

sue johnson

CABINET OF WONDERS:  
MARVELOUS TRANSFORMATIONS  
AND OTHER  
ACCIDENTAL IMAGES

List Gallery / Swarthmore College





**Sue Johnson**

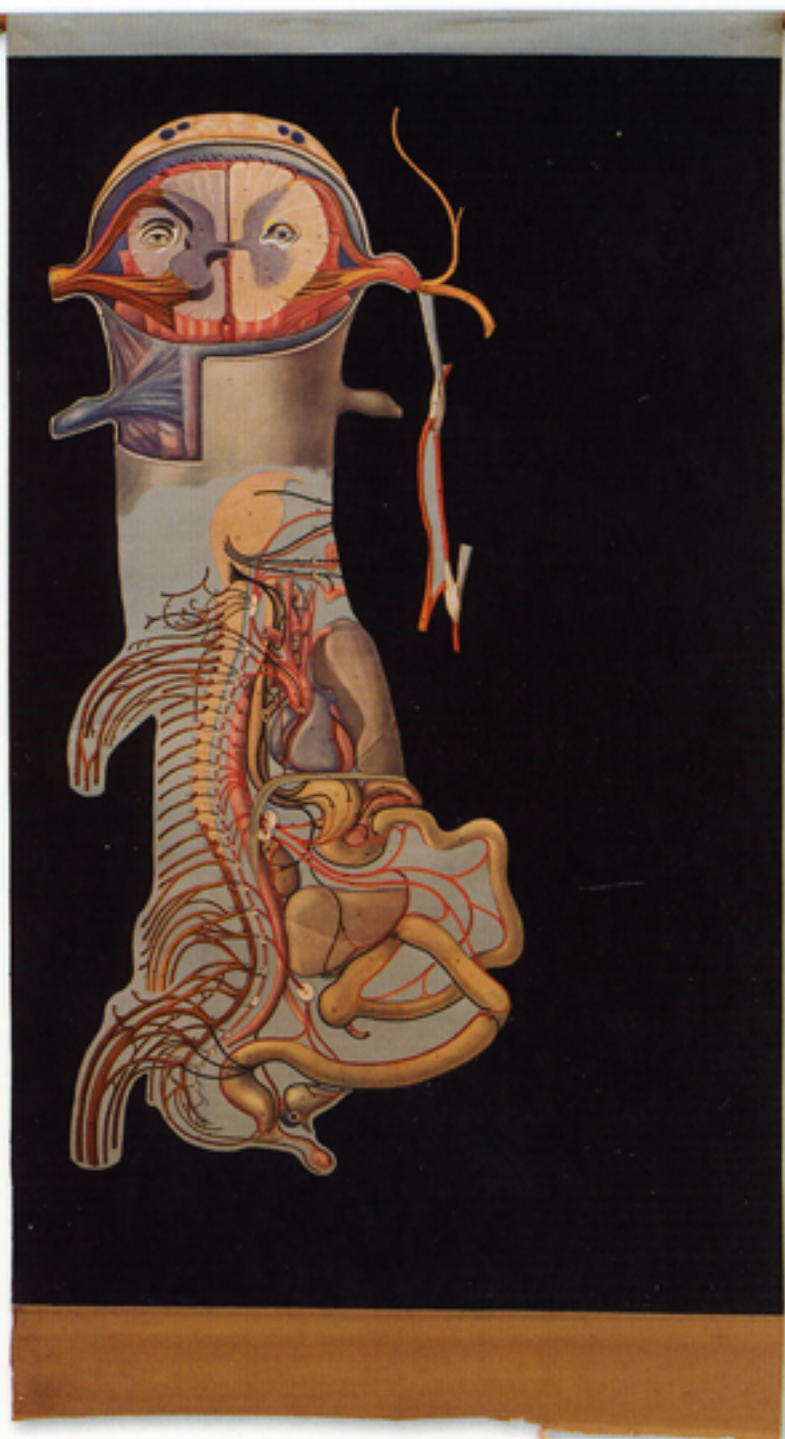
*Cabinet of Wonders:  
Marvelous Transformations  
and Other  
Accidental Images*

**McCabe Library**

**Sue Johnson**

*Cabinet of Wonders:  
Sources and Resources*

January 25–February 28, 2007



**Explorer**

acrylic on printed reproduction

74 X 42.5 INCHES

2005



## wondrous imagination

by Celia Rabinovitch

Celia Rabinovitch is an artist, writer, professor, and director of The School of Art, The University of Manitoba. Her publications include *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art*.

