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EXIT

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# NEW | ART

EXAMINER



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Art Institute of Chicago, this show offered 16 images from 1947 to 1951.

Though brief, the show presented a cross-section of Penn's imagery as he was defining his style. Inasmuch as it had a theme, the exhibition highlighted Penn's use of portraiture as a fashion motif. In six vintage prints from 1947 and 1948, eminent sitters line up in Penn's studio prop of the time—a distended, claustrophobic corner, into which he thrust, among many others, Salvador Dali, Joe Louis, and the Duchess of Windsor. The Mephistophelian Surrealist looks ready to come out fighting, while the massive boxer slumps into the corner, defeated by artifice. The Duchess is split down the middle by the line where the walls behind her meet, yet she returns the camera's gaze unblinkingly in her kimono-style dress, the consummate mandarin. For Penn, portrait sitting is a staring contest.

In another significant body of work from 1949 and 1950, Penn portrays tradesmen posed under hot lights against studio backdrops in London, Paris, and New York. The edges of the backdrop are typically visible in Penn's fashion imagery of the time, as are the cords from his studio lights. In these indoor repetitions of Atget's famous portraits of street vendors, the sheer self-consciousness of placing a Pullman porter or two *Lorry Washers* in the same studio used to document the latest couture fashions foregrounds the artifice of the event. These are among Penn's most pretentious and charming pictures. Later he would take the same props to South America, Africa, and San Francisco to make his disturbing ethnographic portraits. "I can make anyone beautiful," he seems to suggest. Fashion, in Penn's hands, is just a particular kind of scrutiny, elegant and aggressive.

STEPHEN LONGMIRE

## PENLAND COMMUNITY POTTERS

GALLERY 1021, LILL STREET STUDIOS

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773/477-6185

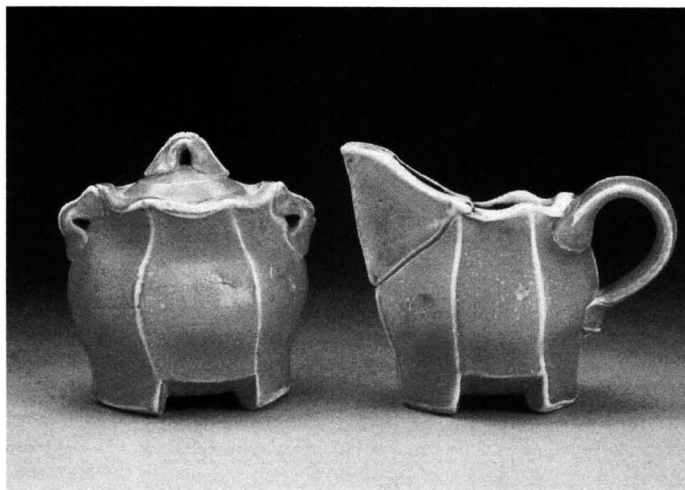
The handsomely made pots included in this show evoke some of the best and most long-lasting impulses in contemporary American functional pottery and craft. The exhibition, "Penland Community Potters," showcased the work of 17 potters from the Penland,

North Carolina area, and carried social as well as aesthetic weight. These pieces come out of an alternative art tradition that emphasizes humanism, subtlety, and a stubborn refusal of pretentiousness lacking in much contemporary art. This craft tradition—and its social implications—has roots in the Arts and Crafts movement of the turn of the century, but was honed and refined for American craft artists in the 1950s by the British potter Bernard Leach and the Japanese potter Shoji Hamada.

Penland is a famous craft school in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains that was founded in 1929 to revive traditional Appalachian crafts, especially weaving. It has since evolved into a 470-acre craft mecca offering classes in all contemporary crafts, as well as residencies and retreats for artists. Not surprisingly, it has also attracted a large number of craft artists working in all media who have settled in the area permanently, setting up rural studios and living a deliberately low-key lifestyle in the temperate climate.

The artists in this exhibition, curated by Chicago potter Suze Lindsay, have all had some association with Penland, and all make functional work in studios close to the school. All earn their livings solely from their artwork—none are teachers—and all articulate what could be called craft's "ethic of connectedness"; that is, that the process of making craft art—from its creative beginning to its eventual end use—is seamless. This ethic emphasizes relationships in the art process—the relationship of integrity between the potter and the way he or she makes art; between the artist and the buyer, who uses the artist's handmade work in ordinary daily life; and finally, the relationship of the user to the work's meaning. As Will Ruggles and Douglass Rankin, a couple who collaboratively produced particularly insightful wood-fired work included in the show, have pointed out: "The finishing of the art of a good pot is in the hands and sensibility of the user."

POLLY ULLRICH



GAY SMITH

*Creamer and Sugar*, from "Penland Community Potters." Soda-fired porcelain, 5" x 5" x 2".  
Courtesy of Lill Street.

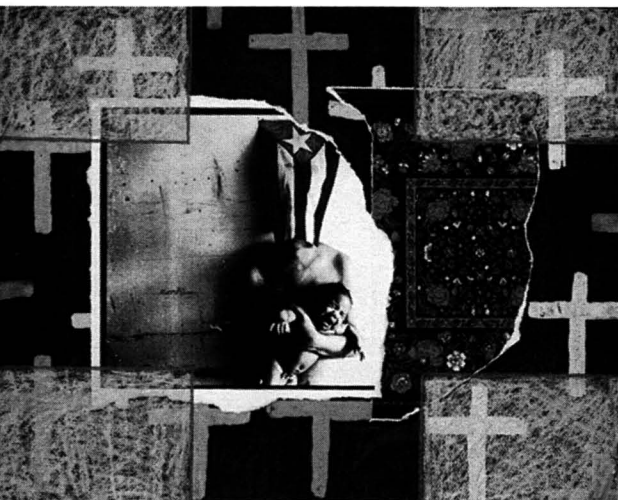
## JUAN SÁNCHEZ

DR. PEDRO ALBIZU CAMPOS  
MUSEUM OF PUERTO RICAN  
HISTORY AND CULTURE

1457 N. CALIFORNIA AVE., 60622  
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For a Puerto Rican like myself, who was carried from Chicago's Humbolt Park neighborhood to the west suburbs by the sheltering arms of parents achieving the American Dream, a visit to the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Museum of Puerto Rican History and Culture both intimidates and inspires. Moreover, it sparks a personal sense of urgency to learn.

