

Leroy Johnson

Margot Samel is pleased to present Leroy Johnson, an exhibition of sculptures from the artist's estate. Johnson exhibited extensively in Philadelphia, the city where he lived and worked for over eight decades. This is the first solo exhibition of Johnson's work in New York.

With a documentarian's eye but a poet's gaze, Leroy Johnson (1937-2022) surveyed the pleasures, hardships, and contradictions within the Philadelphia neighborhoods where he spent his life. Through his occupations as a social worker, rehab counselor, teacher of disabled youth, and school administrator, Johnson pierced the fabric of collective human experience more deeply than most.

This exhibition contains a selection of Johnson's house sculptures, tender yet maximalist assemblages that meld his practices of painting, ceramic, collage, and photography. They are a love letter to the urban landscape. As an African American artist who witnessed the civil rights movement and the impact of racist policies on communities he loved, Johnson took particular pleasure in depicting the richness of Black life. He represented the care within communities while refusing to turn his gaze from intense poverty, racism, and gentrification.

Rather than literal reproductions of buildings, Johnson's house sculptures have a totemic power: they are conceptual sites where the existential self meets the broader forces of society, where psychology and culture merge, where ethics and aesthetics collide. Constructed largely from materials found during his daily commutes, these sculptures are replete with the textures of reality. Johnson represented the city as an accretion of marks. Intentional declarations graffitied on walls hold equal weight as the subtle beauty of the residue of life, of signage and surfaces worn and sunbleached past legibility—their degradation becomes, through Johnson's attention, painterly abstraction authored not by a single artistic hand but by the vast social forces at play.

These sculptures are labyrinths of referent and possibility. They hold such multiplicities of interpretation that to define them simply is a futile task—better to let oneself be tossed into this vibrant fray. News announcements of war and the AIDS epidemic are emblazoned on walls even as clay sculptures of birds line the eaves, sweetly sitting. A spray of fluorescent pink feathers crowns a rooftop. Pasted upon a wall is an image of the blues musician Robert Johnson, whose legendary deal with the devil at the crossroads so inspired Leroy Johnson that he once named an exhibition for it. Here is an equation he saw scrawled on a wall, and loved: "1 CROSS + 3 NAILS = 4 GIVEN."

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Johnson often described himself as an outsider artist, both in the colloquial meaning of “self taught,” but also as a declaration of his position outside existing artistic circles, sometimes by choice, other times through exclusion. He was a mentor to many, but peer to few. Johnson held a monastic devotion to his practice. Within this exhibition is the fruit of that labor, that lifetime of self-referential thinking and experimentation. His was an alchemist’s touch that transformed the dust of the street into rich marrow.

—Olivia Jia

Leroy Johnson (1937-2022, Philadelphia, PA) has exhibited widely, with past exhibitions at Villanova University Art Gallery (1983), the Camden County Historical Society (1990), Cheltenham Center for the Arts (1996), Gloucester County College (1998), The Clay Studio in Philadelphia (1997, 1999, and 2000), the Art Gallery at City Hall, Philadelphia (1998, 2015, 2017, and 2019), the African Jazz Museum, Kansas City (2002), List Gallery at Swathmore College (2004), Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens (2011), and Tiger Strikes Asteroid (2021). He has received grants from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, the Independence Foundation, and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Johnson received a Masters of Human Services from Lincoln University (1986-88), and was a 2014 Pew Fellow at the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage in Pennsylvania. He is in the collections of the American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona, California and the Clay Studio in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was a resident artist for several community-based arts projects, including for Ile Ife, The Village of Arts and Humanities, Taller Puertoqueno, and The Church of the Advocate, St. Francis Academy, in Baltimore and was the inaugural resident artist at Art Barn in Amaranth, Amaranth, PA in 2017. Recently, he held solo exhibitions at Mercer County Community College (2023), West Windsor, NJ; and at The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, PA (2022).

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