

MAIER MUSEUM OF ART

98<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

# *Evolutionary Drift*

*Works by Sue Johnson and Pam Longobardi*

# Evolutionary Drift

Works by Sue Johnson and Pam Longobardi

on view through August 8, 2009

**T**he 98<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition features two artists, Sue Johnson of Maryland and Pam Longobardi of Georgia, whose work overlaps thematically.

*Evolutionary Drift* explores relationships between humans and nature. Johnson and Longobardi expose societal overindulgence, excess, and consumption and subsequent transformative effects on the environment. Both artists are interested in what happens at specific intersections of culture and nature. They reveal these intersections, with Longobardi's work rooted in fact and Johnson's images seeming to reside in fiction. Both artists encourage us to question our cultural trajectory and, with both serious and satirical voices, invite us to contemplate the notion of evolution drifting off-course.

Themes of extinction and mutation are present in both artists' work, but the ways in which they deliver their messages are distinct and complementary. Both artists take a somewhat scientific approach, in Johnson's words, "making art as a response to what you've discovered and collected."



Pam Longobardi, *Drifters*, 2007,  
Fuji crystal archive digital print on plexi,  
36 x 50 inches.



Longobardi travels to distant shores collecting what is essentially run-off from our consumer society. As part of her ongoing *Drifters* project, she chooses objects from mountains of colorful plastic doodads, mostly unrecognizable from their original form, broken down and modified by time and currents. These she assembles into mosaic-type installations like an entomologist preserving specimens. Her 2007 photographs entitled *Drifters* and *Messages in Bottles* provide visual context for her source material. She explains, "I collected the material in these works as it washed in from the Pacific Basin onto the South Point of Hawaii, the southernmost point of the United States. The currents transport and mix the debris into a colony of drifters that temporarily alight and gather on the beaches awaiting the next hurricane, tidal shift or big swell. I was both amazed and shocked by the visual impact of the astonishing array of marine debris I encountered." Longobardi speaks of her found plastic objects as nomadic travelers. This tendency toward the anthropomorphic is also prevalent in Johnson's work.

Another source material for Longobardi is defunct currency which she uses to create collages alluding to issues of value and worth in a dramatically changing world. In *Event Horizon* from 2006, doves



Pam Longobardi, *Eye of the Ocean*, 2008, devalued currency, ink, glass beads and pin pricks on paper, 20 x 24 inches.



Pam Longobardi, *Aftermath*, 2004, oil, enamel, patinas, pigment and collage on copper over wood, 42 x 73 inches.



*Evolutionary Drift* installation view. Pam Longobardi, 1614-1914 (*A Disappearance of Wings*), 1993-2003, slide-dissolve projection sequence on 8-foot diameter weather balloon with copper extinct bird portraits with mounted coffin handles, dimensions variable. Photo by Andrew Wilds, 2009.

surround a ring of fire which encompasses a group of miniscule figures. Longobardi cut each image out of paper currency from Afghanistan, China, Costa Rica, Dubai, Myanmar and Zambia. The work contains a double meaning, as Longobardi explains, "My idea with the 'ring of fire' was an allusion...to global warming, and the tiny people inside from all the different countries was to suggest that all humans are in it together...and to me it was ironic that one of the countries that we are at war with now (Afghanistan) actually had 13 doves on their lowest denomination bill."

Her installation, 1614-1914 (*A Disappearance of Wings*), is a somber tribute combining small portraits of extinct birds with antique coffin handles. On each portrait, Longobardi has pounded into copper the scientific name of each bird and the year in which it became extinct. Details of angel wings from Renaissance paintings faded in and out, appearing and disappearing on an earthlike orb next to the portraits. The angel wings, symbolic of both death and innocence, pulsate like heartbeats.

