



SUE JOHNSON: Pages from the Alternate Encyclopedia

October 20 - November 25, 2000 Tues-Sat: 11 AM-5 PM

Jan Cicero Gallery 835 West Washington, Chicago, Illinois 60607 Telephone: 312/ 733-9551

What do you get when you cross a bird with a berry branch? A Trickster Quail with a clustered comb!? And when you cross a lizard's rump with scooter wheels? A Post-Da Vinci drag/on/ette that drags!? And when you cross unnatural talents with natural science gone awry? The fancies of delight by artist, Sue Johnson -- a bit of botany and partial beast, high tech and herpetology... and so much more. "Pages from the Alternate Encyclopedia" is off the wall, and now on the walls at Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago, until November 25, 2000. With it, confusion turns to child-like fantasy.

Every child throughout the world has played 'what do you get' and 'what do you call.' From the core of human nature, nature has often seemed like tricks and has been the brunt of tricks. Imagination, in deadly earnest and in jest, has given chimeras, bestiaries, florilegiums, herbals and mythologies. From the primitive, the Classical, from the Basilisk to the Unicorn, from paleolithic caves to Edward Lear's four *Book of Nonsense* offerings, something within confronts the 'what and why,' and asks but still 'why not' ...? Sue Johnson, artist, in 2000 Anno Domini, mindful of a Da Vinci or a Durer, applies acute observation and considerable draughtsmanship to rather wierd alternatives for a natural history.

Modern Lizard After Leonardo (1996) exemplifies Johnson's genre, and as well, how hard it is to beat nature at her game. At the opening, some of M.C. Escher's sketches came to mind: 'curl-up,' the rolling, body-made-wheel creatures of that artist's unorthodox inventiveness. Evolutionist Stephen J. Gould noted in "Kingdom Without Wheels" that the wheel, an exclusively 'Old World' invention, has no analog in the natural world; and then reversed himself... but only because a bacterium, *Escherichia coli*, was found to secrete and use a back propeller (a micro-submarine within our gut). (In Gould's *Hen's Teeth and Horses's Toes*) With *Modern Lizard After Leonardo*, Johnson leaps over Da Vinci, bacillus, and several millennia of future possibilities. And then again... 'why not'?



Horsebean (Uncommon), 1996 Gouache on paper
20"x16" © Sue Johnson 2000

In many of Johnson's pieces, the 'why not' seems plausible; and is made even more so both by her manipulation of long-honored conventions and expectations within fine scientific illustration, and by her virtuostic skill. In Johnson's "Pages..." at the Jan Cicero Gallery, plants and animals cross as well as man's machineries. Some, like *The Trickster Quail and the Cricket*, take mimicry and natural convergence to sly conclusions. In this piece on the exhibit's North wall, a quail sports a comb of clustered fruits, presumably a lure for berry biters -- a Carmen Miranda with an appetite. And among some visitors, thoughts turned to the ultimate motives and ulterior designs of fashion. (But many fish, reptiles and even plants use lures to attract prey.) And... 'why not'?

Part of the delight in Johnson's art lies in her chosen style: the legacy of fine art technique and invention applied to scientific illustration. Her style assumes veracity, authenticity and objectivity; and then ambushes all such assumptions. Art historian, Ernst Hans Gombrich wrote of "Truth and the Stereotype" in his *Art and Illusion* (Phaidon: 1995), and he showed how much we 'see' depends upon what we have *learned* to see -- by concept and convention -- rather than upon what is right before our eyes. In that book, Gombrich

reproduces a 1556 anonymous woodcut from Germany, *Heupferd* (Locust), and that purportedly 'exact counterfeit' of the swarming pest follows, not *entomology*, but rather *etymology*: (German *Heupferd* is literally 'hay horse,' which is what the artist made it). Gombrich also notes how Albrecht Durer's 1515 woodcut, *Rhinoceros*, although drawn from secondhand evidence (and armor-plated *a la* dragon), set a convention of image for three centuries, even for some who had actually seen the beast firsthand. Sue Johnson, in a 1996 exhibition at Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, exhibited, her copperplate etching, *Reversed Rhinoceros with gauntlets (after AD)*. Critic Laura Katzman noted Johnson had it 'reversed' -- "so as to ensure its 'copy' status." Katzman concluded that *Reversed Rhinoceros* offered:

...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.



Quail On Metamorphic Rock, 1998 Gouache on paper 11"x14"

© Sue Johnson 2000

Works such as Edward Lear's *Nonsense Botany* (1871), with such impossibilities as his lily-of-the-valley-like "Manypeeplia Upsidownia," have indulged the non-sensical, often in linework. Had Johnson chosen the style of 'comics,' or drawn upon animation's conventions of expression, we would read the concept or 'gist,' but lack the shock of counterfeit authority. Other, non-Western cultures, might not decipher 'comics' at all; while some, as with the Japanese, might well respond with a greater engagement and sophistication, but one different than ours. With that, the cultural matrix -- Western Scientific art -- would be gone.

