

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

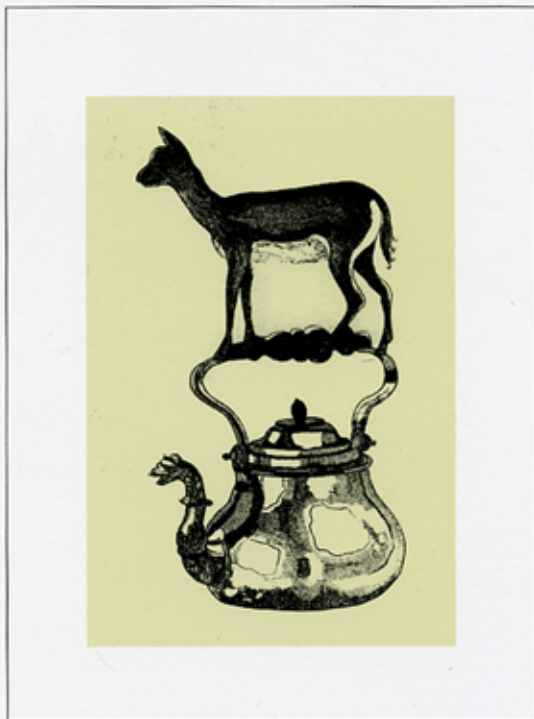
January 16 - February 14, 1997

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



The habitat of the enigmatic Faucet Tree Owl, (also shown, Faucet Tree Monkey), 1996.
Copper plate etching with chine collé (12" X 9").

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



Rabbit Bush (extinct, last spotted 1838), 1996.
Copper plate etching with chine collé (10 3/4" X 8").

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.

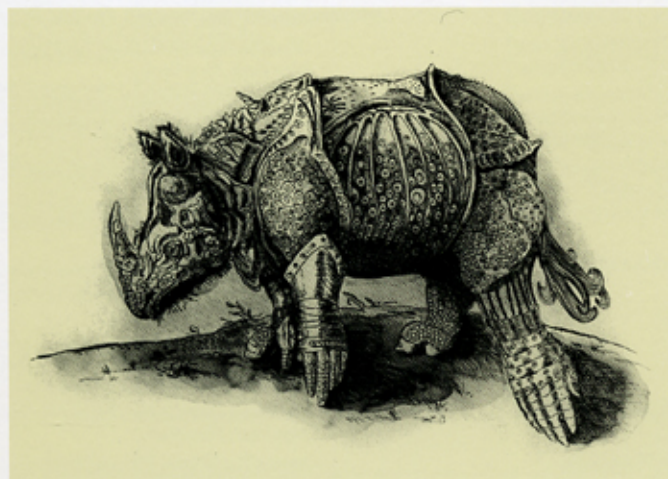
Johnson's work reminds us as well of the projects of nineteenth century artist-naturalists Charles Willson

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.



Reversed Rhinoceros with gauntlets (after AD), 1996.
Copper plate etching with chine collé (12" X 18").

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.

An earlier version of Katzman's essay appeared in Art Papers, vol. 20, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 1996). The author would like to thank the editors for granting reproduction permission.

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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

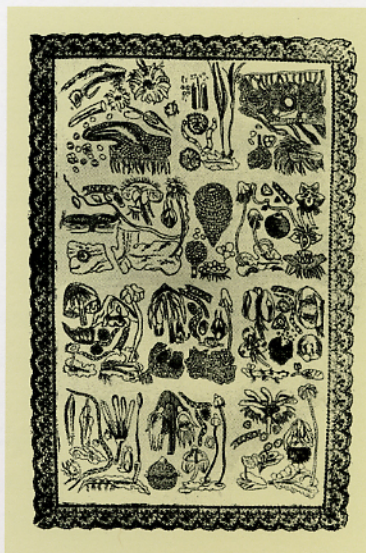
1993— present St. Mary's College of Maryland,
St. Mary's City, Maryland
1992-93 Marymount Manhattan College,
New York, New York
1987-89 Parsons School of Design, New York, New York
1983-85 Herron School of Art,
Indiana University-Purdue University
in Indianapolis, Indiana

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 Mac Dowell Colony
1989, 1991 The Mac Dowell 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 Icons 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 Icons, Artlink Contemporary Artspace,
Fort Wayne, Indiana
1983 *Phobos*, The Pennsylvania State University,
University Park, Pennsylvania
1982 *Parallel Wall Segments*, Syracuse University,
Syracuse, New York



Non-decorative lace (botanical design), 1996.
Copper plate etching with chine collé, (12" X 9").