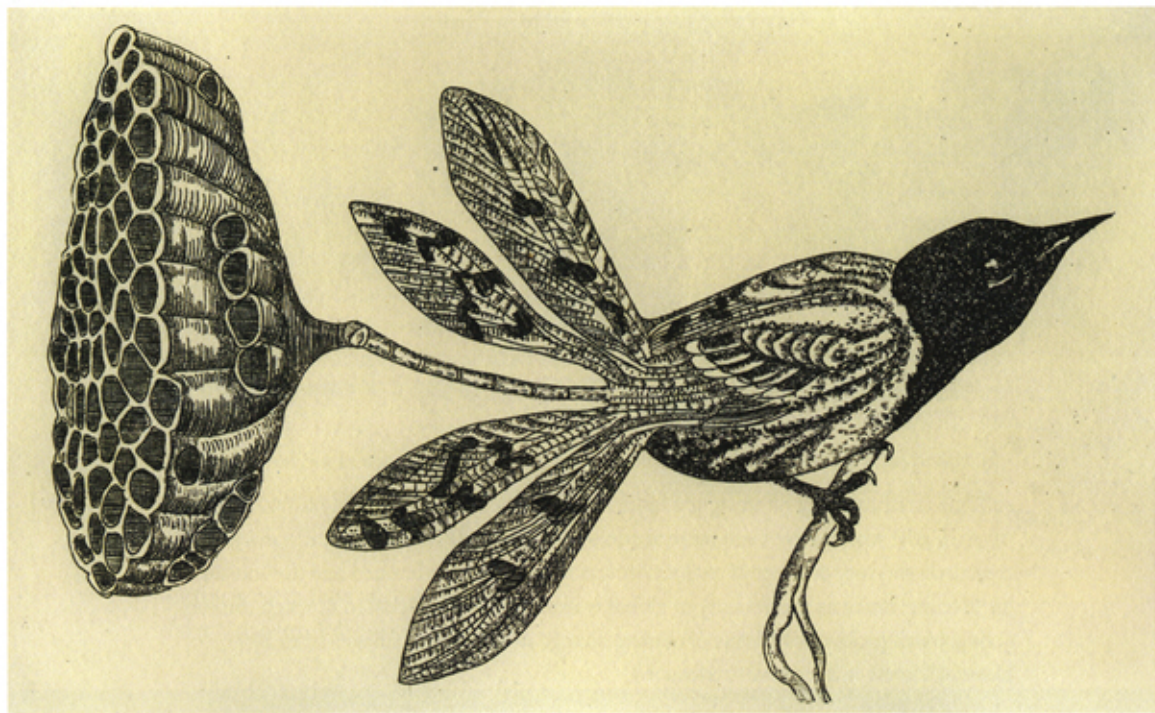
Both artists explore concepts of order versus randomness. Longobardi's *Drifters* works are composed of objects that have ended up in a truly arbitrary collection, in an unintentional repository. For Longobardi, the ocean is "the great formless," yet she collects what it deposits and creates very ordered installations. *Eye Test Chart: Color Blindness* from 2008 is meticulously planned and executed. In fact, Longobardi created a map of the work so that each installation is precisely the same. Similarly, Johnson's encyclopedic approach follows "rules" of collecting and presenting visual information, and imitates a long academic tradition based on the idea that order creates meaning. Johnson's ongoing project *The Alternate Encyclopedia* has in recent years moved to explore the nature of the archive itself, using the simple inventory of things as a way of creating uncanny juxtapositions and in the process celebrating the elusive nature and poetry of everyday objects. Her series of etchings entitled *Evolutionary Paths*, cataloging nearly plausible life forms, suggests something both clinical and ominous.

Bird imagery is prevalent in each of the artists' work. In addition to Longobardi's *A Disappearance of Wings* installation, *Evolutionary Drift* includes Johnson's series of large-scale charcoals entitled *Bird History Drawings* as well as a series of small etchings entitled *Birds Commonly Mistaken for Other Things*.



Pam Longobardi, *Eye Test Chart: Color Blindness*, 2008, found marine debris, silicone and steel pins, dimensions variable.





Sue Johnson, *Waspnest tail Oriole* (from *Birds Commonly Mistaken for Other Things*), 1997, copper plate etching, 5 x 8 inches.



Sue Johnson, *Altercation with Chickadees* (from *Bird History Drawings*), 1992-1993, charcoal on paper, 50 x 38 inches.

The *Bird History Drawings* were created from a combination of old encyclopedia entries and documentary photographs of bird dioramas in natural history museums. Close examination of the works reveals some odd taxidermy. For example, in *Altercation with Chickadees* (1992-1993) one bird is improbably balanced on a twig, its breast strangely bulbous. Scale is significant in these drawings. Johnson deliberately enlarged the birds to "the size of small children" in order to create a sense of discomfort for the viewer. Encountering these creatures in human scale forces the viewer to measure or at least contemplate bird life in relation to human life.

Johnson is fascinated with the ironic legacy of American artist and naturalist John James Audubon (1785-1851). While appreciative of the wonder and beauty of wildlife, Audubon killed the objects of his admiration, deeming it necessary in order to study and document their



Sue Johnson, *Snakefish*, *Rattling Pod Spider*, *Flowering Insect*, *Falling Hummingbird*, *Wild Duck Beetle* (from *Evolutionary Paths*), 1991, copper plate etchings, all 8 x 5 inches.

sublime attributes. He often signed his artworks as being drawn “from life” when in fact “from death” would have been more accurate. Undoubtedly he adored and valued these creatures; the very concept of extinction was regarded as far-fetched and dubious in his lifetime, much as the veracity of global warming has been debated in recent history. (Longobardi picks up the issue of climate change in two other collages from 2006, *Material Witness* and *Sequence Accelerator*.)

