THE BOLD ART OF SUE JOHNSON

"Sprout and Dog Soup"
(Slip cast vitreous china,
6.5 x 9.5 x 2.75 inches, 2007)

by Jennifer Fossell O'Sullivan

It is early January in eastern Wisconsin, but Sue Johnson might as well be living in a tropical rain forest. The thermometer is stuck at 85° and the air hangs heavily with 75 to 85% humidity. Johnson, professor of art in the Department of Art and Art History, is not dressed for such conditions and the fact that her feet are encased in steel-toed work boots and her face partially covered with plastic safety goggles doesn't make the heat any easier to take.

"Mac & Cheese TV Dinner"
(Slip cast vitreous china, 6.25 x 8 x .75 inches, 2007)

This is not a story about global warming. Rather, it's a story about how a painter traveled to the Midwest to spend two months making ceramics in a factory that manufactures sinks and toilets. The factory is the Kohler Company—a name you no doubt recognize from its "The Bold Look of Kohler" advertising campaign emphasizing the products' upscale, cutting-edge design. But why the heat? It turns out that a hot, moist environment is required to keep the clay from cracking.

If the idea of a painter devoting a chunk of her year off to making plaster molds and working with clay sounds a bit unusual, you're in agreement with Johnson. Even though she had done a show at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 2006, Johnson had assumed that only sculptors could apply to the company's Arts/Industry program. But, in fact, the Kohler Company actively seeks out artists from all different kinds of media—especially those for whom ceramics will be a new experience.

An artist who is drawn to painting, in part, by the meditative and solitary nature of the work, Johnson was surprised by how much she enjoyed making pottery. As she wrestled with mounds of clay, feeling its clamminess and contours in her hands, she was struck with a sense of déjà vu. Like a violinist whose fingers have memorized the notes, her hands remembered the act of modeling an object, smoothing away its rough edges. The physical memory was linked to powerful emotion as memories of working with clay alongside her late mother rose to the surface.

When I met with Johnson at her house, she pointed out some of her mother's pottery. Inside a glass-fronted cabinet, orb-like vessels in rich shades of brown and blue shared space with her own collection of vintage "Big Boy" plastic figures. The unlikely pairing offers a view into Johnson's sensibility and her characteristic offbeat way of seeing the world. As a painter, she is interested in "the relationships between things." Rather than looking at an object on its own, she prefers to investigate what happens when two or more objects—often dissimilar—come close or touch one another. As captured in her work, the results are uncanny and strangely gripping, a kind of visual puzzle that exists for its own sake and not for its solution.

The body of work Johnson created at Kohler is centered around depictions of food. There is also a hearty helping of nostalgia in her work—figures of commercial icons like the Pillsbury Dough Boy and Sprout (companion to the Jolly Green Giant), original 1950s TV dinner trays and partitioned plates, fluted Jell-O molds and fawn knickknacks that look like they're straight from a Baby Boomer's nursery. Even the colors are the soft, muted pastels that suggest an earlier time—sea-foam green, butter-yellow, filmy pink. Some of the pieces are embellished with decals—like the TV dinner of macaroni and cheese with a decaled lobster in the space where you'd expect a slice of Salisbury steak.

While the colors are easy on the eye, they don't exactly make one want to gobble up these faux meals. That is what Johnson intended. She wasn't going for verisimilitude but, rather, was interested in an aesthetic that announced "what you see is fake food." But while these creations aren't appealing to the palate, they are satisfying to look at. They don't assault the viewer with a bold statement (her art is not about being overtly didactic, Johnson notes); rather, they make you want to keep looking at them, the visual experience combining with the cognitive process of sorting out what they're all about. Because the idea of creating ceramics from molds is about being able to make multiples of an object, the work has an interesting correspondence to the mass-produced food it portrays.

As in Johnson's paintings, you're likely to encounter a yoking of two unlikely objects. What, for example, is a fawn doing peeking out from inside the well of a Jell-O mold? Too, there is a tendency in Johnson's paintings towards objects looking outwards or at one another. The same is true of many of her ceramics, which seem to examine you even as you are studying them. Her work at Kohler makes use of anthropomorphic figures and icons of advertising, the likes of which appear in many of her paintings. But as three-dimensional objects, Johnson's ceramic figures have an added vitality. "These pieces are more outrightly humorous in some ways," she says. "I envisioned them as characters walking out of a storybook and onto your dining room table."

Johnson cleans up a recent casting of the "Piggy Bank Soufflé.

"Turtle Soup"
(Slip cast vitreous china, 7.25 x 7.25 x 2.5 inches, 2007)

"Jell-O Surprise (fawn)"
(Slip cast vitreous china, 9.5 x 9.5 x 3.5 inches, 2007)

Given her interest in tangency, it seems fitting that Johnson would spend two months creating art in a program that literally puts artists side by side with factory workers. The artists use the same material and processes used by Kohler's factory associates to create sinks and toilets. For both, the most crucial materials are plaster (to create the molds) and clay (which will be fired in a kiln to create the final, finished object).

After spending two months in the factory, Johnson observed that she'll never look at toilets and sinks in quite the same way again. Listening to her description of the elaborate process that is required to transform a shapeless lump of clay into a finished object, neither will I. Using one of her works (the Pillsbury Dough Boy face-down on a plate, a pat of butter melting on his behind), Johnson took me backwards through the process.

After the artist has created a unique object, in Johnson's case by combining and altering found objects, the first step is to create a mold—arguably the most complicated part of the entire undertaking. The artist must carefully study the object she wants to mold in order to figure out where the parting lines should go; otherwise, the mold won't come apart. (The most complicated mold Johnson made consisted of five parts.) The object is set into a bed of clay that meticulously follows the first set of the parting lines and is surrounded by a wooden coddle. For each part of the mold, plaster is mixed and poured. Following a series of additional steps that would take a page to describe, the finished plaster mold is left to dry.

