons, a poet, gave me my first job. He had this unique little restaurant, The House of Art. It was self-service. People came in, made their own orange juice, toast or hamburger, then they had to figure out what they owed. There was a bucket hanging where you left money. People were honest. Simmons would go off and leave me there; I organized things, directed traffic and cleaned up. At night there were poetry readings. That's where I met Dominic Falcone and Yvonne Anderson. They were interested in my work." The next summer, Johnson had his first of five exhibitions and became the only artist to show annually at the Sun Gallery, 393 Commercial Street in Provincetown. The space, founded by Falcone and Anderson and devoted to "new voices," debuted in 1955, lasted five summers then disappeared into P-town folklore. Anderson and Falcone supported the operation on meager salaries and with youthful enthusiasm. Anderson recalled, "Shows closed on midnight Sunday. We drew our orange curtains until the opening of the next show—nine o'clock on Monday night. The artist or artists would paint their names on the window before the opening—by then people would be crowding the street waiting for the moment when the curtains would open."

Paint dripped freely down the glass from Lester Johnson's signature each summer the Sun Gallery survived. "A town crier announced the exhibitions," he said. "I remember Hans Hofmann came to some of my openings. Dom and Yvonne had good-natured arguments with him because he worked abstractly." Other figurative artists who showed at the avant-garde space included: Red Grooms, Mary and Robert Frank, Alex Katz, Allan Kaprow, Marcia Marcus, Dody and Jan Müller, Lucas Samaras, Bob Thompson, Jay Milder, and Tony Vevers. Most of these young artists had studied with Hofmann and shared an unease with the perceived orthodoxy of abstract painting.

By the mid-'50s, Johnson's resolute commitment to the figure and forceful imagery announced a decisive breakthrough, setting an example for attentive young painters. Several important art critics noticed. James R. Mellow said, "Johnson has made himself one of the masters of contemporary figure painting, in a style that is unequivocally his own." Harold Rosenberg agreed, "Lester Johnson has drawn a mysterious, unpredictable and moving image. One could not have arrived at this image through analyzing society or through analyzing painting. It was brought into being by the act of painting itself, and it could emerge only as painting."

Johnson would enlarge the scope of abstract expressionism, going beyond de Kooning's "Women" and Pollock's late black-and-white figurative imagery. Stanislavski's comment, "There are no accidents in art, only the fruits of long labor," is applicable to Johnson's work. As an action painter he learned to exploit accidental events, developing an approach that was neither preconceived not arbitrary. Freedom of action and spontaneity encounter self-imposed artistic conditions that focus Johnson's aesthetic energies. His world is one in which freedom and structure, action and limitations are essential and interdependent.

"I have no interest in balance, because balance is static," Johnson says. "It is the dynamic quality of life that I try to reflect in my paint-

ings." Not simply movement, but the nature force, the continuum that interested Pollock, Tobey, and others in the New York School, is articulated as figure painting. Johnson's paintings clearly go beyond the non-continuous works of de Kooning, who despite his other departures, maintains the traditional isolation of the figure within his compositions. Lester Johnson's motif of the human figure is for him what the square was for Josef Albers. His images may take the form of archetypes or individuals, but they are variations on the structural theme—the human object. These figures defy the familiar rules, optical facts are forgotten in order to examine psychological realities, two images can occupy a space, structure is dictated by the internal necessities of the work, and an aesthetic unity is forged from multiple contradictions.

In 1960 and 1962 Johnson showed at P-town's HCE Gallery; it would be 34 years before another three-letter enterprise—the UFO Gallery—mounted another Johnson exhibition on the Cape, opening July 19th this summer. Johnson reminisced, "The Provincetown scene was all music, writing, and painting. Jo and I wanted to build a summer place there but when we had a child it was out of the question." The Johnsons eventually built a summer home in East Hampton where Lester worked and developed friendships with de Kooning, Rosenberg, and others. "Provincetown would have been more fun," Johnson said. "It was much more of an artists' community than East Hampton. People were always walking on the street at night. It was very social. In East Hampton there were parties but only by invitation, a completely different spirit."

By the time op and pop art burst upon the scene in the early 1960s, Johnson had developed a solid reputation with five successful exhibitions at New York's Zabriskie Gallery. In 1964, a teaching position at Yale University brought Lester, Jo, their daughter, Leslie, and son, Tony,from New York to a spacious home and studio in Connecticut. In teaching figure drawing, Johnson did everything possible to shake up preconceived notions. He had students draw while approximating the model's pose, sometimes actually jostling them as they worked at their easels. "I tried to make them realize that painting is a physical act," he said.

That physicality is evident in most of Johnson's art. His 1996 exhibition at UFO Gallery not only includes a cross-section of drawings and paintings from different periods, but a striking portfolio of six early woodcut prints titled "Man in Woodcut, 1953-1957," done when Provincetown provided nourishing summer escapes from New York. We see the roots of the artist's iconography in these powerful graphic images. The directness and sheer physicality of the medium no doubt had great appeal for him. Compelling heads emerge, activated figures struggle for concrete form within a dense calligraphic field. From the earliest dark and somber works, like "Bowery Silhouettes," through his light-drenched, more recent canvases, Johnson continues to take considerable risk while rejecting formulas.

"Street Scene with Four Men" is packed with action and counter-action, pushing and pulling that oscillate on a flattened picture plane. There is a freedom from intellectual constraint as parts of the body are seen in motion, interchangeable and impossible. In this work, as with others, the persuasive images transcend the everyday events which inspire them. There is an atmosphere of willing submission in each participant's frenzied struggle to accomplish nothing at all. The men go through the empty gestures of modern life in close proximity to each other, passing but never really communicating. The painting is simultaneously representational and non-objective, and at least as much meaning can be drawn from the abstract structure as from the literal content.

"City Scene" presents another panorama of people, the least restrained of whom are Johnson's explosively physical women. Exuberant color and strenuous gestures are typical of the voluptuous women who bring a heightened energy to much of the work of the past two decades. Varied, strongly patterned fabrics have given the artist another vehicle for his color, which is now more assertive than at any point in his development. "City Scene" has its own momentum, which does not allow us to rest with any particular detail. Instead, we are drawn into an hypnotic, syncopated dance of life.

Never has Lester Johnson looked so much like an old master as in the inescapable contrast of his work to the vehement painting of "neo-expressionists" like David Salle and Julian Schnabel. Clearly, Johnson was not only decades ahead of his time, but also in a class of his own. Since his first exhibition in 1951, his work stands as a precursor of much that has become a central concern in today's art scene. The focus of his late paintings continues to be the urban crowd in its kaleidoscopic intensity. Men and women move with the collective bustle of the city in an enigmatic, contemporary drama of epic proportion. There are no heroes or villains, no good or evil, in this agitated and strangely familiar world. It is possible for even the most resistant viewer to somehow join the cast of characters and become part of the narrative in the artist's grand parade. Lester Johnson's animated men and women, with all their nervous energy, yield themselves only gradually to analysis and will no doubt be reinterpreted for many years to come. His largest achievement is perhaps the degree to which each of his works is still able to convince us that the act of painting is relevant and vital. ■

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