

Correspondence school

S.F. and Vancouver meet on a "Free Mattress."

By Johnny Ray Huston

Quack quack. Ducks (along with bunnies) were some of Ray Johnson's favorite animals to draw. He is perhaps best known as the founder of the New York Correspondence School, "the oldest and most influential" — a *Rolling Stone*-bestowed phrase that Johnson often mockingly repeated: — mail art group. A postal prankster dedicated to nothings at a time when Warhol happenings were the norm, Johnson created social and artistic scenes that could fit in an envelope. Though he committed suicide in 1995, his work, as he punned, has "no history, only a present." One of the presents Johnson posthumously received is John Walter's 2002 documentary portrait *How to Draw a Bunny*. The most recent might be "Free Mattress," a gallery show that grew from a decade-old correspondence between Bay Area-based David Larsen and another artist, Marc Bell, who hails from the home base of Johnson's archives, Vancouver, Canada.

Last year, around the time Larsen and Bell made a trip to those archives, "Free Mattress" was conceived. The finished show adds one San Francisco rep (Will Yackulic) and another Vancouverite (Amy Lockhart) to the equation. Larsen's work tweaks and freaks the familiar: addressing weed, his *I Miss You* prints green leaves over yellow loose leaf; *Eyeless Manson* causes one to reconsider an iconic image, though minus the crazed eyes, Manson still has a storm cloud for a head. The mood and look of the latter piece calls Raymond Pettibon to mind — unsurprising, since Pettibon and Larsen have collaborated on shows and individual works. "I came to the idea that text and image should be coeval through Pettibon," Larsen says. "I wouldn't name Johnson as a source the way I would Pettibon, but I feel the same limitation he does. His work is small — you fold it up and send it in the mail. How do you make something monumental out of a piece of paper?"

Animals — stags, simians, boars, bulls, and sheep — run wild in Larsen's art; allowing these creatures to herd together and ricochet off one another, his collage-like wall arrangement for "Free Mattress" is likewise untamed. A series of bold beastly emblems on separate slips of paper (some of them torn) form a makeshift tower capped by a giraffe head. A smaller ripped-paper hybrid, *Ape of the Feeling*, showcases a gorilla whose brain area has been invaded by Roman soldiers. Human and beast meld in some other pieces. *Fighting in the Theater* presents just that: in the dark the silhouetted breasts and heads of

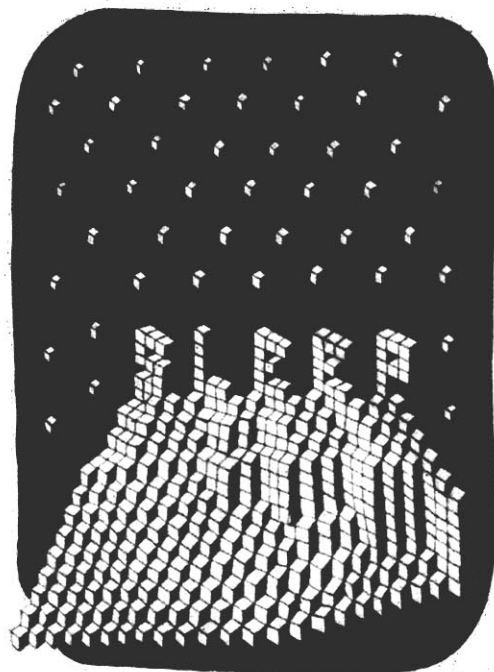
seated patrons resemble waves; one witness to the fight, a woman in pearls, seems outraged. Or perhaps she just looks that way because she, like the witchy subject of Larsen's *Weird Horror*, has a duckbill for a mouth. Quack quack.

Yackulic's cube

How many bricks did it take to build San Francisco's Armory? "Born" in 1914 and registered as a historical site in 1978, the dormant fortress at 14th Street and Mission was officially known, once upon a time, as the San Francisco National Guard Armory and Arsenal. A few years ago a Texas-based company announced plans to convert it into a telecommunications center, though at the moment its interior might as well be littered with free mattresses for squatters. The Armory is so huge and devoid of character that it's easy to miss, but at night the immensity of its windowless exterior takes on an ominous quality. Here is a distinctly unfriendly building, seemingly designed to repel, rather than house (or even host), people. Thousands upon thousands of bricks add up to nothing much.

