

BUT FIRST, THIS COMMERCIAL MESSAGE

JERRY JOHNSON THINKS BIG. The artist behind the king-sized murals looming over Atlantic Avenue and Nevins Street in Brooklyn is a billboard painter, and he works in gallons of paint rather than tubes, rollers more than brushes. Walls are his canvas.

Johnson's company, Orange Outdoor, has created a number of high-profile billboards, including one for Top Tomato and another, featuring a big bald head, for Frankel's shoe store (both signs are visible from the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway; Johnson likes to think that drivers get a kick out of them as they whiz by).

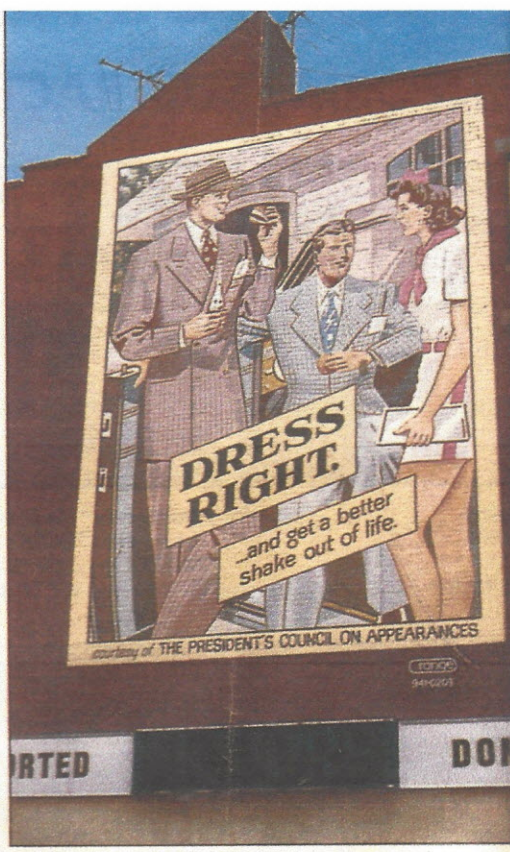
The murals here are also highly visible—but unlike the others, they're spoofs, created by Johnson in moments of whimsy as nostalgic nods to what he refers to as the Golden Age of advertising of the 1930s and '40s. He painted the first in 1982 and has continued with a new design on that spot overlooking Atlantic Avenue every year and a half, more or less.

Johnson got into the advertising business in Cleveland. When he came to the city 13 years ago, he went into the big-sign game. While working on Alex Katz's Times Square extravaganza (the one with 23 heads of women), Johnson met the people at the Public Art Fund and sold them on a deco mural he subsequently painted on the side of a Wall Street building. After that, he did a version of Grant Wood's "American Gothic" for Pintchik Paints off Flatbush Avenue. Then the building at Atlantic and Nevins became available.

"I had a contract with the owner of the place," Johnson says. "He's real positive about murals, by the way, quite a decent guy. Anyway, I subcontracted the space to another guy, who never paid up and left me with the wall. I still had time on the contract, and, though it wasn't a

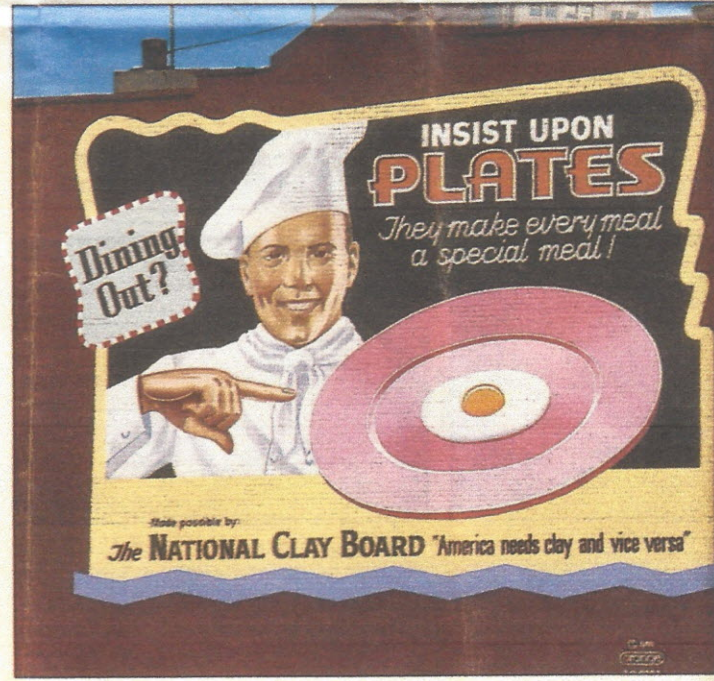


JERRY JOHNSON



MISHA ERWITT

Jerry Johnson (on scaffold) with his latest offering, along with predecessors on the Atlantic Avenue wall from years past.



prudent business move, I decided why not have some fun?" Johnson wants to see more of his brand of mural, commercial or not, in New York: "I'm a bully. I cajole my clients. I believe something that makes people look twice is better than some silly picture and line of copy." If Johnson had it his way, advertisers

would take a cue from California, where he believes visual wit is stronger. "Here, there are a lot of big talkers, though many don't have the guts to go through with it. Guys here just call anybody in the phone book. They're happy with the lowest price. They don't care what it looks like. You don't have to have mediocrity."

Far from being grim on the face of billboards, Johnson holds that the "deadly, awful '70s, we're coming into a new age." He is naturally happy for a big commission—"Times Square obviously." Though he never worked the underwear ads there, it's amusing to think of what they'd look like with Orange Outdoor treatment.