

Moore Adventures in Wonderland

A Project by Sue Johnson

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Sue Johnson's Curious Cabinets by Jennifer Cognard-Black

Early on in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice drains a bottle labeled DRINK ME, which causes "a curious feeling" as she shuts up "like a telescope."¹ She then finds a small cake with the words EAT ME written in currants. As she nibbles it, she exclaims, "Curiouser and curiouser!," immediately opening out "like the largest telescope that ever was," her throat stretching in Sir John Tenniel's iconic illustration like the neck of a swan.² While Alice's transformations seem to result from typical childhood appetite and inquisitiveness, it is significant that Carroll describes her reactions to them as "curious," for this term had specific overtones in Victorian England.

Originally, the Latin *curiosus* meant "full of care"—that is, paying close attention. In the Renaissance, the word came to mean "inquisitive," especially about unusual matters. During the Enlightenment, a "curiosity" was an object made with careful skill, while a "curioso" was someone who inquired into esoteric matters, whether of science or art. Such people collected "curios"—



scientific specimens or *objets d'art* that were rare or strange — and cabinets of curiosities became quite popular, kept by private collectors or exhibited in museums and displaying such items as horns, nautilus shells, or boxes made of bone.³

Yet by the Victorian period, "curious" had become associated with both imperialism and deviance. Curiosity shops, kept by curiosity-mongers, aimed to entice curiomaniacs — collectors who sought objects from the far East, especially items made from animal skins and ivory. A "curiosity" also came to suggest the bizarre and the forbidden; "curiosa" was a euphemism for pornographic books or photographs. Thus Alice, who first feels curious and then curiouser, is not merely articulating an innocent wish to learn. She is also expressing a darker longing to know things that she should not know, particularly firsthand knowledge of Wonderland's exotic creatures.

In *Moore Adventures in Wonderland*, Sue Johnson plays upon these multiple meanings of the curious by merging the curiosities of Carroll's Wonderland with the unconventional, curioso poetics of Marianne Moore. Drawing upon scenes and themes from Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Johnson has selected, arranged and photographed items from Marianne Moore's collection of curios held by the Rosenbach Museum and Library. In the exhibition, these photographs are then contained within large boxes resembling eighteenth-century specimen cabinets — although it takes a keen eye



Above: John Tenniel, "Curiouser and curiouser!" from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Right: Sue Johnson, "The Mouse's Tail," from the installation *Moore Adventures in Wonderland*, 2009. Gouache hand painting on archival inkjet print in specimen box 20 x 28 x 4 inches

to recognize that the cabinets contain photographic assemblages rather than three-dimensional collections of curiosities. In addition, in many of the cabinets, Johnson has painted directly onto the photographic surface, adding various creatures reminiscent of Carroll's own as well as imagistically connected to Moore's poetry and poetic process. As such, the cabinets ask viewers to imitate Alice by tumbling down a rabbit hole of thought and suggestion in order to appreciate such provocative combinations.

Indeed, in a gallery directly above *Moore Adventures in Wonderland*, Marianne Moore's Greenwich Village living room is permanently installed at the Rosenbach. Thus, the exhibit invites viewers to enter a literal as well as an imaginative "free-fall" between Moore's living space above and Johnson's fantastic space below. But instead of finding bookshelves and jars of orange marmalade as Alice does falling between worlds, Johnson's viewers encounter ever more of Moore's own, odd objects: an air-mail envelope, a set of dove-decorated postage stamps, a wind-up mechanical crow from Germany, a stuffed bird, Scottish pins made from real feathers, an angel suspended in a glass paperweight, calling cards with cockfighting poses, and a painted silhouette by Johnson herself recalling John Tenniel's rendition of the Jabberwocky. This particular grouping, arranged in "Things that Fly," is one of Johnson's more associative cabinets, evocative of the metaphor of flight. Perhaps as we viewers "fall," we glide in our mind's eye, catching the tailwind of an airplane with air-mail in its belly, remembering places we've traveled, either real or fantastic. Perhaps we remake ourselves as

imaginative birds, bone-light and plumed, able to look down upon all kinds of wonderscapes passing beneath our wings. Or perhaps we feel afraid of flying, of that raucous rush and soar — especially with the specter of the Jabberwocky like a small but significant shadow representing childhood fears of flight.

