Sue Johnson's

Alternate Encyclopedia

ANDERSON GALLERY
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
Richmond, Virginia
October 18 - December 23, 1996

BOYDEN GALLERY
ST. MARY'S COLLEGE OF MARYLAND
St. Mary's City, Maryland
January 16 - February 14, 1997
Sue Johnson’s work focuses closely on the natural world. Her prints domesticate the wild, familiarizing her audience with the unfamiliar. They ask us as viewers to confront our relationship with nature, our fascination with what animals do, and our fears and anxieties regarding the dark mysteries of the earth’s flora and fauna. Johnson’s animals are not of this world; they seem remote—extinct, stuffed, mute—the creatures of another age. Animated nonetheless, her birds and rabbits are brought to life through clever and witty combinations with other plant and animal forms. Johnson’s wit is decidedly dry, lurking just below the surface, unfolding gradually as we recognize the sheer inventiveness and breadth of her imagination.

But humor is just one part of Johnson’s complex and intelligent work, exemplified most recently by The Alternate Encyclopedia. The Alternate Encyclopedia is a mixed media installation project that began in 1991 and now comprises more than 60 prints. It consists of two interrelated suites of copper plate etchings: Parallel Stories and Evolutionary Paths, each of which is a tour de force of technical and conceptual sophistication. Together, they are a central part of the artist’s ongoing, methodical investigation into the very nature of representation.

Johnson translates and transforms visual material from old scientific research texts, science guides for home use, and popular encyclopedias dating from the 17th through the 20th centuries. She recombines, rearranges and modifies original material in ways that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, between the zones of male and female, the handmade and the machine-made, and art and science. The artist is concerned with the evolutionary relationship between nature and culture and the power that historical texts assert in “fixing” reality. Johnson, in essence, explores the mutability of meaning and the ways in which meaning is contingent upon context. Her images and objects, appropriated from the real world (and from real books), take on new meanings through her own observations, alterations and recombinations, as well as through her own ingenious titles and accompanying texts.

Johnson’s images, which simulate the schematic, technical and descriptive look of old nature texts or encyclopedia pages, demonstrate the seductive power of realism to convince viewers of the truth of her subjects. For example, the obsessive detail of her animal-object mutations tempts us into believing that these objects may have at one time actually existed for a specific purpose. This is true of the Fawn handle tea kettle (limited edition, 1947), to be held—disturbingly—by the belly of the stuffed fawn, and the Baby Rattle (Woodpecker with bells), a dangerously bizarre toy for a child. The Special occasion centerpiece for the buffet (Woodpecker Vessel) piques the viewer’s curiosity. On what occasion would such a strange object have been used?

Fawn handle tea kettle (limited edition, 1947), 1996. Copper plate etching with chine collé (12" X 9").

Even the prints that have more fantastical configurations and are clearly functionless, such as The habitat of the enigmatic Faucet Tree Owl and Rabbit Bush (extinct, last spotted 1838) raise similar issues. Their documentary quality compels us to take them seriously on another level—not as real objects/beings, but rather, as fanciful
creatures of old legends—animals with mythical as opposed to literal realities. The antler-crowned rabbit in the Rabbit Bush, for example, who blooms from the berry-filled stalk of a lush plant sprouting amoebic forms from its leaves, could conceivably have symbolized fertility in the tales of a distant era (female fecundity here complicated by the large rack typically associated with male animals). Johnson further plays with reality in her subtitle: "extinct, last spotted 1838." Referring to the year before the official invention of the daguerreotype, this title alludes to the representational power that scientific illustration had in depicting "reality" in a pre-photographic world.

The illusionistic naturalism of Johnson's prints is reinforced by the way the artist has conceived of their display. Her installations typically recreate the intimate look of a 19th-century natural history museum, with low lighting that encourages a close-up, contemplative viewing of the intricately detailed images. The prints themselves have the antiquated, delicate look of old bookplates, their eggshell color and greenish cast suggesting that they have naturally yellowed over time. Her faux settings are enhanced by the three dimensional objects she has collected and designed to accompany her prints. Simulating odd science experiments, hybrid mutations of plant and animal life, specimen collections, and reconstructions of flora and fauna, these assemblages are thoroughly integral to the artist's project and in many cases relate specifically to individual prints.