Across the street, in one corner of the comparatively tiny building that contains Pond, Yackulic's art deadpans a humorous miniature answer to the Armory's dead-monument atmosphere: This link is pure happenstance: Yackulic certainly wasn't thinking of the Armory when he began drawing the micro-mammoth formations that dominate his contribution to "Free Mattress." But listening to him discuss his nature-free landscapes, a certain irony about the Armory's most recent aborted manifestation — as post-human tech space — becomes clear. "There have been fantastic utopian visions of technology as this great organizer," Yackulic says. "But everything has become so complicated that people can't even live their lives."

Any viewer who steps outside Pond to face the monster wall across 14th Street will find it hard not to flash back to Yackulic's work; both are built through ceaseless repetition, but his pieces — making something monumental out of a piece of paper — trade the Armory's bricks for cubes that are a half-loving, half-begrudging nod to '80s video game graphics. (They're usually hand-drawn.) The cubes form a variety of almost-structures. *Small, Untitled* suggests the Chrysler Building; elsewhere there are pyramids, and *Osmos*'s terrain is a quasi-medieval ruin that spills from the truncated title phrase. Yackulic's cube: a puzzle in which patterns



Gleaming the cube: Will Yackulic's new work (including *Sleep*, above) contains half-loving, half-begrudging nods to '80s video game graphics.

sometimes splinter into triangle formations. The overall effect is op art with an invisible ink *p* at the beginning; shades and shapes of blue and gray trick the eye into seeing different dimensions on the paper's surface, an effect magnified in the 3-D installation centerpiece, *Untitled Construction in Blue and White*.

Staple diets

Yackulic's and Larsen's contributions to "Free Mattress" match their personalities. The former is laconic; the latter is antic. They do have something in common, though: both flirt and battle with artist-author bonds. Yackulic is fond of pseudonyms. His "Free Mattress" video game aestheticism becomes overt in the tiny stapled handbook *Pac-Mastery: Observations and Critical Discourse*; adopting the pen name C.F. Gordon, he crafts dot-eating advice that's simultaneously practical, poetic, and (most amusingly) profound. Another recent small stapled book, *Stendec*, finds him assuming the name M. Pernod in order to summarize the history of the universe in two and a half elegantly fractured pages. An uncredited zine titled *Poorly Rendered* proves one-liners can consist of images, not just words.

A more elaborate published project, *Evidence of the Paranormal* (Owl Press) pairs Yackulic's art with poems by writers including John Ashbery, Joanne Kyger, Ron Padgett, and Eileen

Myles. Throughout the book, the comic-strip pop of Yackulic's older work and the cryptic optical trickery of his newer pieces converge with the humor found in the writing. Repetition again: *Evidence's* centerpiece is a biped made of minuscule gray thought-bubble cells, and the creatures that populate the book's drawings are states of being. Though Yackulic's recent landscapes seem relatively barren, there is in fact a continuum; the cubes that dominate "Free Mattress" first appeared as small background elements of figure-based drawings from two or three years ago.

Larsen's latest booklets, *Kept Back* and *Freaky If You Got This Far*, are loud — armed with exclamation marks and capital letters — yet solitary laments; as an empire destroys the monuments of a culture, he uses paper and a photocopier to assemble some of the debris. Fond of lists and collages, Larsen turns each page into a box of mementos. *Kept Back's* title refers to this tendency, and to everyday failure; *Freaky If You Got This Far* embellishes a stone-cold 1963 text about stigma so that it becomes an inverted diary. Both booklets could fit in a back pocket — or a small envelope. And both turn history into a bloodstained American present. ♦

"Free Mattress" runs through Oct. 19. Sat.—Sun., 3–8 p.m., Pond, 324 14th St., S.F. (415) 437-9151. For more information go to www.mucketyduck.org.