At another extreme, with a photographic medium, we are often accustomed to suspect manipulation, even trickery; or to expect mechanical limitations. Johnson's expert technique within a time-intensive, labor-intensive tradition where the *raison d'être* is truth and accuracy (even if it is not always achieved) is crucial to our delight and curiosity in her art. Linework, comics, photography may document and record: art interprets not just its subject, but at times its own context as well. Here, past tradition is a vital factor, and exploited intelligently, attractively. Ultimately, this is all a curious afterthought as to why Johnson's art potentially delights. Delight itself comes from the artist's personal, intuitive choices, allusions and analogies; and her considerable talents.

Art historian, Laura Katzman, noted of Johnson that "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." (*Art Papers*, vol.20, no.1 (Jan/Feb 1996)) Such institutions, as 'encyclopedias' of material items, were intended to reveal nature in full array, and inspire thoughtful, further investigations -- they were for edification, conceptual and even moral. Katzman does note, however, that Johnson's wit-at-a-distance brings that intent full circle, to self-examination:

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.

The "Alternate Encyclopedia" earns its place among such as the many medieval and renaissance musings: mandrake with roots of human form (true to still more ancient roots); "Narcissus," a man-flower from the 1491 *Ortus Sanitatis*. (All shown in *The Art of Botanical Illustration* (1994)). But the "Alternate Encyclopedia" could only happen in our modern age. Sue Johnson's *Self-feeding Cornstalkhopper*, in which a grasshopper sports corncob wings, seems an ecological answer to Gombrich's *Heupferd* from 1556. *Deciduous Flatfish*, a flounder with a tail of fanned oak leaves, echoes anew the mandrake's zoological-botanical chimerality. Johnson's *Mothray Deluxe*, a moth with stingray antennae, harmonizes form echoing form... a flight of delicate beauty with a sting.

Johnson's art is seeped in modern continuities. Today, one current in 'Creationism' holds that the fossil record, while documenting an evolution, is a fraud, an 'instant genealogy' created at once with all else. (Although little explanation is offered as to 'why' such a deception.) Johnson's *Grasshopper Secreting a Fossil Record* seems a co-conspirator in such a contemporary forging of antiquity, for here, a grasshopper exudes an ammonite-like coiled shell: an impish wit in passing stones.

Sue Johnson's series on the East wall does recall a bit of M.C.Escher. She presents three designs for "home furnishing wallpaper design": *Sticky Foot Ant Pattern*, *Snails Eating Snails*, and *Flowering Beetle Pattern*. Although Johnson labels them as wallpaper design, among some visitors to the Jan Cicero Gallery there was malicious talk of wrapping picnic

foods...

Ultimately, however, it's all wonderful fun: 'What do you get,' and 'What do you call' -- Even where nature might drop a few 'nots' from 'why not.' Unnatural talents with natural science gone awry -- The fancies of delight by artist, Sue Johnson. "Pages from the Alternate Encyclopedia" at first delights, and then provokes the obvious: 'Only a Fool Believes his Eyes.' Upon reflection however, one is reminded of two important facts: One can only parody what is significant. The trivial is unworthy, and quickly enough becomes unknown. And for one to toy with a subject, there must first be a deep engagement by it. Here, a viewer's delight is also a honoring... of the artist, and of the genre which she herself profoundly understands and loves.

For the child within the man -- for those who have dabbled with Darwin and turned to Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll for relief -- Sue Johnson catalogues the fauna and flora of a fairy-tale. Enjoy it now, enjoy it up until November 25, 2000, at Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago. "Pages from the Alternate Encyclopedia," the art of Sue Johnson is on display, together with work by Dannielle Tegeder, Victoria McAlister, and Barbara Rogers.

Sue Johnson received her MFA from Columbia University, New York, N.Y. (1981) and her BFA, Magna cum laude, from Syracuse University, N.Y., (1979). She currently teaches at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Additional information about Sue Johnson and her *Alternate Encyclopedia* may be found at <http://www.smcm.edu/~srjohnson/>

--G. Jurek Polanski

Jurek Polanski has previously written and art edited for *Strong Coffee* in Chicago. He's also well known and respected among the Chicago museums and galleries. Jurek is currently a Visual Arts Correspondent for ArtScope.net.

Editorial Note: Books mentioned in www.artscope.net reviews may be purchased through this site's Barnes & Noble link. Of related interest are Stephen Jay Gould's *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes* (W.W.Norton: 1983). The genre Sue Johnson's art draws upon is excellently summarized by *Images of Science: A History of Scientific Illustration* by Brian J. Ford (Oxford: 1993) and *The Art of Botanical Illustration* by Wilfrid Blunt and William T. Stearn (Antique Collectors' Club/The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: 1994). For the pensive connoisseur, E.H.Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (Phaidon: 1995) is highly recommended.