

Rimanelli, David, in conversation with Larry Johnson, "Larry Johnson: Highlights of Concentrated Camp," *Larry Johnson*, Los Angeles, and Munich: Hammer Museum, DelMonico Books, an imprint of Prestel Publishing, 2009, pp. 90-96

**LARRY JOHNSON:
HIGHLIGHTS
OF CONCENTRATED CAMP**

INTERVIEW BY DAVID RIMANELLI

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David Rimanelli: Well, I'm just going to start out with some really interviewy questions: how did you arrive at your characteristic method?

Larry Johnson: By not studying photography. By never, ever studying photo techniques.

DR: You started out as a painter. What did you paint?

LJ: Yes. I always liked pictures but never liked "photography." What did I paint? I did repetitive images, over and over.

DR: À la [Andy] Warhol or [Gerhard] Richter?

LJ: Egyptian landscapes and smiling women. Waitresses and nurses. I liked women in uniform.

DR: As I'm asking the obligatory questions, what's your relation to Warhol?

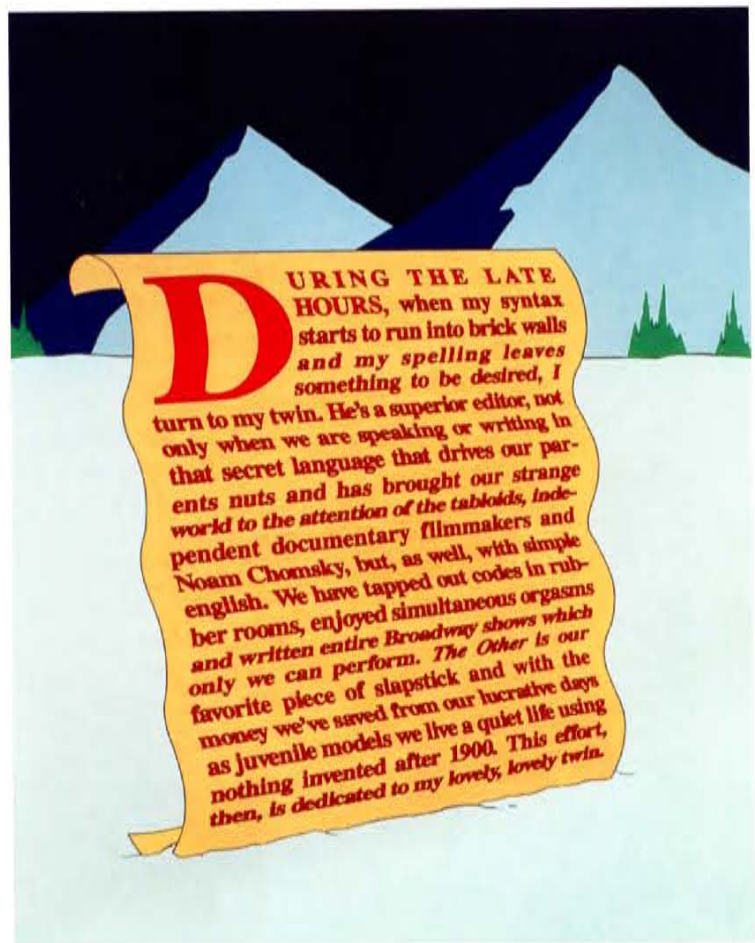
LJ: I don't know. Really all there is to say at this date is you either like him or you don't. That's enough. I like him. I'm glad I'm old enough to realize he really is dead.

DR: Your pictures now are kind of abstractions: one could come in and read them or just look at them as pattern and decoration. This last show [at 303 Gallery, New York] seemed to have even more of that dichotomy going on.

LJ: Or one could take another approach and say that the reason abstract painting exists is that people inherently like to look at nothing. So I'm above reproach. I'm only human.

DR: Yesterday you told me that you were worried that there was a sort of covert charge to the texts you use. You wanted them to be as vacant as they looked.

LJ: Well, when they originally existed, I think there was that covertness, a codifying. I would love to eliminate that, if I could. I certainly don't want to imbue anything with *more* meaning. Heaven forbid.