### a new territory

In *A Cabinet of Wonders*, Sue Johnson leads us on an imaginative journey that overthrows the conventional division of knowledge between art and science. As she contemplates the intricacies of the physical world as seen through science, she uncovers unexpected echoes between forms, images, and symbols that reconfigure the world anew. *Cabinet of Wonders* understands matter through visual analogies—as forms, surfaces, or functions become connected as juxtapositions or visual puns without reference to their familiar function. An ironic wit rules this disconcerting dream of the material world.

Like the Surrealists, Johnson's art makes a deliberate and irreverent assault on the scientific view of the world with its categorization according to shape (morphology), purpose, and scale—turning conventional wisdoms topsy-turvy in a visionary contemporary world's fair of knowledge. *Cabinet of Wonders* refers to images unearthed through the artist's discovery of uncanny similarities between forms in nature, scientific illustration, and material culture as well as her playful and anthropomorphic transformations of mineral to vegetable and animal and back again.

It is no accident that the *cabinet de curiosités* or *wunderkammer* (German—wonder cabinet), to which this exhibition's title refers, was designed to hold what the French ethnocentrically collected—an entire range of objects of exotic provenance obtained from India, China, or Africa. These curiosities excited the European imagination with their unusual forms, symbols, and surfaces that had little connection to the familiar lexicon of European art. The growing appeal and status of these collections in the 17th century had developed from a historical lineage through

the Renaissance, and even earlier from classical antiquity when the Roman taste for exoticism popularized pageantry, zoological or botanical collections, and foreign mystery religions from Asia and North Africa.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the cabinet was that its collections leveled the meaning of its diverse curiosities—forms as dissimilar as unusual minerals, gems, and fossils of earlier animal life; shreds of exotic animal life such as peacock feathers, elephant tusks, or teeth; or foreign cultural artifacts understood only as oddities. In a similar method of egalitarian collage and combination, Sue Johnson's *Cabinet of Wonders* transforms modern material culture with the impartial yet curious eye of an early ethnographer. She takes as her point of departure the common images and illustrations that for most of us are so ubiquitous they have become invisible. These include biology charts, advertising images, scrapbooks, Victoriana, packaging, and commercial "take aways" including the Pillsbury dough boy and other cultural detritus now seen as collectibles by a society of eBay shoppers. In this sense hers is an innocent and even populist eye finding meaning where others have overlooked it.

### contemplation, reverie, and imagination

Contemplation of the natural world was already established as a starting point for artistic creativity in the Renaissance, when artists such as Leonardo da Vinci remarked on the uses of sustained contemplation as a way to imagine new forms. Leonardo tells the artist to "arouse the mind to various inventions" by looking at "a wall spotted with stains" to find forms reminiscent of clouds, landscapes, battles, and figures that will become the inspiration for painting—"like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or

1. Paris Ms. A, fol. 102v (B.N. 2038, fol. 22v); Richter 1970, vol. 1, p. 321, no. 508: "Modo d'aume[n]tare e destare lo i[n]gignio a varie i[n]ue[n]tioni."



word you choose to imagine.” After Leonardo, as the taste for virtuosity developed into mannerism, a similar approach to exciting the imagination appeared in the notion of “the grotesque,” in which the evocative forms of rocky caves from which watery springs emerged were inspiration for the architectural gargoyles that decorated gardens and grottos. As a form of wit, the grotesque employed the exaggerated movements of vaudeville or the excesses of caricature, but it also evoked frightening forms that suggested a strange and distorted nature. This contradiction between what is darkly humorous and what is grotesque forms the imaginative matrix of Johnson’s art. It is precisely this contradiction that compels the viewer to continue to look, captured by an ambivalent state of mind in the presence of her art.

