

JOHN EVANS (b.1932)

The work of John Evans — the only living member of this group — sheds light on the common interests of this “constellation” of artists. Evans’ collages are about associations, whether personal, political, historical or visual. He creates freewheeling, often humorous or ironic connections, among seemingly unrelated or disconnected elements. His daily “diary” collages, begun in 1964 and continued through the year 2000, reflect his commentary on the world, especially the New York art world, and frequently refer to his friendships with various artists. Prominent among his friends were Ray Johnson, Buster Cleveland and May Wilson. Evans was also a longtime friend of artist, novelist and playwright Ursule Molinaro, who inspired the “Ursuline Ducks” that regularly inhabit his collages, and of painter Alice Neel, who painted portraits of Evans, his wife Margaret, and their twin infant daughters, Honor and India.

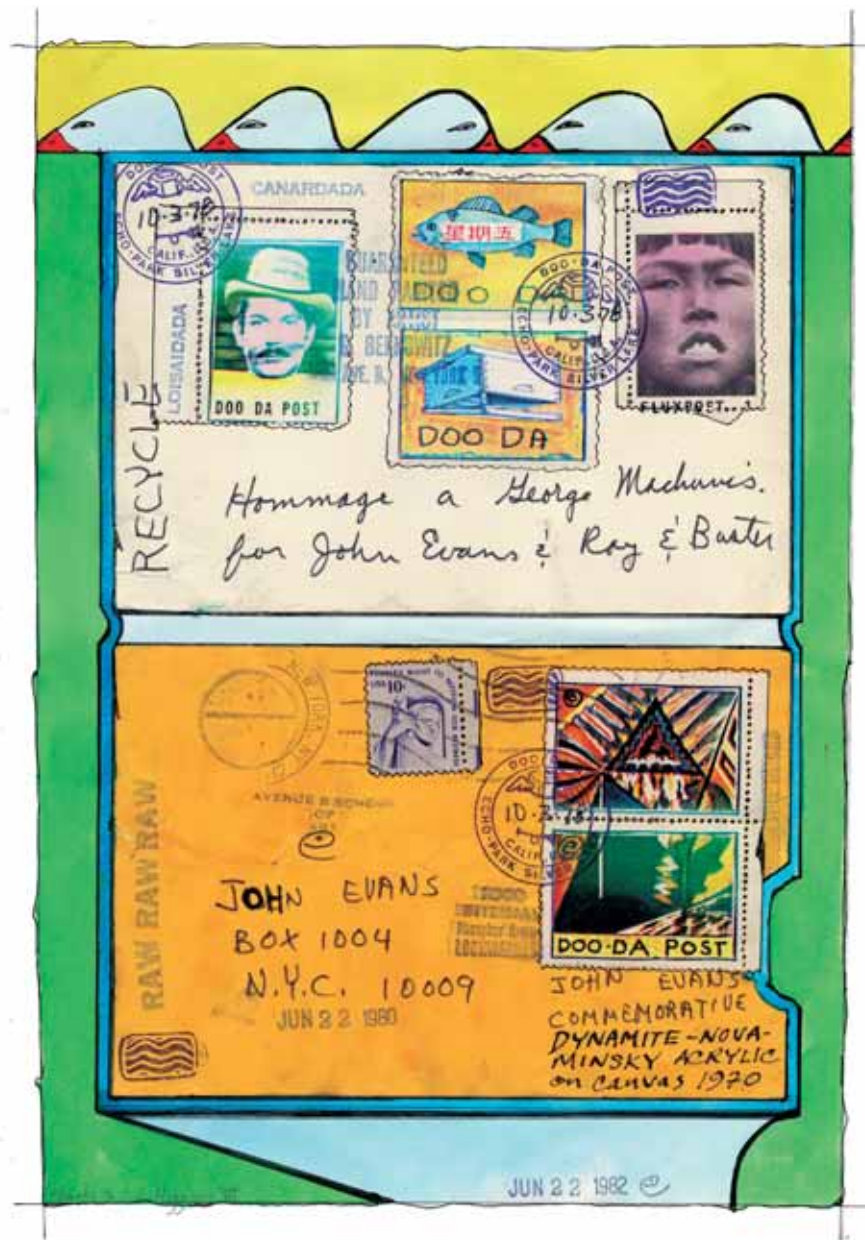
Evans’ collage materials range from clippings, business cards, product stickers and ticket stubs, to bits of ephemera and anonymous snapshots or vintage photographs found on the streets of his East Village neighborhood. Using colored inks, he builds upon and embellishes the collage elements, creating lively, vibrant compositions. Recalling the small-scale works of Kurt Schwitters or Paul Klee, Evans’ collages are in fact page-sized paintings that extend the boundaries of the medium.

In Evans’ collages there are numerous references to or snippets of correspondence from Ray Johnson, Buster Cleveland and May Wilson, all of whom were working with collage and sending each other material. Though not a personal friend of Al Hansen, Evans responded to Hansen’s collages made from Hershey wrappers and his “Venus” collages of cigarette butts. Through Ray Johnson’s New York Correspondance School, Evans became involved in the international Mail Art movement during the 1960s, a hybrid of art and communication that included cartoon-like drawings, fictitious postage stamps and rubber-stamped images, all sent through the postal system. Concurrent with Mail Art during the period was Fluxus, an international grassroots collective headed by George Maciunas (1931-1978). Although Evans and Johnson were never formally affiliated with Fluxus, there was some overlap between the two movements, as for example, in the group’s Fluxpost stamps. Johnson, moreover, was included in Fluxus-related publications of the period, such as La Monte Young and Jackson MacLow’s *An Anthology* (1963); and Johnson’s *The Paper Snake* (1965) was published by Dick Higgins’ Something Else Press. In a 1982 collage, Evans features a mailing from E.F. Higgins III, including Higgins’ Doo-Da Post stamps, with his inscription, “Hommage a George Machunis [sic] for John Evans & Ray & Buster.” Characteristically, Evans added a row of Ursuline ducks in profile along the top border, and in the lower left of the collage neatly penned his acknowledgment to the sender: “Thanks to E.F. Higgins III.”

Allusions to Buster Cleveland’s characteristic Lucky Strike logos (inspired by Johnson’s earlier use of this image) and his mail art series ART FOR UM appear in several Evans collages, as do references to May Wilson’s “Ridiculous Portraits” and stamps. For a 1968 “Stilt Walk” event organized by Ray Johnson, Evans made stilts, and artist John Willenbecher photographed May Wilson perched on them, assisted by Johnson. Evans recalls that he used to visit Wilson once a week and bring her found objects for use in her eccentric assemblages. When he first came to New York in the late 1970s, Cleveland stayed in Evans’ studio and they became good friends.

While the five artists represented here did not form a group or movement, they were closely related aesthetically and shared an offbeat, irreverent sensibility that found expression in their myriad collages and constructions. Evans’ rich, multi-layered works epitomize the many levels of connectedness among these artists and the depth of their association, both as friends and as ironic commentators on the art world.

Robert M. Murdock
Independent curator and writer, author of
JOHN EVANS: Collages (The Quantuck Lane Press, 2004)



June 22, 1982, 1982
Mixed media on paper
11 x 8½ inches
Private collection