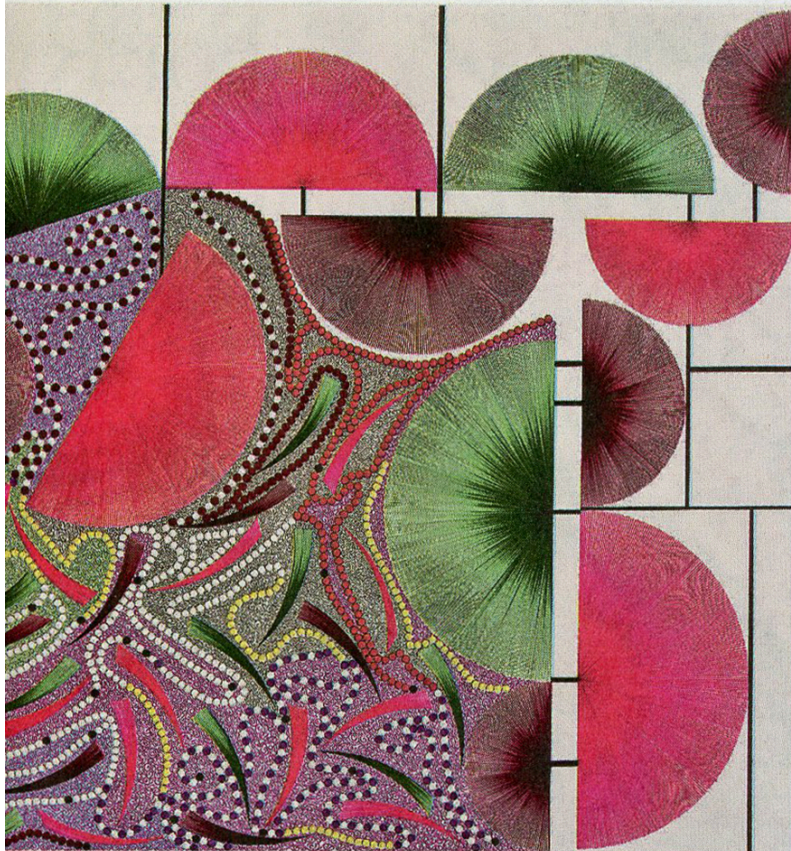


Galleries



“6/15/20” (2020), above, combine geometric forms, intricate textures and color. The drawings in the current show were mostly made last summer.

‘RAY JOHNSON: WHAT A DUMP’

Through May 22. David Zwirner, 525 West 19th Street, Manhattan, 212-727-2070, davidzwirner.com.

The Ray Johnson show now at David Zwirner — one of the largest such surveys in recent years — includes more than 50 of the trademark collages Johnson made between the 1950s and his suicide in 1995. They are lovely little things, heir to the 1920s collages of Hannah Höch and Max Ernst but with more whimsy and nostalgia — they often nod to stars from Hollywood’s Golden Age. (“What a dump,” in this show’s title, is a favorite quote of Johnson’s from a Bette Davis

movie.) Almost all the collages are meticulously signed and dated in Johnson’s tiny script, as though to proclaim, “Here be art.”

By the standards of the art being made around them — Pop appropriation, minimalist sculpture, object-free conceptualism — these collages can seem backward-looking. But to criticize their aesthetics, or even to adore them, misses what matters most about these works, and the point that the curator, Jarrett Earnest, makes in this exhibition.

Johnson sent out many collages, or at least photocopies of them, to friends and acquaintances around the world, in the classic example of what is known as mail art. The true medium of Johnson’s best work may not be the paper and glue of his collages but the human connections his

mailings let him forge: He often invited people to rework his images and return them, or to pass them along to others. This exhibition is as much about those connections as about any objects that incited them.

Once you received a Johnson, you could count yourself a member of his New York Correspondence School (his spelling), which became a kind of virtual clubhouse for creators who didn’t find an easy fit in the art world — often because, like Johnson, they were gay. The three partners in General Idea, the queer art collective, were eager members of the Johnson “club,” as was the gay poet John Giorno. This show includes work by them and other correspondents. (An unaffiliated exhibition at Off Paradise gallery on Walker Street presents more artists of a “Johnsonian turn of mind.”)

I like to think of Johnson’s lovely collages as the secret objects kids craft in their clubhouse, to affirm their membership. The care that goes into making those objects is a sign of how much that membership matters.

BLAKE GOPNIK

TR ERICSSON

Through April 25. Totah, 183 Stanton Street, Manhattan; 212-582-6111, davidtotah.com.

As we enter the second year of the pandemic, one of the feelings foremost in my mind is grief. How do we process the losses that continue to accumulate? TR Ericsson’s solo show “Pale Fires” offers a moving example.

Ericsson’s exhibition is not about the pandemic; it’s about his mother, Sue, who died by suicide in 2003. The artist has amassed an archive of items related to her life that form the raw material for his ongoing series “Crackle & Drag.” The show at Totah is com-

posed entirely of these works, the gallery freighted with absence and loss.

Ericsson often reproduces family photographs and documents in silk-screen, but personalizes the process by mixing in unusual, symbolic materials — like his mother’s funerary ashes or alcohol — with more conventional ones like ink. “Sue 63 (Nicotine)” (2020/21) is a portrait of her as a poised young woman, rendered in ghostly, sepia-toned nicotine. Many of the images are hazy or blurred, as if they were memories just out of reach.

“Letter (March 3, 1994)” blows up a three-page missive from Sue, and in doing so provides a glimpse of the drama of her existence, as well as her voice — which forms the soundtrack of the film “Crackle & Drag,” via recorded conversations and voice mail messages left for her son. It’s unfortunate that the film, which is screening only once a week or by appointment, isn’t better integrated into the exhibition, because it resonates with an emotional complexity that breaks through the cool conceptualism of the project. Portraying Sue both intimately and from a distance, it is a harrowing elegy.

JILLIAN STEINHAUER



TR Ericsson’s “Sue 63 (Nicotine),” 2020/21, a sepia-toned portrait of the artist’s mother.

ON ESTATE

g.
M. C.
, Mon-
eva-

TOTAH