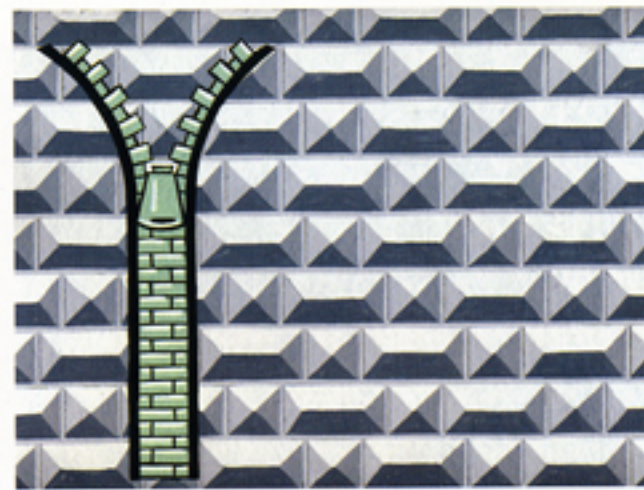
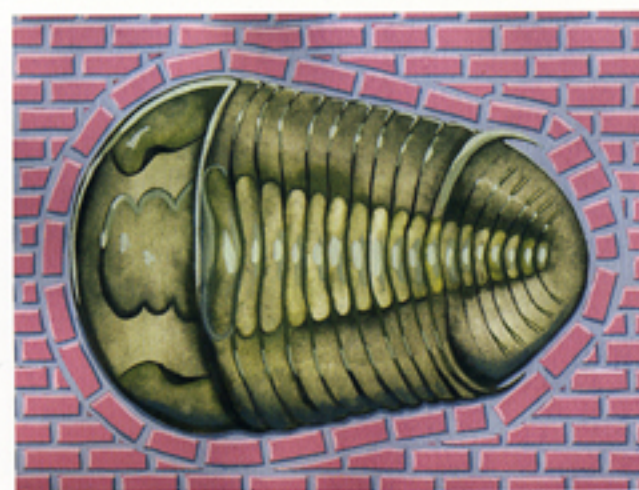
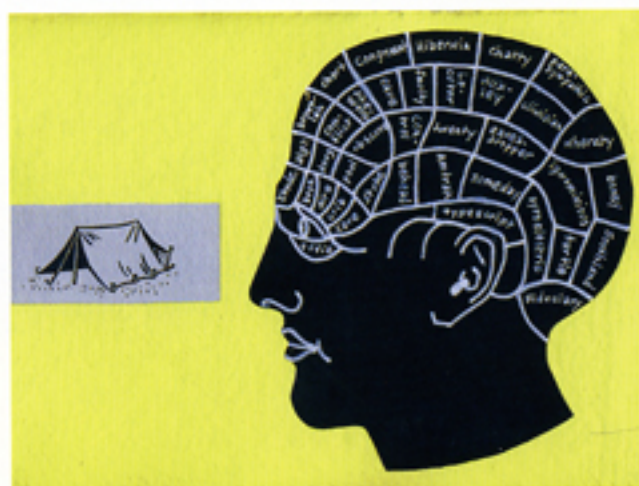
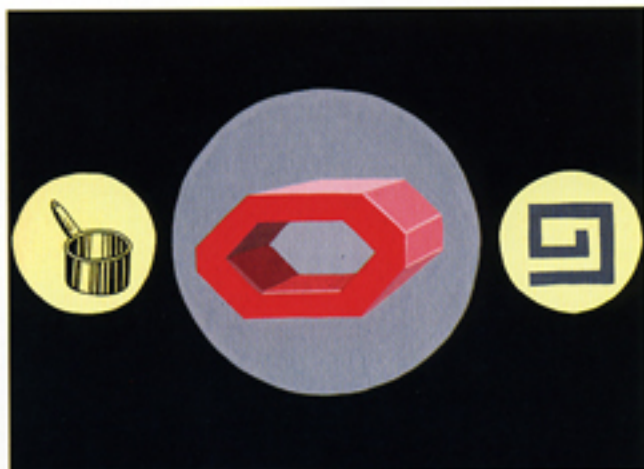
The artist’s imagination expresses itself vividly in the *Poem-objects*, small gouaches that combine two or more images into a new meaning. Created simultaneously with the larger images that employ biology charts from 2005–06, they form a kind of *mode d’emploi*, literally “instructions for use” for understanding the rest of her work. For the artist, these *Poem-objects* become part of a process of discovery through exercising the imagination, rather like playing scales or rehearsing a dance movement. For the viewer, the *Poem-objects* with their fusion of meanings evoke a visual haiku full of potential meanings and a feeling of reverie.