Visitors—no matter what their personal history—stood to learn a lot from this exhibition of collages by Brooklyn-based artist Juan Sánchez, titled "RICAN/STRUCTIIONS." Understanding the various levels of Sánchez's messages requires an exercise in close and repeated examination and the confidence to ask questions. It's like walking into a classroom and being called on for the answer, regardless of whether one raises one's hand or not. At first glance, the work seems pretty straightforward—colorful, repeated imagery and text that indicate a relationship between parts in a whole. There's no argument that those parts—native Taino petroglyphs, African-inspired masks, Spanish-European Catholic imagery, and much more—are blended into Puerto



**JUAN SÁNCHEZ**

*El Grito III*, 1992. Collage on paper, 36" x 24". Courtesy of the artist.

Rican history and culture. But the work also reveals a method of careful placement and planned layering. Like an investigator breaking ground over a time capsule that he himself buried, Sánchez invites his audience to continue the excavation. Here, repressed collective memories surface, and the learning kicks in.

A close inspection of *El Grito II* and *El Grito III* uncovers multiple levels of passion and the pacifying forces working against them. A repeated newspaper photograph of political demonstrators shouting with their fists raised high sharply contrasts with a repeated image of Mary gently cradling the baby Jesus. Highlighted with pastels and systematically scratched around the edges, they surround and close in on one of Sánchez's most passionate, yet alarming, images, a black-and-white photograph of a woman holding a screaming baby. The woman stands nude against a scarred wall with the Puerto Rican flag concealing her face. She holds the baby securely, but not in a very comforting manner. The composition raises many questions: Does the woman with the flag for a face represent Puerto Rico's ambiguous existence as a United States colony? Is the baby a symbol for the working-class Puerto Rican, vulnerable in the arms of an evolving culture? Do the demonstrators represent the Puerto Rican political prisoners to whom Sánchez dedicated this show? Learning and re-learning the answers begins by peeling away layers of history, much like Sánchez tears into his reconstructed imagery.

Sánchez has returned to some of his works, radically changing them even after they've been exhibited. Perhaps this is one reason why he chooses to reproduce his collages as color laser prints, a medium that allows him to change the work as quickly as he can press the "print" key. Even so, he retains the intimate feel often lost in such processes by carefully tearing the edges of each print to emulate the irregular, deckled edges of handmade paper.

Sánchez's work evolves much like the social and political issues addressed within it. And although the issues are specific to Puerto Rico, the themes are universal. They suggest a long history of human oppression, much like the politically charged paintings of Leon Golub, both a teacher to Sánchez and a respected peer. The lessons are passed on, the learning continues.

JULIO FLORES

**RAY JOHNSON**

**FEIGEN, INC.**

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There's a character in Norman Juster's novel *The Phantom Tollbooth* who's a lot like Ray Johnson. He's a giant, but he's the world's smallest giant. He's also the world's biggest dwarf, and so on. Johnson was the most famous unknown artist in America for better than 30 years. He was also the art world's most successful failure and its most sociable misanthrope.

I've never understood why Chicago, with our self-proclaimed "outsider" ethos, didn't take to Johnson and his work. When I asked dealers about this, I was always told that showing Johnson was more trouble than it was worth, that he had become the sort of crank who punishes anyone who tries to help him. So here, at last, unimpeded by the late artist, was a museum-quality show covering 30 years of work by one of, in my view, the authentic great artists of our time (the lines of succession and equivalence are: Kurt Schwitters to Max Ernst to Joseph Cornell to Ray Johnson), and hardly a thing sold. It beats me, why. The front gallery alone, which contained collages that were found, mostly unframed, in Johnson's studio after his death, held the best show I've seen in Chicago in years. It was a classic Ray Johnson show: a cranky, gratuitous display of brilliance, and another mysterious failure.



**RAY JOHNSON**

*Clock Gable*, 1971. Collage, 22" x 18 1/2".  
Courtesy of Feigen, Inc.

It's hard to name an important artist of the postwar years who didn't know Johnson, and, moreover, who didn't seem always to have known him. Friendship, like every other fact of his life, lost most of its specifics in its passage through his vast interiority. Johnson was, in a sense, the last great product of colonial America. His teachers and models were all European, and his work is, like Cornell's, an off-shore product of continental culture. It was characteristic of our colonial nature, our liminality, that our artists took on the influences of multiple and contradictory European ideas in ad-hoc syntheses that sometimes, like a kid mixing nitro in the basement, succeeded spectacularly: weird amalgams like, say, Abstract Expressionism. Johnson's work is a good example of this tendency: it combines Albers's Bauhaus fussiness and attention to materials with Ernst's twee folksiness. The medium in which these influences combined was, like Cornell's, the twilight interior space of diva worship. Johnson's work is a maze of self-reference and media trivia, and the key to it all rests, I think, in classifying him from the beginning as, like Andy Warhol, essentially a religious artist, a devout and penitent believer.

TIM PORGES