Knight, Christopher, “Art Review: ‘Larry Johnson’ at UCLA Hammer Museum,” *LATimes.com*, June 30, 2009

Larry Johnson was still a graduate student at California Institute of the Arts when he made “Untitled (Movie Stars on Clouds),” 1982/84, a group of six celestial color photographs with the names of celluloid actors floating in cumulus splendor. They're installed in a row at the entrance to his survey exhibition at the UCLA Hammer Museum — high up on the wall, so that you literally look up to the stars in the pale blue sky — and they function as a remarkable touchstone for the 60 works that follow.

Celebrity culture is Johnson's artistic leitmotif, although not necessarily in the way we conventionally think of it. His work is not especially interested in show-biz media antics, paparazzi pile-ups, the psychological crush of fan-dom or even serious Hollywood work.

Instead, his graphically sleek photographs regard the degree to which contemporary identity and experience are simultaneously reflected in and fabricated by the media's hall of mirrors, as surely as it was once honed by church and state. And despite all the campy jokes, double entendres, cartoon characters, pastel hues, bright primary colors and crisp graphic designs on abundant display in the work he has made over the last 25 years, the exhibition is relentlessly bleak.

Cynicism is Johnson's main artistic “ism,” although in this instance that's not

necessarily a bad thing. He has remade American artists' post-World War II claims that the greatest art embodies a profound knowledge of the tragic and the timeless. Unlike those counterculture bohemians, however, he has simply located those truths within the mundane fabric of everyday life.

Johnson's “Movie Stars on Clouds” (all his works are untitled, with descriptive subtitles appended) are patently fake. Cotton tufts on pale blue construction paper were photographed, with actors' names printed across them — Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, James Dean, Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo. The printed words cast shadows against the fake backgrounds, transforming language into something physical. The word is made flesh.

The first three actors starred in 1961's “The Misfits,” an old-style Hollywood epic about the end of the mythic West, while the last three starred in 1956's “Rebel Without a Cause,” the slightly earlier embodiment of the new Hollywood and its orientation toward the crack-up of troubled youth. Representing a fitful and tumultuous period of cultural transition, during which Johnson was born (in 1959 in Long Beach), all six celebrities met sad and, in some cases, violent deaths.

The four men were also the ambiguous subjects of homosexual scandal-rumors, from Gable's purported work as a hustler in his struggling-actor youth to Mineo's murder, which gossips speculated came at a hustler's hands. Johnson's otherwise sunny “Movie Stars on Clouds” enshrines forbidden sex, brutal violence and inevitable death, all as the AIDS epidemic was casting its lengthening shadow in the early 1980s.

It's worth remembering too that the period also coincided with art's international explosion, when for the first time young artists were being manufactured as instant celebrities. As celebrity seeped into every nook and cranny of contemporary life, Johnson's prescient piece overlaid a raw and scary transition in Hollywood's popular culture with one that was then unfolding in art culture.

The Hammer exhibition, organized by adjunct curator Russell Ferguson, is presented in a very loose chronology. One intriguing feature of “Movie Stars on Clouds” that plays out more fully as the exhibition unfolds is the virtual absence of people's faces. Texts are instead abundant. Johnson at first fabricated his celebrity photographs like commercial mock-ups and, after about 1990, digitally manufactured them.

Hand-drawn cartoon animals do turn up — a goat, the ancient symbol of Dionysian reverie famously given a distinctly gay subtext in Robert Rauschenberg's Combine painting “Monogram”; a mule, the infertile beast of burden used for its more vulgar connotation as an ass; a giraffe, solitary long-necked freak of the animal kingdom. Sometimes Johnson's finger gets in front of the camera's lens, simultaneously suggesting both the omnipotence of the artist and artistic failure.

Elsewhere his arm and hand enter the photographed drawing, holding an eraser. The artist as potential destroyer merges with the conventional, even sentimental idea of the artist as earthly equivalent of the divine creator. Johnson italicizes this distinction by positioning his arm and hand in poses straight out of Michelangelo. These works seem determined to obliterate stuffy and entrenched formulas, which celebrity wants to enshrine and perpetuate.

And today, especially as we drown in a sea of reality television where stars-on-clouds are just the regular people living next door, celebrity has entered a weird dimension. It's simultaneously distinctive and ordinary, unique and typical, exalted and routine.

“Nobody wants to see a movie with Madonna in it,” one work cheekily (and no doubt correctly) asserts. Johnson doubles a religious connotation with a secular one, printing the slogan across a sexually suggestive Popsicle stick. The phrase is deftly broken into two parts — “nobody wants” and “to see a movie with Madonna in it” — at precisely the place where the phallic treat has been licked clean.

Pictorially, the most direct influence on Johnson's art is likely the Pop word-paintings of Edward Ruscha. An iconoclastic undercurrent of Catholic purity and damnation courses through both artists' work.

The influence of William Leavitt, Douglas Huebler, Richard Prince and even Sister Corita, the rebellious 1960s “art nun,” is also felt. Homosexual artists like Michelangelo, Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Ellsworth Kelly and Andy Warhol are repeatedly referenced in his designs.

Yet, if there's one person whose work is critical to Johnson's output it is the

influential American commercial artist Paul Rand (1914-1996). You can see it in the punchy colored lettering on jet-black backgrounds in several late 1980s works, as well as in the use of found-logos from storefronts that derive from early 20th century Constructivist motifs. That's just the sort of thing Rand adapted for mass consumption.

It's also there in the multicolored stripes backing two funny 1994 works — stripes that come straight from Rand's 1974 packaging design for the first personal computer. One is a personals ad from a Mensa-geek, the other a visually warped text that reads, “Why say high school when you can say Choate?” A self-taught, working-class Brooklyn native, Rand was most famous for shaping the commercial look of IBM, the first in a slew of information technology companies that have transformed popular culture.

“The problem of the artist,” Rand wrote in 1985, “is to defamiliarize the ordinary.” Johnson has taken that advice to heart, both in the functional graphic design technique he employs and in the celebrity degradation he pictures.

One of my favorite Johnson works, unfortunately not in the survey, eviscerates the common notion of art's high-mindedness. “Noblesse, Oh Please,” the 1994 picture whines, punning the let-'em-eat-cake condescension of noblesse oblige on a pair of cheerleader pennants. The anti-democratic obligations of generosity associated with high rank or birth get deftly shredded.

Johnson stopped working in 2001 — the show's otherwise informative catalog does not discuss why — then started again in 2007, skipped 2008 and has made but one photograph this year. An edition of 50 (most of the earlier works are rarefied editions of two or three), the newest photograph is particularly devastating.

A bungalow picture-window is quickly sketched on a field of faded paper, with a few scraggly shrubs scribbled in the lower left-hand corner. On the window sill stands the familiar outline of an Emmy award.

Wings held high, her body straining forward with an atom held aloft, Emmy recalls Tinker Bell, the jealous pixie who glowed brightest for Peter Pan. Johnson's trophy is precariously balanced, as if poised between a neighborhood

display of self-satisfied pride and an imminent swan dive off a suicide ledge.

Titled “Achievement: SW Corner, Glendale + Silverlake Blvds.,” it's a heart-breaker. It is also a thoroughly bereft picture of our conflicted time.

-- Christopher Knight

"Larry Johnson," UCLA Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Tue., Wed., Fri., Sat.; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thu.; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sun. Through Sept. 6. $7. (310) 443-7000.