Previous to the meditations of the *Poem-objects*, which form the visual vocabulary elaborated in the larger works, Johnson worked on her series *Episodes in a Fantastic Landscape* for several years. Works in this series provoke the viewer with visual puns. The panorama *The Fundamental Laws of Levitation* depicts a bizarre combination of images including a squirrel whose tail becomes a turkey’s head in a manner reminiscent of fetishes or power objects that combine diverse animal parts. Whereas *The Fundamental Laws of Levitation* invents creatures that grotesquely co-mingle animal and vegetable forms, other panoramic scrolls such as *Vision of the Cantaloupe*

*Girl* present a cinematic play with disparities of scale and the juxtapositions so often used in advertising to rivet the viewer’s attention. In this image, the fish, squirrel, and melon-headed doll are unsettling protagonists, and the viewer must invent the drama. *Ant Farm at Land’s End* literally reverses our customary sense of scale, making the minuscule large (as does a microscope) and the human small. The placement of images such as the truck or the bird near the edge of the frame extends the invented space into our own. Visitors to Johnson’s studio saw the various components of these horizontal paintings in a state of flux—being moved from one area to another, against different backgrounds or combinations of color, until the images found their rightful place. Her placement of the images was determined less by formalist concerns, at which Johnson is accomplished, than by the play of visual ideas. The analogies and metaphors evoked by memorable images and similar forms are fused into something resembling a visual pun. Because it is a visual paradox, we cannot express it in words, but must continue to ponder it over time.

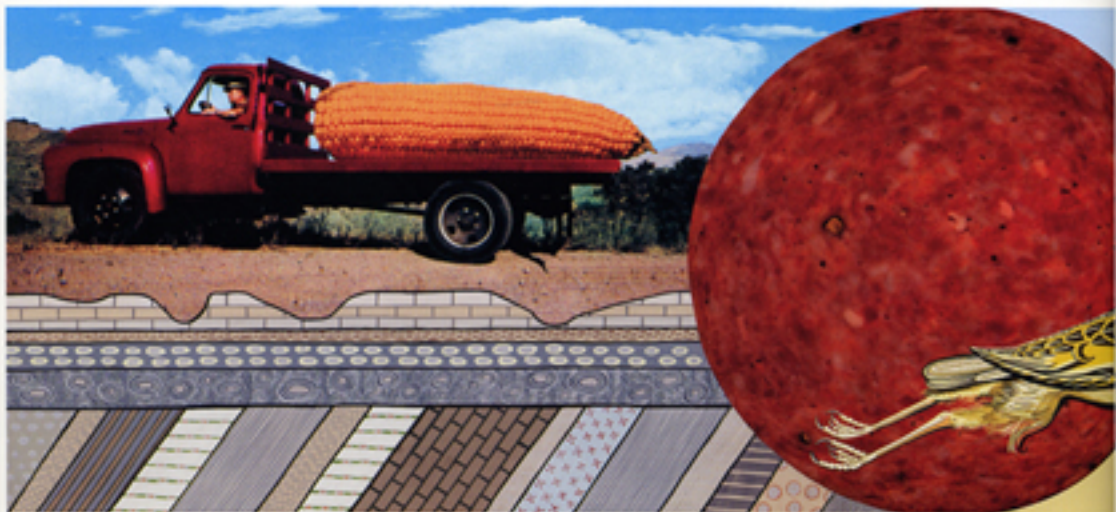
The commanding *Abstractions*, painted on vintage biology charts, are the point of departure for the rest of the exhibition, showing the artist wresting particular images and meanings from various conventional anatomical illustrations. These *Abstractions* provoke curiosity, laughter, and unease simultaneously. Like the *Episodes in a Fantastic Landscape*, which she developed at the same time, the paintings form vertical scrolls. The inference of portability suggests that they might be used for instruction in some alternative encyclopedia of knowledge. But whereas the panoramic landscapes rely on the juxtaposition of various material culture images to create a new meaning, the vertical paintings present a new form or creature. In *Explorer*, Johnson transforms the conventional anatomy of an abdomen and digestive tract into a Jules Verne-like explorer peering out at us from a submersible contraption surrounded by oceanic darkness. The tubing of this explorer’s gear is transformed from veins and a digestive tract, and its tensile extensions suggest







The Fundamental Laws of Levitation  
Gouache on archival inkjet print  
16 x 48 inches  
2006



Ant Farm at Land's End  
Gouache on archival inkjet print  
16 x 48 inches  
2006



portable air tanks and wiring. Even the *Explorer's* shocked eyes convey surprise at its new situation. This work makes the inanimate become animate when organs vital to the human body become an entirely new creature that challenges our habitual understanding of biology. By contrast, but in a similar strategy of reversal, *Muscle Candyland* also mingles internal and external. This elegant image shows detailed striations of the human musculature no longer contained by the human form but extending into a continuous landscape of sinewy line and color. The image embodies a primal beauty through patterns reminiscent of animal skins as well as layers of sedimentary rock. Similarly, *Eardrum-Agate* merges mineral with animal, developing a fantastic landscape replete with lush colors and detailed textures.