Blurring boundaries once again, Johnson delights in placing real organisms in unexpected situations, only here with creatures considered to be at the bottom of the animal kingdom hierarchy. She displays a beetle with decaying leaves attached to the tips of its back feet, which seems preposterous until we learn that it refers to an actual insect. She adheres an insect gall to the painted greenery on a ceramic dish, making it appear to naturally grow out of the pattern. Most startling, she glues real acorns (resembling tiny breasts) into the sharp openings of a metal grater, rendering it at once useless, dangerous, female and thus unreal in its associations.
This is where Johnson’s artistic inspirations become most apparent. Her art recalls the work of modernists Man Ray and Meret Oppenheim, and the surrealist penchant for juxtaposing unrelated objects with verisimilitude that upsets our expectations of reality. Her conflation of art and science call to mind Albrecht Durer’s prints, specifically his woodcut *Rhinoceros* (1515). Johnson’s version, *Reversed Rhinoceros with gauntlets (after AD)* (which adds armor, enhances the tail, and reverses the whole so as to ensure its “copy” status), describes this beast with microscopic detail. Her translation underscores the ontological existence that Durer’s print has assumed after centuries of being copied and reproduced—an existence that is ironic since, in actuality, it is an imaginary beast, rendered from the written description of an animal the artist never saw. Johnson’s “homage” to Durer, then, amounts to meta-commentary—illuminating not the exotic mammal per se, but rather the authority that prints such as Durer’s have wielded in disseminating information of all sorts (scientific, religious, etc.) to the world.

Johnson’s work reminds us as well of the projects of nineteenth century artist-naturalists Charles Willson Peale and John James Audubon. She is, in fact, intrigued by the notion that we can only study and draw animals when they are still—or dead and stuffed, as in the case of Audubon, whose taxidermied birds have, ironically, come to signify documentary truth.¹

*The Alternate Encyclopedia* subtly subverts the popular perception of an encyclopedia as a neutral, authoritative book that provides factual information on all branches of knowledge in a systematic, alphabetized and non-biased manner. Johnson reminds us that encyclopedias inform us as much about our need to classify knowledge (to understand and gain control over the world) as they do about any particular subject contained within their covers. Johnson explores age-old issues about the nature of representation in fresh and provocative ways. Her imaginatively conceived hybrid-objects and meticulously executed creatures, as well as her sharp-witted texts, promise to surprise, delight, sometimes horrify, and always challenge.

- Laura Katzman

Laura Katzman is an art historian who teaches American art and directs the Museum Studies Program at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Lynchburg, Virginia.

Notes
¹ While Audubon’s images seem stiff and frozen to us today, we must remember that in his time they were considered innovative, noted for their fresh and dynamic compositions. Audubon pioneered new sketching and taxidermic techniques, picturing birds as close to their natural states as possible, without the aid of photography. Conversation with Audubon scholar, Carole Anne Slatkin, July 1996. See Slatkin’s catalogue entries in Annette Blaugrund and Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. eds. The Watercolors for The Birds of America (New York: Villard Books and The New York Historical Society), 1993.

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Sue Johnson

BORN
San Francisco, California 1957

EDUCATION
Columbia University, New York, NY, MFA, 1981
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, BFA, Magna cum laude, 1979
Randolph-Macon Woman's College, 1975-76

TEACHING
1993–present  St. Mary's College of Maryland, St. Mary's City, Maryland
1987-89  Parsons School of Design, New York, New York
1983-85  Herron School of Art, Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis, Indiana

GRANTS & AWARDS
1995  Maryland State Arts Council, Individual Artist Award in Visual Arts: 2D
1995, 1990  The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Residency Fellowship
1994  Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation/NEA Regional Fellowship in Painting
1991  Milton and Sally Avery Award for Outstanding Work in the Visual Arts, The MacDowell Colony
1989, 1991  The MacDowell Colony, Residency Fellowship
1988  Millay Colony for the Arts, Residency Fellowship
1987  The Hambidge Center for the Arts and Sciences, Residency Fellowship
1984  New Jersey State Council on the Arts Fellowship
1979  Augusta G. Hazard Fellowship in Painting
1979  Hiram Gee Fellowship in Painting

