

Leroy Johnson

MARGOT SAMEL

In these houses, nothing dwells but nightmares. They were built by Leroy Johnson (1937–2022), who was employed in Philadelphia as a social worker and educator. Because he was self-taught, he is usually labeled an outsider artist. Yet I came away from this exhibition at Margot Samel convinced that his work critically engages some of the



Leroy Johnson,
4 Given, ca. 2010–15,
mixed media, found
objects, collage,
9½ × 8 × 8".

central questions pertaining to modernist sculpture—and that the tradition will be impoverished if it does not reckon with his achievement.

Because they represent architecture, Johnson's shoebox-size constructions engage the gallery as a spatial enclosure. They often include openings—windows and doors—that allow one to see the cubic volumes inside. As I peered into these imaginary rooms while standing in a real one, I felt aware of the space around me. To me, this self-referentiality evokes the strong modernist tradition—once traced in these pages by Brian O'Doherty in his three-part 1976 essay, "Inside the White Cube"—concerned with breaking the usually self-evident conventions of the gallery by ambiguating literal and fictional space.

Johnson's interests were more targeted, however. In his works, space is not generic but is specific to the home—domestic territory functions as both the subject and the structure of his art. This preoccupation places him in a line of sculptors running from Kurt Schwitters to Louise Nevelson and Betye Saar, who have blurred the line between the domains of residing and exhibiting, rendering them both familiar and strange.

Johnson's works do not merely join that tradition, however, but reconfigure its emphasis on *interiority* as a configuration of experience and form. Many of his sculptures sit not directly on the shelf but on a base layer of wood or cardboard with slightly larger dimensions. These vernacular pedestals undermine the houses' apparent autonomy, the idea they could exist apart from their spatial and social context. Against the self-enclosure of a four-sided building, they connote arbitrary excerpption, as though a fictional stretch of pavement could have been wider or narrower. This characteristic fuses an artistic and political point. Domestic space cannot be walled away from the outside world. Interior and exterior combine into an uncanny Möbius strip.

In many places, the built walls of Johnson's houses seem to disappear into the collaged photographs they bear. This occurs most jarringly where the artist places pictures of a ground floor onto an upper story of his sculpture. In *4 Given*, ca. 2010–15, one such view hovers above an image of men praying, taken from Richard Wright's 1941 photo book *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. The sizes of these pictures are completely uncalibrated, the congregants' heads larger than both the depicted and plastic doorways elsewhere on the structure. In such juxtapositions, the house becomes less a motif than a medium.

Elsewhere, however, Johnson coordinated the collaged images with the figures around them. In *You Been Had*, ca. 2000–2005, the artist pasted a label for Energizer batteries inside one of the house's walls, sized for a human hand. But in the context of its placement, the tag appears scaled to the dimensions of the fictional building. It looks like a poster, thanks in no small part to the words JOHN BROWN scrawled on its surface like graffiti. We can intuit the scale of the fictional space not only via features such as windows and doors, but also by the paperdoll cutouts that populate the street surrounding the house. They impart a sense that the world is inhabited, lived in, such that the buildings' apparent decrepitude registers as evidence of wear and tear. The lack of windowpanes, for instance, comes across not as a feature of the sculptures—Johnson chose not to construct them—but as an aspect of the homes themselves, as though no glass could weather the life of this street.

Knowing that Johnson worked in Philadelphia, I could not help but see in the scorched palette and burned-seeming structures evocations of the 1985 MOVE bombing, in which police evicted a Black-liberation group by dropping bombs on a residential street. Johnson thus renders his houses uncanny by both evoking and denying a feeling of habitability. He portrays the domestic as a fold within public space, privacy as an illusory carve-out from the social world.

—Harmon Siegel