#### expeditions with the artist

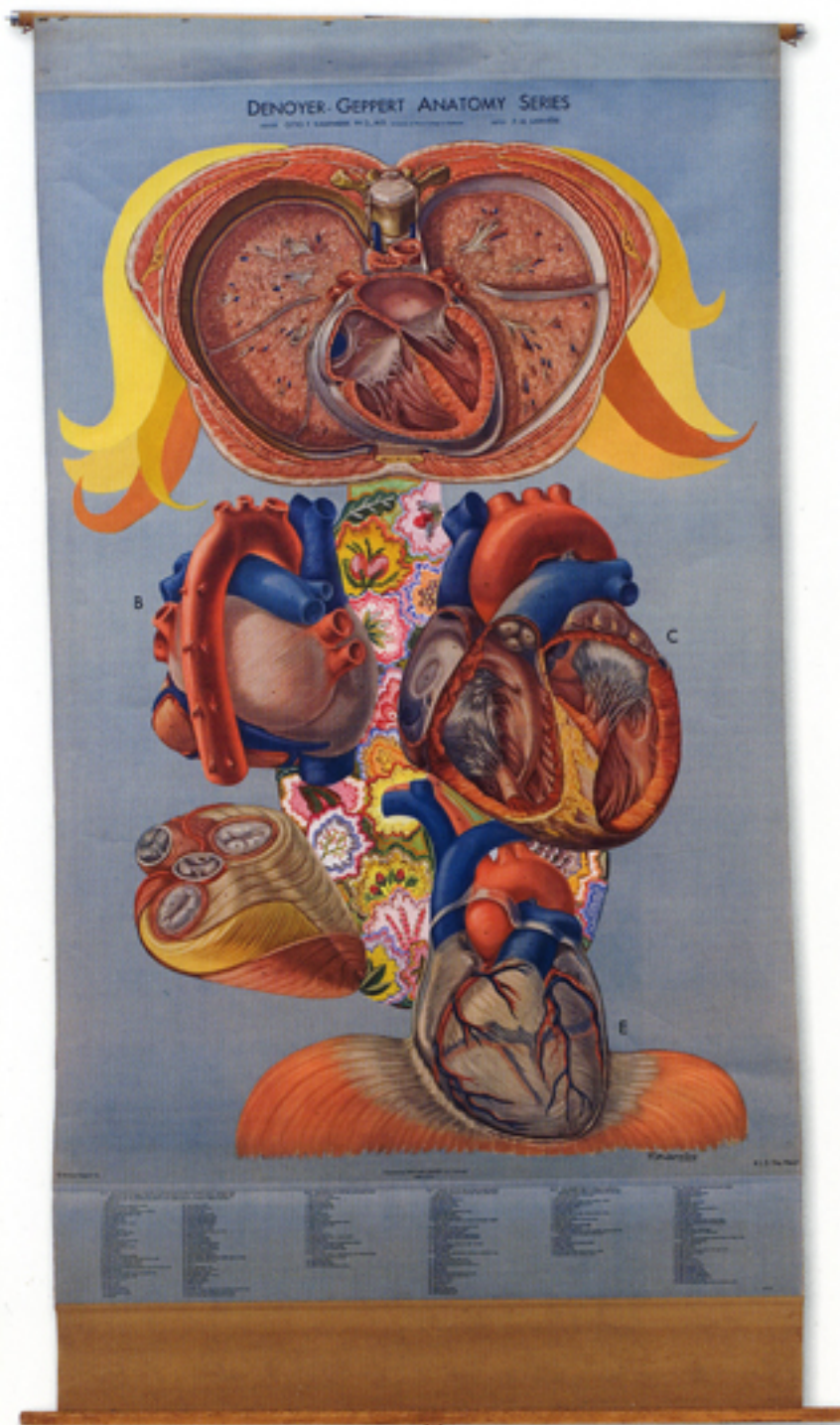
Sue Johnson has created a new body of work that intrigues us with rich meanings, textures, and ideas. She intentionally adopts those creative processes of juxtaposition, analogous thinking, imaginative contemplation, and wit that have impelled artists since the Renaissance. Her work conveys the visual ideas so commonly missing from the deconstructive world of contemporary art practice, with its acquiescence to the thin air of semiotic language and its professional artist as apologist for the very existence of art as a creative endeavor.

