

LESTER JOHNSON



*DARK PAINTINGS*





*Untitled #7*

1962

ink on paper, 69 x 42 in.

# Lester Johnson: Dark Paintings

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steven harvey fine art projects



Lester Johnson by Robert Frank  
(used by permission of the artist)

In the early sixties, Lester Johnson painted his monochromatic figures inspired by the homeless men who drifted beneath his windows at 222 Bowery across from the Bowery Mission. They moved so slowly that he could practically draw them from life. But the paintings he produced have little to do with perceptual painting. They are experiential, and as essential as Toltec or Easter Island sculptural heads.

In a 1961 *Artnews* article, "Lester Johnson Paints a Picture," Lawrence Campbell wrote that:

*Johnson's theme is "Man in Life"; man without past or future, man passing through. In his paintings he wants man to seem to be sliding into space, entering the frame at one side, leaving by the other, as though the picture were a slice of a subway train...*

By introducing the figure into monochrome painting, Johnson created a significant subset within twentieth century monochromatic abstraction.

Johnson remarked that

*Life, which I try to reflect in my paintings, is dynamic. To me my paintings are action paintings—paintings that move across the canvas, paintings that do not get stuck, but flow like time, without stop or start.*

Evoking Hans Hofmann's ideas about plasticity, Johnson's paintings successfully evoke motion. Yet his iconic early heads also project an iconic force and shimmering opticality, linked to abstraction, which remains radical to this day. It is a remarkable synthesis.

—Steven Harvey

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The greatest mystery in the art world is its negligence for Lester Johnson, a great artist with a solid place in art history. Although in numerous museum collections and ample museum shows Johnson has been overlooked in the current craze for the “new.”

First came his marvelous dark paintings, blacks and purples, in many different shades and often in such heavy impasto they became bas reliefs. They are not just very challenging they are also gorgeous, even though some have claimed they lacked charm, as if “charm” was important to great art. What these dark paintings do have is magical and superhuman power.

But Johnson can’t win. From a cycle without charm he went on to create the most charming possible paintings, a celebration above life and for life. Still that didn’t satisfy the critics, this singing new work was “too beautiful.”

In this latter cycle Johnson also mastered what is often the most difficult subject for an artist, movement. Using unusual new and vibrant colors Johnson created colored motion that bathe humans enjoying life. Also in this later period no artist ever has so well captured the optimistic frenzy in midtown Manhattan.

Although this writer has a collection based on Giacometti, surrealism and minimalism he finds that Johnsons dance well among them. For the simple reason that great art is always great art.

No artist living can surpass Johnson’s parade in to the eyes.

—Herbert Lust

**Mulberry Street**  
1963  
oil on canvas, 66 x 44 in.











*Three Transparent Heads*

1961

oil on paper mounted on board, 32 x 67 in.





*Portrait of SJ*  
1962  
oil on canvas, 20 x 16½ in.

*Untitled (Head)*  
1961  
mixed media on paper, 24 x 18 in.











*Dark Portrait*

1965

oil on canvas, 68 x 54 in.

*Head*

1962

oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in.



FRONT AND BACK COVERS:

*Three Transparent Heads* (detail)

1961

oil on paper mounted on board, 32 x 67 in.