Untitled (A Quiet Life), 1990

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John-John and Bobby

John-John was nineteen and built like a brick shit house and had nipples as round and rare as Kennedy half dollars. He was tan. He mumbled and many times Bobby had heard him tell the story, toke, tell the story: John-John was four and the nameless numbered thousands or hundreds as the pitch of the telling rose above and then dropped below the ooze and ah's of whoever happened to be listening.

The gist was the same: Somewhere on the planet these nameless wandered and knew in their hearts they owed their very lives to the four-year old who had pulled the lever, broke the current, blew the whistle, sounded whatever alarm to divert the trains and boats and planes from what surely would have been the worst land-sea-air disaster ever. The innocence with which John-John recalled his early heroism was matched by the innocence of his original action. A child's game, a harmless prank and the thanks of a multitude.

Bobby was older. At twenty-two he had seen and done more than his young friend. Sometimes it seemed much, much more. Since he was John-John's age Bobby had lived a nightmare of missing moments, of unaccounted hours and dread. The broken headlight on his van, the dents, the bruises. The scratches on his face. Waking up in his bed fully dressed. These things he never shared, and once when a headline hit too close, he knew he never would. So Bobby saw himself: loveable day-tripper and night-stalking goon.

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John-John and Bobby, Inc.

The first tape was rough. Slightly out of focus images became tougher to discern as Bobby fumbled with a hair-trigger zoom. What could be made out was John-John, naked, in a masturbatory frenzy. Behind him moved a blur of people against the bright fluorescence of shopping mall signage. The tape lasted about three minutes, beginning with a fumbled effort to locate the figure in the center of the viewer and ending with a rapid zoom and close-up of John-John's ejaculating dick.

Each tape had the same premise: John-John would star, first as a solo performer and later with other hustler-boy co-stars. Bobby was cameraman. The location was always public with opportunities for rapid getaways. Fucking, sucking and masturbating in two's and three's, John-John and Bobby made their way through some of the best parking lots, shopping malls and business districts of Los Angeles.

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DR: I guess that has to do with whether the text is viewed as being attached to you or your own experience, or whether it's just utter codified nonsense culled from wherever.

LJ: It's impossible to get away from. For some viewers it's great because it has nothing to do with the artist and "what fabulous appropriation," or for others it's fabulous because it's about the artist spilling his guts. There's no middle ground. Perhaps the best thing would be for people to examine their own reasons for liking the same stories I do. Maybe that's enough.

DR: So the best way to describe your relationship with your texts is that you like them?

LJ: Yes.

DR: Stories about the Kennedys, about Bette Davis and her daughter . . .

LJ: But it's not about Bette Davis and it's not about her daughter. It's about any reader, any daughter. Or perhaps son. In these cases the fragments are chosen for the universal or non-specific qualities of their confessions and complaints. I am the author of first-person fictions.

DR: Conversely, does that mean that the stories that you did write might as well have been written by someone else?

LJ: No, I wrote those. But I did learn so much from these other young authors: B. D. Hyman, Nancy Sinatra, Christina Crawford.

DR: Is your work post-literate?

LJ: My job as an editor is to cram a big story into a small space: to forego the short story, to forego anything but the blurb. The idea is to maximize the attention span the reader/viewer has for the work of art, which I imagine to be equal, say, to that of a daily horoscope or beauty tip.

DR: Let's talk about your "Fag Show" of 1989.

LJ: I had found all this pre-AIDS pornography. There seemed to always be this threat of danger, these allusions to death. For example, one story had these guys in a sixty-nine and one was passing a joint while the other was passing poppers, and the poppers spilled and ignited, and one guy's face was burned and so was the other guy's cock. In another this guy has sex with a merman and then he turns into one through a sort of merman virus and so has to go live with the other merman in some strange non-stop undersea orgy. So it was my desire to restate these themes of personal risk, violence, and never-ending nightlife, not as some allegorical AIDS romp but as revolutionary acts presented in a high camp style.

