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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ray Johnson

BLUM Los Angeles

March 16–May 4, 2024

Opening Reception: Saturday, March 16, 5–7pm

Los Angeles, CA, March 5, 2024—BLUM is pleased to present Los Angeles’s first solo exhibition of work by Ray Johnson (b.1927, Detroit, MI; d.1995, Sag Harbor, NY)—seminal Pop Art figure, early conceptualist, and pioneer of mail art.

Johnson's preferred medium was collage, that quintessentially twentieth-century art form that reflects the increased (as the century wore on) collision of disparate visual and verbal information that bombards modern man. Johnson integrated texts and images drawn from a multiplicity of sources, from mass media to telephone conversations. Ranging from 1954 to 1994, the collages and sculptures comprising this presentation tell the story of Johnson’s career, from his early encounters with New York’s avant-garde to the end of his life. Leaving his hometown of Detroit, Michigan, in 1945 to study at Black Mountain College in North Carolina—widely known for its influence on future generations of artists as well as distinguished faculty such as Josef and Anni Albers—Johnson thereafter moved to New York City in 1949 where he quickly became an active participant in the downtown art scene. Over the next forty-some years, he would become a pillar for this important period in American art, involving himself with Andy Warhol’s Factory, spearheading mail art with the conception of the artist network called the New York Correspondence School, and much more.

An art history savant with an uncanny ability to recall and connect an encyclopedic wealth of information, Johnson made work that conveys the vast nature of the human experience as viewed through the pinhole of the artist’s own dynamic life. The works on paper on view here are emblazoned with the artist’s celebrated “moticos”—the term, an anagram for osmotic, that Johnson coined for the deconstructed, black glyphs that function as signifiers in the artist’s widely referential visual language. Initially brought forth from the clutter of pop culture’s runoff—such as promotional images of James Dean, Elvis Presley, or department store models—Johnson would cannibalize his early works by cutting them up and reworking them, often referencing his art-world contemporaries in the work’s final title. In this exhibition, the artist has paid homage to members of his cohort, such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Mark Rothko, and more.

The exhibition’s two sculptures, *Untitled (Paddle with Bunnyheads and Mickey)* (1986–c.1994) and *Untitled (Block with Bunny and Screw)* (not dated), will make their first-ever public debut here. Bearing the artist’s signature drawing of a bunny head—the image that the artist used as a universal portrait or catchall to depict and unite otherwise disparate individuals—these objects can be understood as anointed by Johnson’s symbol and, thus, brought into the fold of the artist’s trove of meaningful things or ideas. An early practitioner of performance art akin to the style of Fluxus or Allan Kaprow’s happenings, Johnson would use objects such as cardboard boxes, wooden spools, or hotdogs to create temporal performance events that he called “nothings.”

In what many later considered his final performance work, on January 13, 1995, Johnson was witnessed diving off a bridge in Sag Harbor, Long Island, and backstroking out to sea. His body was later found, and it was determined that he had drowned. After his death, an extensive archive of Johnson’s work

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was found, meticulously organized in his home. Due to the unconventional and secretive nature of the artist's practice during his lifetime, larger-scale exhibitions exploring and situating Johnson's practice were near impossible. Posthumously, with exhibitions such as this one, Johnson can be understood as one of the major artistic innovators of the second half of the twentieth century.

Ray Johnson (b.1927, Detroit, MI; d.1995, Sag Harbor, NY) was a seminal pop art figure in the 1950s, early conceptualist, and mail-art pioneer. He studied at the Detroit Art Institute, MI and spent a summer in a drawing program at Ox-Bow School in Saugatuck, MI, an affiliate of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL before matriculating to Black Mountain College, NC. Johnson has been the subject of numerous exhibitions at museums and institutions, including The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY (2022); Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL (2021); School of the Visual Arts, New York, NY (2019); The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2015); The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, NY (2014); Berkley Art Museum, Berkley, CA (2012); Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2012); National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway (2003); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (1999), and many more. Johnson's work is represented in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Berkley Art Museum, Berkley, CA; Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Tate Modern, London; Walker Art Center, MN; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; and many more.

About BLUM

BLUM represents more than sixty artists and estates from sixteen countries worldwide, nurturing a diverse roster of artists at all stages of their practices with a range of global perspectives. Originally opened as Blum & Poe in Santa Monica in 1994, the gallery has been a pioneer in its early commitment to Los Angeles as an international arts capital.

The gallery has been acclaimed for its groundbreaking work in championing international artists of postwar and contemporary movements, such as CoBrA, Dansaekhwa, Mono-ha, and Superflat, and for organizing museum-caliber solo presentations and historical survey exhibitions across its spaces in Los Angeles, Tokyo, and New York. Often partnering with celebrated curators and scholars such as Cecilia Alemani, Alison M. Gingeras, Sofia Gotti, Joan Kee, and Mika Yoshitake, the gallery has produced large-scale exhibitions focusing on the Japanese Mono-ha school (2012); the Korean Dansaekhwa monochrome painters (2014); the European postwar movement CoBrA (2015); Japanese art of the 1980s and 1990s (2019); a rereading of Brazilian Modernism (2019); a revisionist take on the 1959 MoMA exhibition, *New Images of Man* (2020); and a survey of portraiture through a democratic and humanist lens (2023); among others.

BLUM's wide-reaching program includes exhibitions, lectures, performance series, screenings, video series, and an annual art book fair at its base in Los Angeles. BLUM Books, the gallery's publishing division, democratically circulates its program through original scholarship and accessible media ranging from academic monographs, audio series, magazines, to artists' books.

Across the three global locations, BLUM prioritizes environmental and community stewardship in all operations. In 2015, it was certified as an Arts:Earth Partnership (AEP) green art gallery in Los Angeles

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and consequently became one of the first green certified galleries in the United States. The gallery is also a member of the Gallery Climate Coalition, which works to facilitate a more sustainable commercial art world and reduce the industry's collective carbon footprint. BLUM is committed to fostering inclusive and equitable communities both in its physical and online spaces and believes that everybody should have equal access to creating and engaging with contemporary art.

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