Much could be made of Johnson's artistic lineage from the Renaissance, through mannerism in the 17th-century cabinets of curiosities to the 18th-century encyclopedists and their relentless categorization of knowledge into a comprehensible framework. Her earlier body of work, *The Alternative Encyclopedia*, inverted the 18th-century encyclopedists' high purpose,

**Muscle Candyland**  
acrylic on printed reproduction  
74 X 42.5 INCHES  
2005







reconfiguring knowledge through her intrepid imagination rather than through scientific categories or classifications. However, these historical connections might well miss the point.

The strength of Johnson's work lies in her imaginative power to take material forms and transform them into metaphor. She explores both artistic and scientific perceptions of the material world to bring these two modes together—the artist's creative contemplation and material imagination, and the scientist's curiosity and analysis. She playfully yet affectionately regards objects that become detached from the functions of daily life and the methods of scientific categorization. Her wondrous transformations engage the contemporary viewer with intentional wit that captures a world having roots in our own, yet one in which contradictory meanings, visual puns, and playful transformations occur—of mineral to vegetable, vegetable to animal, and animal to industrial object and back. This "recombinant imagination" takes as its subject scientific and natural imagery, culled from 20th-century anatomy charts, 19th-century anthropomorphic imagery from Victorian scrapbooks, and medieval bestiaries. While Johnson researches these vintage and historical artifacts—she is a self-confessed eBay addict—she is not merely a voyeur documenting the peculiarities of the ways in which human beings have constructed the ways of science. Rather, she presents us with an effervescent imagination in the face of the natural, animal, and industrial worlds and the structures of science and pseudo science. In her art, she creates a pure enjoyment of the weird combinations, uncanny similarities, and the artist's rebellious habits of mind that find in the material world an endlessly creative meditation to be shared with us, her traveling companions.

**Cross section of a Blonde Girl**  
acrylic on printed reproduction  
74 X 42.5 inches  
2005



#### Sue Johnson

Sue Johnson was born in San Francisco, California in 1957. She earned a B.F.A. in studio art from Syracuse University and an M.F.A. in painting from Columbia University. One-person exhibitions of the artist's work have been held at the Tweed Museum of Art at the University of Minnesota Duluth, the Midwest Museum of American Art, Jan Goerz Gallery, the John Michael Kohler Art Center, Carleton College, the McLuan Project for the Arts, the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University, the Munson-Williams Proctor Institute, Bucknell University, Illinois State University, and Artists Space. She is the recipient of grants and fellowships from the Maryland State Arts Council, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation/National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the American Antiquarian Society and the American Philosophical Society, and residency fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, Art Omi International Artists' Colony, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Jantzi Artist Residency Program, Ragdale Foundation, and Milay Colony for the Arts. She is currently the Stephen Muler Distinguished Professor of Art in the Department of Art and Art History at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

#### Flight of the Landshark

Gouache on archival inkjet print  
16 x 48 inches  
2006



#### Expedition to Rock Bottom

Gouache on archival inkjet print  
16 x 48 inches  
2006

#### Acknowledgements

The List Gallery is pleased to organize two complementary installations of Sue Johnson's work at Swarthmore College. We are fortunate not only to feature *Cabinet of Wonders: Marvelous Transformations and Other Accidental Images*, but also to present *Sources and Resources* in McCabe Library, an exhibition that brings together archival images and materials from both the library's and the artist's personal collection. Through viewing these sources we gain insight into Johnson's engagement with history and popular culture, and we glimpse the creative genesis of many of the compositions on display in the List Gallery. In turn, Johnson's fantastic transformations allow us to explore the ways in which her sources are themselves imaginatively constructed. Both exhibitions and this accompanying catalog are made possible through a generous grant from the William J. Cooper Foundation. Funding for this catalog was also made possible by the St. Mary's College of Maryland Foundation. I am especially grateful to Pamela Harris, McCabe Library instruction and outreach librarian, and Amanda Watson, reference intern, for their collaborative support and expertise.

Andrea Packard List Gallery Director