

# River Gazette

## Art at St. Mary's



Eric Jackson '04

**Visual artists shape and challenge the way we see the world. With this issue of the River Gazette, you will get a glimpse into how the Art and Art History Department teaches its students, and teaches us all, how to think differently about our surroundings. Enjoy the view.**

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Special River  
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## Genetic Engineering for Art Majors *No One Sees Nature like Sue Johnson*

by Robin Bates, Professor of English



*Constantly on the lookout for "specimens" to go into her Alternate Encyclopedia project, Sue Johnson applies a special lens to the world. Here she holds up one of her finds, a "miniature antelope-type creature." Photo by photography professor Colby Caldwell*

Are you old enough to remember the little "creepy crawlers" that kids used to make by heating up plastic and pouring it into insect molds? Or if you missed that fad, surely you know about Mr. Potato Head, with plastic eyes, ears, etc. stuck in

various combinations into a plastic potato. But did you ever think about these games as preparation for an age of genetic engineering?

Sue Johnson, chair of the Art and Art History Department and Steven Muller

Distinguished Professor in the Arts, thinks in these terms all the time.

Johnson is fascinated by the ways that humans interact with the world of nature and is always on the lookout for the countless forms this interaction takes.

In recent years, this fascination has led to "the Alternate Encyclopedia," an on-going and ever-expanding project that involves paintings, prints, drawings, strange creations, and found objects. The Alternate Encyclopedia has now been featured in 13 one-person shows, including one that has just concluded at the Tweed Museum of Art at the University of Minnesota at Duluth.

The Alternate Encyclopedia defies easy description. Parts of it resemble a decorative arts museum since it includes furniture and various functional objects. Of these, many are found objects and all are connected with nature. In the Tweed exhibit there is a velveteen-upholstered buffalo horn chair, a lady's fan made out of a dead bird, and a woman mannequin imprinted with ferns.

The Alternate Encyclopedia also resembles a natural history museum, with diagrams, specimen displays, and cabinets filled with various items. When you look at the displays closely, however, you realize you've never seen a natural history museum like this one. There are schematic watercolors of the "wasp nest tail black-headed oriole," the "cactus fossil head whippoorwill," and the "blossom tail insect charmer." One finds manipulated insect bodies, such as the "stopper head beetle (extraordinarily rare)" and "the large American rhinoceros beetle," which sports a tiny American flag.

Some of Johnson's creations have

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been bred specially for human consumption. A placemat from "Sue's Gene Splice Café" shows off the "John Doree Fish with savory baconstrip tail" and the "Soleoliveloaaf Fish." There are anatomical drawings of the ugly duckling, the winged horse Pegasus, and Peter Cottontail (with a special close-up cross section of the cotton tail). There are schematic diagrams of the peapod from "The Princess and the Pea" and of a frog in different stages of metamorphosis as it becomes a prince.

The surprises go on and on. As part of the "New Ark Preservation Project," the artist turns archaeologist, attempting to understand civilization by collecting things



that people have thrown away. In plastic ziplock bags one sees dryer lint, a Barbie doll (identified as "an ideal woman," complete with a "hair sample"), and Pez dispensers. A large glass container is crammed with stuffed tigers, described as specimens.

Presiding over the exhibit is a "self portrait" in which Johnson has painted herself as a bird-headed woman surrounded by objects from nature. Walking through an Alternate Encyclopedia exhibit, one feels in the presence of a creative imagination as profligate, and as haywire, as nature itself. It's as though an artist who once delighted in creepy crawlers has wandered into a much bigger playground and let her mind run wild. Everything is possible.

The Alternate Encyclopedia started to materialize when Johnson came to St. Mary's eleven years ago. Before then, she received her master of fine arts at Columbia University and worked as director of the Lincoln Center Gallery and then of an international artists residency program. None of these jobs were fulltime, so she also worked in the textile industry ("a boring job but it's where I really learned to mix colors"), did custom framing, and taught part-time.

St. Mary's offered Johnson a stable base and an interdisciplinary setting that helped launch the Alternate Encyclopedia. A key moment was a workshop, supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trust, in which faculty from different departments gathered to discuss how environmental studies could be fostered in general education. Important friendships developed.

## Genetic Engineering for Art Majors No One Sees Nature like Sue Johnson

by Robin Bates, Professor of English  
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*Original creations, like the artist's "self portrait," fish engineered for convenience dining, and anatomical cross sections of literary and mythical figures like Pegasus, are scattered throughout the Alternate Encyclopedia, along with such found items as a velvet chair with buffalo horns. The exhibit defies categorization and invites visitors to question their own categories as well.*

Biologist Bob Paul supplied Johnson with de-accessioned specimens from the College's insect collection. Biologist Chris Tanner taught scientific illustration courses with her. Spanish professor Israel Ruiz directed her to a story on classification by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges that proved influential.

As one would imagine of an artist who sets herself up as the "author" of an encyclopedia, classification is of major interest to Johnson. She notes that we don't see nature in a pure way. Rather, what we see is shaped by those who have classified it. For instance, when we look at the animal world, we see mammals, birds, insects, etc. What we think

of as "facts" are just classifications that have become invisible over time.

Johnson is not only interested in how facts get decided but who gets to do the deciding. Noting that scientists have traditionally been male, Johnson playfully imagines how we might see nature if it had been classified by women. In "Hidden Structures of the Universe," she does a close-up of a flea and discovers "bead bag diatoms" and cells that resemble interlocking corsets. Noting that we often use metaphors when we name plants or animals, she has painted a watercolor showing impossible flower petals in the form of ladies slippers for what is actually a real plant, the "lady's slipper

bush." These particular pieces are grouped under the "Scientific American Women" section of the Alternate Encyclopedia. "It's impossible to establish a comprehensive or fixed system of nature where everything is in an ordered hierarchy," Johnson says. "There will always be idiosyncrasies. I embrace idiosyncratic interpretations of the world."

When she sets up one of her exhibits, her idiosyncratic eye seeks out odd artifacts that are specific to the region. For instance, before the Duluth exhibit, she visited the Minnesota Historical Society, which is where she found the buffalo chair and the dead bird fan. Learning that giant statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox were



close by, she imagined the two, in retirement, traveling around the world, and she created postcards of them next to the Empire State Building and the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

"My work has sometimes been mistaken as a rejection of science," Johnson says, but she points out that everyone, not only scientists, resorts to categories to understand the world around them. Classification is becoming increasingly slippery with genetic engineering because it is less and less clear what is "natural" and what is "manipulated." Is a genetically spliced tree any less real than a tree that hasn't been tampered with? Once a plant or a body has been genetically or otherwise altered, what is the identity of the new entity? But Johnson notes that the lines have been blurring for a long time, and that even Leonardo da Vinci, when he wanted to imagine a unicorn, did so by combining parts of different animals. Johnson's project is to force people to become more aware of how they define, classify, and, ultimately, see themselves and nature.

Sometimes her project allows us to envision wonderfully new and creative possibilities. An element of fun pervades Johnson's work. Sometimes, on the other hand, she exposes how categories have been used to oppress people. "I spend a lot of time being alternately amused and horrified," Johnson says.

One thing is for sure. After one has encountered the Alternate Encyclopedia, categories that we once took for granted no longer feel so solid. The world shifts beneath our feet.