By curating Moore's personal objects into such inventive combinations, it becomes clear that the Modernist poet didn't merely think like a curioso; she lived like one. Moore's living room contains its own associative collections, including purposeful arrangements of gifts from other Modernist poets, perhaps most famously a footstool from T. S. Eliot and a yellow rose painted by E. E. Cummings, as well as numerous animal-shaped figurines, including a small replica of Dürer's rhinoceros and an elephant made by Malvina Hoffman inspired by Moore's poem, "Elephants."⁴ Moore also tucked diverse clippings into her numerous books, creating mini-assemblages in word as well as object. And while she never wrote directly about Lewis Carroll, she owned all of his children's books and saved within their pages a wondrous assortment of essays pertaining to his legacy — often newspaper articles announcing new editions of *Alice* or containing comments from still-living women who had known Carroll as children. In this manner, Sue Johnson's aesthetic directly mirrors Moore's own.

Yet *Moore Adventures in Wonderland* brings to light additional connections between Carroll and Moore as well, emphasizing the curious fact that, in terms of process, both writers acted as their own authorial "curators" — gathering bits of language



Sue Johnson, "Things that Fly," from the installation *Moore Adventures in Wonderland*, 2009. Gouache hand painting on archival inkjet print in specimen box 20 x 28 x 4 inches

and imagery from diverse cultural sources to construct their poems and novels. For her poetry, Marianne Moore culled found language and imagery from sources as eclectic as advertisements, *National Geographic*, Chinese philosophy, and displays at the American Museum of Natural History, aligning such disparate elements within her poems to engender, like Johnson, her own new “animals” from certain bones.⁵ Thus, *Moore Adventures in Wonderland* offers a similar artistic process as well as a parallel site of productive interaction in which artist and viewer co-create meaning. Ultimately, the fixed and tagged objects in the pseudo-scientific boxes are not static at all but are in dynamic interaction with each other. As such, Johnson’s groupings ask viewers to take on an inquisitiveness that recalls both Carroll’s and Moore’s own by contemplating embodied, visual “poems” made from curated objects.

In “Tea Party,” for example, Johnson suggests Carroll’s characters through objects selected from the Moore archives: the Mad Hatter appears as a tiny green top hat, the Dormouse as a small toy. Alice becomes the famous tricorne hat sported by Moore herself, while the March Hare is represented by a painting recalling Albrecht Dürer’s celebrated hare.⁶ Here, the viewer encounters an ironic commentary on Carroll’s original Wonderland tea party, where a staid Victorian institution is transformed into a curious event indeed: the rude Hatter buttering his pocketwatch, the somnambulant Dormouse getting stuffed into a teapot, and the foolish March Hare offering Alice wine when there is none to be had. Initially, these transgressions confuse Alice, but when the creatures insist that she’s not “very

civil,” she stalks off from what she calls “the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!”⁷ Thus Carroll implicitly critiques Victorian conventionality, for British ambassadors were not always open to the curious customs of the wondrous lands under their control.

In Johnson’s version, “Tea Party” offers another layer of critique — this time, an analysis of an artist’s relationship to the materials of his or her art. Specifically, “Tea Party” transforms the viewer into a scientist peering down into clinically neutral space where specimens can be scrutinized, categorized, and deconstructed. Yet as viewers continue to look, the objects become less and less neutral. In keeping with Alice’s shifts in size, here the economies of scale are out of joint: the Dormouse’s shadow looms larger than its body, and the obnoxious Hatter has been reduced to a tagged, miniature metonym. The tea cups are empty and the creatures largely absent. Instead of a party, we see the material detritus of Moore’s life — her gloves, cups, and hat. The curious on-looker confronts what he or she perhaps shouldn’t learn: an assemblage of the dead, objects that have outlasted a poet’s life and are no longer in human motion.

Like Moore’s poetry, however, “Tea Party” also suggests an opposite movement from death to life. At first glance, this assemblage appears serene; each object is separate and distinct, seemingly at rest. Yet their juxtaposition produces a dynamism that transcends their individual forms. The painted hare reminiscent of Dürer’s reveals how Johnson’s assembled curios actually exceed the cabinet, in part through allusion; in part through Moore’s own fascination with Dürer that connects



Sue Johnson, “Tea Party,”
from the installation *Moore
Adventures in Wonderland*,
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this grouping to even more poems and images; and in part because it is a painted item — not a photograph skimmed from the real.⁸ As a painted creature, Johnson's hare is completely of the imagination: it is *immaterial* and, therefore, in perpetual movement, ever-changing.