While Johnson’s *Birds Commonly Mistaken for Other Things* are abundantly humorous, they are also disturbing. Encountering them in the context of Longobardi’s work prompts one to consider the potential for genetic mutation in an imbalanced environment. The juxtaposition also presents the sobering notion that the birds documented in Longobardi’s *A Disappearance of Wings* are now as imaginary as Johnson’s.

Both artists explore the concept of human-made objects taking on organic form. When Longobardi harvests her plastics, not only have their shapes been transformed by the ocean, often algae has grown on them, thus confusing mother birds who collect them to feed to their young. For Johnson, the merging of manufactured and organic matter takes on forms modified from commercial playthings like Mr. Potato Head and the iconic trademarks of popular foods.

Each artist consciously blurs the line between art and artifact. Johnson’s ceramics are displayed on pedestals with protective domes—priceless objects to be admired and contemplated as expressions of some exotic culture. Longobardi’s artifacts are the plastics which reveal much about the society from whence they originate. A disinterested scientist from another planet may be confused by the contradiction implied in the prevalence of both discarded toothbrushes and cigarette lighters, among the detritus.



In *Evolutionary Drift*, not only are the two artists in dialogue with each other, they are also responding to themselves as the people and artists they were 10 to 15 years ago. For instance, in *1614-1914 A Disappearance of Wings* (1993-2003), we feel Longobardi's lament, a passionate if somewhat passive expression of grief. In the *Drifters* series begun years later and still flourishing, we see the artist taking a decidedly active approach and performing a thoughtful, physical intervention. Longobardi states, "I believe this artwork can function to raise awareness and transform behavior while providing a provocative visual delight." Thus we witness Longobardi refusing to succumb to hopelessness, responding to, and, perhaps offering solace to herself as a younger, despondent, eulogizing artist.

The imagery of *Evolutionary Drift: Works by Sue Johnson and Pam Longobardi* has the potential to elicit rich and timely conversations—between artists, with one another, and within ourselves.

Martha Kjeseth Johnson, Curator  
Maier Museum of Art



*Evolutionary Drift* installation view. Pam Longobardi, *Aftermath*, 2004, Sue Johnson, *Bird History Drawings*, 1992-1993. Photo by Andrew Wilds, 2009.



## BIOGRAPHIES

Since 1990, PAM LONGOBARDI has had over 30 solo exhibitions and 65 group exhibitions in galleries and museums in the U.S., China, Italy, Spain, Finland, Poland, Japan, and elsewhere. Her artwork is included in corporate and private collections across the U.S., and she has been commissioned to create pieces for Benziger Winery, the Hyatt Corporation, the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the Fulton County Medical Examiner's Facility, and the First Tennessee Bank in Memphis. Her work involves painting, photography, fabricated objects, and installations and addresses the psychological relationship between humans and the natural world. Longobardi was recently invited to exhibit and participate in a residency at NY Arts/Beijing during the 2008 Olympics.

SUE JOHNSON earned a BFA in painting from Syracuse University and an MFA in painting from Columbia University. She has had one-person exhibitions at the Tweed Museum of Art, Jan Cicero Gallery, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Midwest Museum of American Art, Swarthmore College, Anderson Gallery/VCU, and University of Richmond Museums. Grants include awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts/Mid-Atlantic Foundation Fellowship, and three Individual Artist Awards from the Maryland State Arts Council. Johnson is a professor of art in the Department of Art and Art History at St. Mary's College of Maryland, where she has taught painting, drawing, printmaking, and book arts since 1993.

# Evolutionary Drift

## CHECKLIST OF EXHIBITION

Artists and their works are listed alphabetically. Where media and dimensions are the same for all works by an artist, they are listed before the titles. For dimensions, height precedes width.

SUE JOHNSON born 1957  
*Bird History Drawings, 1992-1993*  
 charcoal on paper  
 all 50 x 38 inches

*Altercation with Chickadees*  
*Curious Yellowleg*  
*House Wren*  
*Indigo-Bird in a Tree*  
*Looking for Housing*  
*Towhee and the Flying Squirrel*

*Birds Commonly Mistaken for Other Things, 1997*  
 copper plate etchings  
 all 5 x 8 inches

*Cactus-tail bird*  
*Chuck Will's Widow on a Metamorphic Rock*  
*Fancy sweet gum bird*  
*Fancy tail Blue Jay with Treat*  
*Fernbeak Snakebird*  
*Grape-head Trickster Quail and Cricket*  
*Roottail Sandwalker*  
*Waspnest tail Oriole*