DR: Let's talk about gay art.

LJ: Let's talk about gay dollars. The resuscitation of Tom of Finland as a "folk artist" spelled dollars. He's the Grandma Moses or the Rev. Howard Finster of gay art.

DR: The recent recuperation of gay art by the art market could seem like the fashion for primitivism in the twenties—novelty, exotica.

LJ: There is a certain bad-faith aspect to the notion of gay separatist work once it enters the market. It's like it needs that straight validation. So it's more about the straight dollars than gay dollars. It's like when Marilyn sings that "No, No, No...No!" to the men in her "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" number. You know if you don't really have a place in the world, you can stand tall at Tiffany's. That's the form of that attitude: Marilyn Monroe in that pink dress.

DR: Let's talk about gay dollars.

LJ: During my training as a young postmodern, there was this concept that the rapid fragmentation of culture was accompanied by the collapse of meaning and



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Installation view of *Untitled (Your Name Here / Jesus B. Christ)*, 1990, Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1990



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that previously disenfranchised groups would be able to take part in a kind of cultural grunion hunt, reclaiming history and language and remaking them in their own image. Some of these ideals get trampled very early. One of the ways I would like to see my work functioning as "of interest to gays" is as camp. Camp is an area in which I can claim ownership. I'm not a one-man celebration and I don't think *difference* is about sucking cock.

DR: What about your recent New York show [at 303 Gallery]?

LJ: It's like maybe Shirley MacLaine might really be on to something. Perhaps absolute confusion about one's identity is a kind of Zen, and possibly it is multiple personalities that are best equipped to deal with the world. So here I had a chorus of public voices dealing with one private hell.

DR: What about celebrity and stardom in your work?

LJ: Well, they're great motifs because you don't have to do any background for the reader. It's a kind of shorthand. I don't have to describe anyone for my readers; the language is just as familiar as any character. They've read it a million times.

DR: Do you use specific celebrities as characters because they seem to be archetypes of what you want to portray?

LJ: No, as far as they function as characters, I try to remove the distinction between what is the archetype and what is the everyday. We already think of celebrities as archetypes. That's why they exist. I equate them with the everyman by removing their names and so their celebrity status. It comes out seamlessly that way.

DR: What about the Kennedys?

LJ: Who doesn't like the Kennedys? They're a stable of characters, they're stock. I could pick MGM of the forties and call my characters Clark and Judy. I might as well.

DR: The Kennedys occupy a phantasmal camp landscape?

LJ: Well, it's not my fault. I'm not the one who named my administration after a hit Broadway musical.

DR: Do you have a crush on John-John?

LJ: Doesn't everyone? He's always half naked. I mean, we all saw his father get killed and we love him for that. He's like Bambi.

DR: All of your stories seem involved with some kind of ruin.

LJ: Yes, but the incidents portrayed run a poor second to the language that constructs them. The truly tragic is where you find it.

DR: How the stories read or seem banal?

LJ: That's part of it, and that's an issue. That they seem banal to us is in itself part of the tragedy. I'm not discounting emotion, or suggesting that emotion is not a part of the real anymore, but I'm not all that interested in what the emotion might be like. What I focus on are the precepts that accompany that emotion: the confession, the self-explanation, the release, the testimonial, the testimony. The things that have come to signify what is meaningful. Where emotion seems absent or misplaced has as much to do with the anxieties of the gallery-going public as with the language I use.

DR: Is there any reality on the occasion of receivership?

LJ: God. Reality has a bad rep. It's not my intention to accentuate difference or suggest a hierarchy of texts. I might have to dip into reality to complete this landscape and I might have to dip into the fictive to complete that one, but nothing is more or less real in the work.

DR: Who's your favorite star?

LJ: I like Madonna because she's truly user-friendly. She can stand in place of nostalgia without being necessarily nostalgic. She's reinvented celebrities without the sticky parts. She's Garbo without wanting to be alone, she's Marilyn without that messy murder/suicide thing. And now she could be Frida Kahlo without the painful politics and back problems.