Rather than looking at an object on its own, she prefers to investigate what happens when two or more objects—often dissimilar come close or touch one another.

A couple of days later, the artist fills the mold with slip, or liquid clay. The plaster immediately begins to draw out the moisture from the clay, which helps to create a wall within the mold, a process that can take from 15 to 40 or more minutes, depending on the size of the object. After the slip has set up within the mold, the excess is poured out, creating a hollow object like a chocolate Easter bunny. After several other steps, the object is extracted—ever so carefully—from its mold.

Free from its plaster bed, the object is left to air dry for about five days. Next comes the glazing. Like Kohler's factory associates preparing to beautify humble toilets with whatever colors design-conscious consumers currently favor, Johnson heads for the hulking vats of glaze. These big drums are equipped with sprayers; Johnson begins by covering her piece in a flat white which will turn glossy and creamy after nearly a day in the kiln.

But unlike toilets and sinks which, for the most part, are glazed with one color, Johnson's objects require painstaking brushwork and a wide palette of colors. As much as possible, she tried to use the muted industrial colors currently in production at Kohler to lend her food objects the look of mass production. Some colors required special mixing and a lot of trial and error. For example, Johnson notes that it was a real challenge to come up with the peculiar orange of macaroni and cheese. Each time she mixes a new color, Johnson applies it to a tile and fires it in the kiln to see how it will turn out.

Once glazed, the object is loaded onto large, wheeled cars that move along a track and into the kiln to be

(left) A selection of works created at Kohler's Arts/Industry program (Slip cast vitreous china, 2007)

(right) "Steak and Mr. Potatohead" (Slip cast vitreous china, 10.25 x 10.5 x 3 inches, 2007)

fired. Artists' work is placed on the same cars as the factory workers' products; this means the Pillsbury Dough Boy might lie sandwiched between a couple of sinks, or miniature turtles and deer might crouch beside a toilet. The kilns, which fire 24 hours a day, operate on 17- to 22-hour cycles. Artists were expected to be there when their finished objects came out of the kiln. This meant that if Johnson's object entered the kiln at 11 a.m. to be fired for 18 hours, she must return to the factory to claim it at 3 a.m. In an attempt to avoid such a late-night rendezvous with the Dough Boy, Johnson did her best to plan her firing times accordingly. When all is said and done, the process of going from the mold to finished piece can take nearly two weeks.

Kohler provides a technical assistant, a trained artist, to assist artists-in-residence as they get the hang of working with industrial materials and processes. Johnson points out, however, that artists are expected to be self-sufficient. There is no special treatment. This means lugging heavy buckets of plaster, sweeping up the ever-present white, powdery clay at the end of each day, and hoisting heavy molds up onto the drying rack. Johnson, a painter accustomed to feather-light brushes and solitude, calls it "an alien experience."

Yet even as this radically unfamiliar environment presented its share of physical challenges, it introduced Johnson to a much more social form of making art. Because some objects were so heavy, she and her fellow Kohler artist, Jon Rappleye, relied on each other and factory associates to move their work. The men and women who craft sinks and toilets, some of whom have worked in the factory their whole lives, were often willing to share tips that made the artists' work go more smoothly. Johnson was especially grateful for the help of one worker, who came to the rescue when her mold of Sprout kept cracking and "collapsing like a soufflé." He advised her to mix together a bit of slip and water and then rub it on the inside of the mold. A simple enough procedure, but it worked like a charm. This exchange gets to the core of what the Arts/Industry program is all about—breaking down barriers between the arts and industry, between artist and industrial artisan.

The Kohler Arts/Industry program has its roots in an exhibition of contemporary American ceramics that was organized by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 1973. The participating artists, Arts Center staff, and the management of the Kohler Company were so taken with the experience that they decided to launch a one-month pilot residency in its industrial pottery. Over the years, this residency has grown into a year-round program that brings 16 to 22 artists to Kohler in any given year. In a description of the Arts/Industry program, the Kohler company notes that it has "been cited often as the most unusual and fruitful collaboration between industry and the arts in the United States, if not the world."

The program is administered by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in nearby Sheboygan which, while it is tangentially related to the factory, functions as its own separate entity. At any given time, the program has four artists in residence, two in the pottery, and two in the foundry. Artists are provided with housing, round-trip travel, use of equipment and space, technical expertise, photographic services, and a weekly stipend; in return, they are asked to donate one work to the John Michael Kohler Center and one to the Kohler Company permanent collections. (Because she wanted her individual objects to be viewed as a whole, Johnson decided to donate a full set of her work to be divided between the Art Center and Kohler Company collections.)

The experience has given Johnson a new understanding of sculpture, something she calls "a really material-oriented situation." In the future, she may decide to reapply to the Arts/Industry program. She is also considering the possibility of paying a company to do the grunt labor of making molds which she would then use to cast her objects in ceramics or, possibly, plastics. The idea of creating work that combines two- and three-dimensional objects fascinates her.

As our time together drew to a close, I asked Johnson if spending two months making ceramics at Kohler has had any influence on her painting. She paused and thought for a moment, but decided "it's too early to tell." She had, after all, only been home for a couple of weeks. But the most tangible take-away from her experience at Kohler—besides her work itself, of course—has been the surprising realization that she *really likes* working with ceramics and the confidence that she now has the skills and experience to do more with them in her future work.

All works were created in Arts/Industry, a long-term residency program of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. Arts/Industry takes place at and is funded by Kohler Co.