*Evolutionary Paths, 1991*  
 copper plate etchings  
 all 8 x 5 inches

*Antelope Ornament*  
*Bird Balancing a Conifer*  
*Bovine Bush*  
*Deer Insect*  
*Double Bird Head Beetle*  
*Doubler Moth*  
*Falling Hummingbird*  
*Fishsnake*

*Flowering Insect*  
*Moth Eaten Corn*  
*Protective Posture of Turtles and Terrapins*  
*Rattling Pod Spider*  
*Snakefish*  
*Wild Duck Beetle*

*Incredible Edibles, 1997*  
 slip-cast vitreous china

*Blue Plate Special (Dory with dirty rice)*  
 9 3/4 x 9 1/4 x 1 inches

*Butterside Up Doughboy*  
 7 x 7 x 4 1/2 inches

*Happy Meal*  
 5 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 2 inches

*Jell-O Surprise (fawn)*  
 9 1/4 x 9 1/4 x 3 1/2 inches

*Meatball, large plate*  
 9 1/4 x 9 1/4 x 4 1/2 inches

*Meatball, small plate*  
 7 x 7 x 4 1/2 inches

*Mr. Potato Head Twin Plate*  
 9 1/4 x 9 1/4 x 2 3/4 inches

*Piggy Bank Souffle (yellow crackle)*  
 7 x 7 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches

*Pork and Beans*  
 9 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches

*Sprout and Dog Soup*  
 6 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches

*Steak and Mr. Potato Head*  
 10 x 10 x 2 1/2 inches

*Turtle Soup*  
 7 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches

*TV Dinner (Mac & Cheese) with assorted decals*  
 6 1/4 x 8 x 3/4 inches

*Drawings inspired by Incredible Edibles, 2008*  
 charcoal on paper  
 all 22 x 30 inches

*Butterside Up Doughboy*  
*Jell-O Surprise with Fawn*  
*Large Meatball*  
*Mac and Cheese TV Dinner with Soft Lobster*  
*Sprout and Dog Soup*  
*Steak and Mr. Potato Head*



## Works by Sue Johnson and Pam Longobardi

PAM LONGOBARDI born 1958

*Aftermath*, 2004  
oil, enamel, patinas, pigment and  
collage on copper  
42 x 73 inches

*Critical Mass*, 2006  
devalued currency collage on paper  
20 x 24 inches

*Drifters*, 2007  
Fuji crystal archive digital print on  
plexi  
36 x 50 inches

*Event Horizon*, 2006  
devalued currency collage on paper  
20 x 24 inches

*Eye of the Ocean*, 2008  
devalued currency, ink, glass beads  
and pin pricks on paper  
20 x 24 inches

*Eye Test Chart: Color Blindness*, 2008  
found marine debris, silicone and  
steel pins  
dimensions variable

*Material Witness*, 2006  
devalued currency collage and  
cyanotype on paper  
20 x 24 inches

*Messages in Bottles*, 2007  
Fuji crystal archive digital print on  
plexi  
36 x 50 inches

*Sequence Accelerator*, 2006  
devalued currency collage and  
cyanotype on paper  
24 x 20 inches

*1614-1914 (A Disappearance of Wings)*,  
1993-2003  
slide-dissolve projection sequence  
on 8-foot diameter weather balloon  
with copper extinct bird portraits  
with mounted coffin handles  
dimensions variable

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## About the Maier's Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art



Louise Jordan Smith,  
*Self Portrait*, 1897,  
pastel on canvas. Bequest  
of the artist, 1929.

As we celebrate the 98th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, the concept of an “annual” exhibition may be confusing to those less familiar with the history of the Collection. After all, exhibitions are on view at the Maier year-round.

The “Annual” is one of several important traditions and contributions that make up the Louise Jordan Smith legacy. Smith was one of the first five resident professors when the College opened its doors as Randolph-Macon Woman’s College in 1891. In 1900 she declared, “I want an annual loan exhibition. This exhibition must contain only the best work that is done anywhere...it should be understood that each year the best pictures should be bought for a permanent collection. If the history of our nation may be foreseen by the light which other nations give us, we may know that our influence will last longest through our art.”

The First Annual Exhibition was installed in 1911. Except for the omission of one Annual during World War I, the series has been continuous.

## The Helen Clark Berlind Symposium

This catalog was prepared for the 18th Annual Helen Clark Berlind Symposium, March 21, 2009.

In 1991, on the occasion of the 80th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, friends and family of Helen Clark Berlind ’58 established a symposium in her honor which would expand and extend the educational mission of the Annual Exhibition.

**COVER:** Pam Longobardi, *Aftermath* (detail), 2004, oil, enamel, patinas, pigment and collage on copper over wood, 42 x 73 inches. Photo by Andrew Wilds, 2009.