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS
1995  The Alternate Encyclopedia (project-in-progress), Camp Gallery, The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Sweet Briar, Virginia with additional works at the Mary Cochran Library, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia
1994  Evolutionary Paths, Dance Theater Workshop organized by Artists Space, New York, New York
Recent Paintings, Nancy Drysdale Gallery, Washington, D.C.
1993  Paintings, Boyden Gallery, St. Mary's College of Maryland, St. Mary's City, Maryland
Recent Paintings, RCCA: The Art Center, The Rensselaer County Council for the Arts, Troy, New York
1985  New Paintings, Patrick King Contemporary Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
Animal Icon Too, Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Anthropology Games II, 431 Gallery, Indianapolis, Indiana
1984  Anthropology Games I, Columbus Cultural Art Center, Columbus, Ohio
Recent Paintings, Contemporary Art Workshop, Chicago, Illinois
Animal Icon, Artlink Contemporary Art Space, Fort Wayne, Indiana
1983  Photos, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania
1982  Parallel Wall Segments, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1996  Frankenstein (in Normal), University Gallery, University of Illinois at Normal, curated by Stuart Horodner, Normal, Illinois
Inner Landscapes, Gallery One, curated by Karen Wilkin, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Works on Paper Invitational, Blue Mountain Gallery, New York, New York
1995  Environ, Boyden Gallery, St. Mary's College of Maryland, curated by Sarah Tanguy, St. Mary's City, Maryland
Gallery Group Show, Nancy Drysdale Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Charcoal Drawings: Judith Cotten, Sue Johnson and Carlston Schedel, Jill Newhouse Gallery, New York, New York
A Moment Becomes Eternity: Flowers as Image, Bergen Museum of Art and Science, curated by Michael Walks, Paramus, New Jersey
The Return of the Caduceus Enquis, The Drawing Center, New York, New York
Songs of Retribution, Richard Anderson Gallery, curated by Nancy O'pera, New York, New York
Msr. B's Cario Shop, Thread Waxing Space, curated by Saul Ostrow, New York, New York
Morphology: Art in General, curated by Holly Block, New York, New York
SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS (continued)

1992  
_Beyond Nature: Paintings by Beverly Fishman, Sue Johnson and Drew Lowenstein_, MMC Gallery, Marymount Manhattan College, New York, New York
_Painting_, Proctor Art Center, Bard College, curated by Steven Salzman, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

1991  
_Entre'te_, Michael Walls Gallery, New York, New York
_Triangle Artists Workshop 1991 Exhibition_, Bennington College, Usdan Gallery, Bennington, Vermont
_Skill Alike: Contemporary Still-life Painting_, Rockford College Art Gallery, Rockford College, curated by Barbara Morris, Rockford, Illinois
_Benefit Exhibition, White Columns_, New York, New York

1990  
_The Environment Show_, Krasdale Art Gallery, curated by April Vollmer, Hunts Point, Bronx, New York

1989  
_Works on Paper_, Salena Gallery, Long Island University, curated by Charlotte Kotik, Brooklyn, New York
_Small Scale_, Parsons School of Design, New York, New York
_Boundaries: A Tradition of Drawing at the Herron School of Art_, Herron Gallery, Herron School of Art, Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis, Indiana

1988  
_Benefit Exhibition, White Columns_, New York, New York

1987  
_Soho Center for Visual Artists_, New York, New York

1986  
_24x24_, Ruth Siegel Gallery, curated by Michael Walls and Ruth Siegel, New York, New York
_Painted Surfacing_, Rice Gallery, Albany Institute of History and Art, curated by Thomas Lollar, Albany, New York
_Materials at Media_, Evanston Art Center, curated by Virginia Roeder and Barbara Blades, Evanston, Illinois

1985  
_Peter Plagens, Laurie Fendrick, Sue Johnson and Fred Burton_, Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
_70th Annual Indiana Artists Exhibition_, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
_Paint 1985_, Central Michigan University, curated by Jerold Maddox, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

1984  
_Illinois Artists' Show, Artemisia_, Chicago, Illinois
_Invitational, Patrick King Contemporary Art_, Indianapolis, Indiana

1983  
_Invitational, Contemporary Art Workshop_, Chicago, Illinois
_Faculty Exhibition_, Herron Gallery, Herron School of Art, Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis, Indiana

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Taeffe, Susan, The New Art Examiner, exhibition review, "Anthropology Games" at the Columbus Cultural Art Center, Columbus, Ohio, 1985 (photo).
Garmel, Marion, The Indianapolis News, Indianapolis, Indiana, "Artist Sue Johnson measures civilization by the games we play," 1985 (photo).