

Larry Johnson

Works from the 80's and 90's

March 18 – April 19, 2017

Kimmerich Gallery is pleased to present Larry Johnson's *Works from the 80's and 90's*.

Works from the 80's and 90's consists of four photographs and three paneled pieces, each indicative of Johnson's simultaneous fascination and critique of celebrity culture. Language is critical to Johnson's work and indivisible from his investigation of celebrity as he describes, "to master celebrity is to master language."

The works in this exhibition began as short, fragmentary narratives, giving rise to the images as Johnson felt he "needed an environment for these texts to exist in." Using speeches about the Kennedys, news articles recounting celebrity deaths or billboards in LA's Koreatown, Johnson develops a lexicon tinged with an ambivalent and often morbid glamour. His focus on death as an openly gay man in the 1980s was also a direct response to the AIDS epidemic.

A native Angeleno and a graduate of Cal Arts, Johnson's work is inscribed in a lineage of Los Angeles artists. His play with visual language and intimate portrayal of Los Angeles geography recall the work of Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari and his mentor and Dean of Cal Arts at the time, Douglas Huebler. Johnson brings an unusually pedestrian vantage point to the Los Angeles cityscape, however, as he has lived in LA's Koreatown without a car since the early 1980s. Works like *Untitled (Perino's Front, Perino's Rear)* make explicit reference to Los Angeles landmarks.

Untitled (Classically Tragic Story) is part of a series of texts imposed on winter landscapes that stand in stark contrast to California sunshine. The snow-covered branches and pale blue sky in this painting also clash with the morbid text, which describes the psychopathic Manson family murders in 1969. *Untitled (Black Box)* also engages Johnson's focus on death and "the inability of language to deal with death." Johnson takes this text from the black-box recording of a 1982 plane crash into the Potomac River. Meaning recedes from the difficult to decipher and multi-colored text, as language becomes a visual rather than signifying form.

Johnson's works from the 80's and 90's find new relevance in our contemporary world, as he explored the stakes of fragmentary and visualized language long before tweets and memes became ubiquitous modes of communication. As the 45th president of the United States communicates to the world in 140 characters or less and digital information becomes increasingly visual, Johnson's ambivalent investigation becomes a prescient lens to examine how we communicate today.

Larry Johnson (b. 1959, Long Beach, CA) graduated from the California Institute of the Arts. His work was shown in a retrospective at the Hammer Museum in 2009. He lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

All quotations from conversation between Johnson and Hammer museum curator Russell Ferguson.