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 *Environs*, 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.
1994 *The Press: A Print Workshop*, Horodner-Romley Gallery,
New York, New York
1993 *Charcoal Drawings: Judith Cotton, Sue Johnson
and Carleen Sheehan*, Jill Newhouse Gallery,
New York, New York
A Moment Becomes Eternity: Flowers as Image,
Bergen Museum of Art and Science, curated by
Michael Walls, Paramus, New Jersey
The Return of the Cadavre Exquis, The Drawing Center,
New York, New York
Songs of Retribution, Richard Anderson Gallery,
curated by Nancy Spero, New York, New York
1992 *Nature Fabrilis*, Steibel Modern, curated by
Deven Golden, New York, New York
Mssr. B's Curio Shop, Thread Waxing Space,
curated by Saul Ostrow, New York, New York
Morphologic, 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
Pain-ting, Proctor Art Center, Bard College, curated by Steven Salzman, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
- 1991 *Entre'acte*, Michael Walls Gallery, New York, New York
Triangle Artists' Workshop 1991 Exhibition, Bennington College, Usdan Gallery, Bennington, Vermont
Still-Alive: 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 *Vital Signs: Artists Respond to the Environment*, Henry Street Settlement, curated by April Vollmer, New York, New York
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 Charlotta 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 *New Nature Again*, White Columns, curated by Bill Arning, New York, New York
Soho Center for Visual Artists, New York, New York
- 1986 *24 x 24*, Ruth Siegel Gallery, curated by Michael Walls and Ruth Siegel, New York, New York
Painted Surfaces, Rice Gallery, Albany Institute of History and Art, curated by Thomas Lollar, Albany, New York
Materials as 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 Jerrold 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

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- McCoy, Mary, *The Washington Post*, "Three at Drysdale," exhibition review, July 30, 1994.
- Hirsch, Faye, *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, "The Press" at Horodner-Romley Gallery, New York, Vol. XXV, No 2, May-June 1994.
- Watkins, Ellen, *The Star Ledger*, "Museums offer spectacular exhibition focusing on the flower as eternal moment," exhibition review, Bergen Museum of Science and Art, July 4, 1993.
- Cotter, Holland, *The New York Times*, exhibition review, "Nature Fabrilis" at Stiebel Modern, July 3, 1992.
- Ostrow, Saul, catalog essay, *Mssr. B's Curio Shop*, Thread Waxing Space, 1992 (photo).
- Wilkin, Karen, *Partisan Review*, "At The Galleries," exhibition review of "Morphologic" at Art in General and "Beyond Nature" at Marymount Manhattan College Gallery, Vol. LIX No. 3, Summer 1992.
- ed. Hoffman, Jill, *Mudfish No. 6. Art & Poetry*, Box Turtle Press, New York, selected etchings from *Evolutionary Paths* reproduced, 1992.
- Myers, Terry R., catalog essay, *Triangle Artists' Workshop 1991 Exhibition*, Bennington College, Usdan Gallery, Bennington, Vermont, 1992.
- ed. McKinley, James, *New Letters*, University of Missouri at Kansas City, selected plates reproduced from, *Premonition of a Natural History: Fireflies Burning*, 1992.
- Wyatt, Julie, *The Knickerbocker News*, Albany, New York. "A fine, eclectic show at the Albany Institute of Art," 1985 (photo).
- Taaffe, Susan, *The New Art Examiner*, exhibition review, "Anthropology Games" at the Columbus Cultural Art Center, Columbus, Ohio, 1985 (photo).
- Paine, Morgan T., catalog essay, "Animal Icons Too" at Alverno College Art Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1985.
- Garmel, Marion, *The Indianapolis News*, Indianapolis, Indiana, "Artist Sue Johnson measures civilization by the games we play," 1985 (photo).
- Mannheimer, Steven, *The Indianapolis Star*, Indianapolis, Indiana, "Work by Sue Johnson Featured in Two Exhibitions," 1985 (photo).

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