Artist shares his delight with contemporary scene

Story: HELEN ZUCKER
Photos: STEPHEN CANTRELL

There is a moment in the life of every artist who crosses the long bridge—the bridge of learning, synthesizing, working with his subject and his materials over and over—when he knows he has finally, crossed over.

It is the point of awareness, the point of cross-over to the realization that he has found his own material, his own metier,his own way of saying what he hasto say. It is really the jumping-off place the artist has been looking for all his life.

Once found, it's a lode to be mined—one that will never run out of meaning and mystery.

When that happens—some morning alone in the studio—the artist, knows that some fusion of energy, intuition, and intellect has taken place.

At some point, such a moment obviously happened to Lester Johnson, whose ,recent show atthe Donald Morris Gallery, is nearly sold out. That is a rare enough occuranceduring an artist's life time.

Donald Morris, friend, as well as art dealer, recognzied Johnson's talent before his works went into collections at the Detroit Institute, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Hirshorn Museum.

Along with the Martha Jackson Gallery and the Zabriskie Gallery, both of New York, and the Sun Gallery in Provincetown, Mass., Morris was showing Johnson's work in 1965, 1967, and again in 1974.

THIS LATEST COLLECTION of Johnson's works includes not only paintings, but street scenes done on a special paper prepared by the artist. Johnson sprinkles pumice over a ground rhoplex before beginning to work with acrylics, inks or pastels, and creates a brilliant assemblage of mainstream faces.

Through all these works, the virile, cury-haired young men and pretty girls with hair frizzed out, walk, sit, run, meet each other, and part. Johnson works with the loveliness of muscle and bone—the mystery of flesh and movement.

He creates street scenes in which no one is the same, nor two, though they look alike, and share similar fashions and thoughts. His figures turn and turndespite generous rumps, shoulders, and breasts, they are creatures of essentialdelicacy and wonder. The fragility of human bodies is beautifully expressed inthe clumping masses of humanity.

Unlike Raphael Soyer and his 60s youth paintings, and Reginald Marsh, who painted Bowery and Village scenes, Johnson makes no overt social comment. Rather, his touchstones seem to be closer to Jules Pascin (a more innocent Pascin, perhaps) and Picasso, somehow blended with Paul Mazursky's vision of New York in the 70s.

Mazursky, in his movie, "An Unmarried Woman," seems to draw inspiration for his Soho Washington Square scenes, his streets filled with lovely, smartly-dressed women, crudely-dressed, macho men, straight from Johnson's canvasses. Everyone is there. The boy in the "Da Vinci's Pizzeria" shirt who marches through many of Johnson's canvasses, (Johnson's son is the model) is seen againand again in Mazursky's shots of New York streets.

JOHNSON'S PAINTINGS MOVE on a deeper level. He makes a comment on the loneliness and essential mystery of the human body. In true Renaissance Heroic Style, he worships the human body. He doesn't, as so many artists do, find it grotesque, ugly, or an expression of man's hell. Nor does he feel that the body is merely a casing for a loathsome, grasping, evil heart as so much modern art has taught us.

No it's a pleasure to look at Jouhnson's work. Without any sentimentality, this artist really likes arms, chins, eyes, mouths. He adores womens' legs. They're long, smooth, appealing, if not ideally shapely in every single work, no matter what else the rest of the girl is like.

His girls clomp along on theirtortuous platform, 70s heels, smoking, gesturing, showing their derrieres to the world under their body-hugging, exquisitely rendered clothing. Johnson pays as much attention to fabric as he does to bodies. His cloth is wondrous to behold.—sequins, madras, lame pants suits. Grecian villages, and gorgeous birds adornthe dresses of his women. His males seem content in their tight polos and pants striding along in boots.

In a way, it's strange that Johnson gives us such an immediate sense of "place," i.e. Soho, Washington Square, here because he pays little attention to place else where. Instead, he sketches, if at all, merely the fragile lines of the old Cooper Union structue, or some sketchy Village buildings.

HIS HANDSOME GIRLS with their doll-like faces, pretty lips, and large black eyes, and his good-looking, macho guys are what this series is all about. And yet we come away with a very strong sense of movement of location, of the impact of crowds upon the individual.

Like artist who'vebeen through much, and worked hard, Johnson has emerged out of his past dark, gestural drawings, his somewhat German Expressionist men in bowler hats and made it into the light. He is out there in the springtime street, his heart and his eye intact.

This is work about the beauty of the human figure, and how nothing—technology, crowds, not the dizzy pace of life today—will ever change the essential mystery and beauty we all come from. It is fine to see someone, who, like Picasso, uses strength of arms and flesh as repeating motifs.

Johnson's crowds aren't anonymous masses. His paintings aren't filled with thedrear comings and goings of "The Unknown Glossy Citizen," checking in at the right places at the right times. Johnson's people are alert, knowing, and their bright black eyes dream, as the eyes of the young should dream.

Although not perfect in face or body, Johnson's women and men have an appeal which shows the artist's appreciation of his subject matter.

The paintings are so rich, multi-leveled and carefully-wrought, so filled with echoes from his knowledge of other artists, so witty, and so robust, that he deserves the many one-man shows he has had, plus the group shows. These include the recent purchase of one of his crowd scenes by the Guggenheim Museum and this year's Creative Arts Award from Brandais University.

ONE OF THE BETTER THINGS Brandais is known for is the high quality of the annual arts awards. The judges mean business. The people they have given the awards to, have, so far, richly deserved them. High talent plus dedicated, disciplined years of work are a hallmark of the recipients.

The 22nd annual awards, held at the Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue and 89th in New York, this year, went to Saul Bellow and Grace Paley for fiction, Robert Rauschenberg and Lester Johnson for painting, Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn for their work in theater arts at the Long Wharf Theatre.

It is good to see an artist who has had his hard, doubt-filled moments alone stand up for a moment of high public recognition. Lester Johnson deserves this year's Brandais award.

The show runs through May 6 at the Donald Morris Gallery, 105 Townsend. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. through 6 p.m.

Mihalik is honored

Bob Mihalik, who has offices in Farmington Hills, was honored for outstanding sales achievement by the Reinforced Plastics division of A. O. Smith-Inland Inc., during a recent national sales meeting in Little Rock, Ark.

Mihalik sold the second highest dollar volumes ever sold by one salesman in a year and achieved 216 per cent of the quota.

He is a district manager for the Farmington Hills division, which is the world's largest single source for reinforced thermo-setting resin piping systems. His district includes most of Michigan and portions of Indiana and Ohio.