

Noble, Kathy, "Larry Johnson: Raven Row," *Artforum*, Reviews, November 2015, Vol. 54, No. 3, p. 315-316

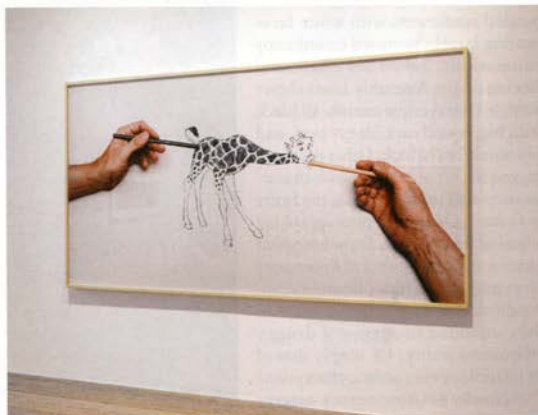
## Larry Johnson

RAVEN ROW

*Untitled (Raven Row Giraffe)*, 2015, is a wall-spanning photograph of a cartoon giraffe with an image of a pencil inserted in its asshole as it sucks on another—the pencils manipulated by images of two human hands. The animal's pouty lips are clasped tightly, its eyes popping out. Another photograph, *Untitled (Ass)*, 2007, depicts a line-drawn donkey whose anus is being poked by a pencil eraser as it makes dopey, sexy, come-hither eyes at the hand that wields the writing implement. In *Untitled (Kangaroo)*, 2007, a female marsupial has a pencil sticking erect from her pouch, which she grips firmly with both hands, arms bent, mouth open wide with joy.

These works punctuated "On Location," a survey of the Los Angeles-based artist Larry Johnson's work from the early 1990s to the present, curated by Bruce Hainley and Anthony Hudek. The unabashed sexual pleasure enjoyed by these creatures, each receiving a wry conceptual goosing from the artist (yet one with no discernible climax, in contrast to Andy Warhol's film *Blow Job*, 1964), is only mildly diluted by their status as cartoons. "On Location" included a diverse range of Johnson's output mainly constructed from found text and imagery—collaged and photographed in earlier works, later manipulated digitally.

Beyond the humor, some works allude to a kind of ghostly space, something between presence and absence—for instance, *Untitled (Projector)*, 2007, a black-and-white rendering of a projector next to a stack of papers whose phantomlike beam into a void of black was added



Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Raven Row Giraffe)*, 2015, C-print, wood, 5' 5" x 10' 8 3/4" x 2 3/4".

digitally; *Untitled (Copier)*, 2007, a similarly created image of a photocopier illuminated by its own light; and *Untitled (The Thinking Man's Judy Garland)*, 1999–2000, a white-on-white image of the words of the subtitle, capitalized but barely perceptible.

Myriad references and stories surround Johnson and his work; the accompanying book *Commie Pinko Guy* is both interpretive and critical, and includes new and reprinted texts mixing art history, pop culture, Hollywood, sex, and queer identities and lives in L.A. Hainley's essay—in the form of a letter responding to Lisa Lapinski's preceding essay—discusses Johnson's use of Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine's collaboration "A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything" at James Turcotte Gallery in LA in 1981. Lawler and Levine's exhibition invitation took the form of a card with that eponymous text plus the statement HIS GESTURE MOVED US TO TEARS collaged onto it. The photo of this pasteup became Johnson's *Untitled (Moved to Tears)*, 2010. Hainley explains that Turcotte was not only a gallerist but also a writer whose fictional works had previously concealed his homosexuality. However, in 1988, he was diagnosed with AIDS; before his death five years later, he began to write openly about his experiences. Hainley thus wonders if it was Turcotte's life story that originally "moved" Lawler and Levine, then Johnson, then himself, in a chain of affect.

Johnson is often described as an "artist's artist." Yet his works are as blatant as they are oblique. His cartoon animals and pencil play seem to imply that the real pleasure of life comes from enacting whatever we feel and think—and that this stuff might just fill the empty void.

—Kathy Noble

Noble, Kathy, "Larry Johnson: Raven Row," *Artforum*, Reviews, November 2015, Vol. 54, No. 3, p. 315-316