All of Johnson's cabinets invite viewers to experience this supple dynamism by combining their memories of the *Alice* books with their own curious connections. In "Humpty Dumpty," a split geode is evocative of that cracked egg who told Alice how "provoking" it is "to be called an egg!"⁹ In "The Mock Turtle and The Gryphon," the statue of a winged lion stands in for the mythological beast that instructs Carroll's Mock Turtle — in this case, a pin cushion. And in "The Mouse's Tale," Donald Duck and Pooh the Bear join a cohort of creatures listening to a Carrollian mouse, including a bust of Moore as yet another Alice figure exercising her curiosity.¹⁰ Johnson's viewers thereby absorb Moore's Modernist mindset: a logic of juxtaposition by which bits of culture are combined to form new, coherent wholes. Akin to

Moore, Johnson curates disparate raw materials into new statements and fresh ideas.

Whatever our wondrous minds concoct as we fall into this space and peer into Johnson's cabinets, the resulting transformations make us all authors, all artists, all Alices. Just as Moore's typewriter looms over the tiny walrus figurine in Johnson's "The Walrus and the Typewriter," we — like Moore, like Carroll, like Johnson — create a kind of curious mental assemblage that is larger than the sum of its parts. For both writing and art-making, after all, are wonderful kinds of magic. Hash marks on a page or the X's and O's that make up the pixels of a photograph translate in the human mind into new ideas, new visions, new Wonderlands.

As such, the interplay of the curious is ever in flux in Sue Johnson's *Moore Adventures in Wonderland*. With each ensuing inspection, her work demands curiouiser and curiouiser applications of viewers' own insatiable and elastic curiosities.

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There; The Hunting of the Snark*, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992) 11.

² Carroll 13.

³ The term "cabinet" was used in sixteenth-century England to designate a case for storing small articles, including biological, antiquarian, or curio collections. By the seventeenth century, "cabinet" could also mean a secret room for storing treasure or a room for exhibiting artworks in a museum. As a *curioso* herself, Marianne Moore often wrote poems about unusual objects displayed in private collections or museums; see, for example, "The Jerboa" or "Tippoo's Tiger."

⁴ Hoffman, a personal friend of Moore's, was a well-known sculptor and author who worked for a time with the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

⁵ See, for instance, Moore's "Comment" in *The Dial* from May 1927. Moore was the editor of this literary magazine from 1925 to 1929.

⁶ Dürer's "Young Hare," 1502, is now at the Graphische Sammlung Albertina in Vienna.

⁷ Carroll 55, 60-61.

⁸ Dürer is best known for his woodcut of a rhinoceros in which he represented this exotic animal by depicting its armor — a visual language recognizable in Dürer's time. For two centuries, the woodcut was copied and became the visual definition of "rhinoceros" to Europeans. Moore kept a reproduction of Dürer's rhinoceros on her writing desk and made direct reference to his work in poems such as "Apparition of Splendor." Intriguingly, Dürer has been a touchstone artist for Johnson as well. In 1996, fascinated with the legacy Dürer, Johnson created a print in dialogue with the history of his rhinoceros, entitled "Reversed Rhinoceros with Gauntlets, after A.D."

⁹ Carroll 159.

¹⁰ Moore's presence among the listening creatures in Johnson's "Mouse's Tale" is delightfully apt. Her only known direct use of Carroll's writing is a verbatim transcription of "The Mouse's Tale" from *Alice's Adventures under Ground* — his original manuscript of the Alice stories presented to the real-life Alice Liddell in 1864. As a young woman, Moore copied out Carroll's original rendering of "The Mouse's Tale" as part of a mock newspaper, called "The Daily Scale," that she and her mother assembled in 1911 while embarking upon a Grand Tour of Europe.

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Sue Johnson earned a BFA in painting from Syracuse University and an MFA in painting from Columbia University. Her on-going project, *The Alternate Encyclopedia*, has been shown nationally and at such venues as the Tweed Museum of Art, Jan Cicero Gallery, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, John Michael Kohler Art Center, Swarthmore College, Anderson Gallery/VCU, and University of Richmond Museums. She has been awarded grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the NEA/Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, and four Individual Artist Awards from the Maryland State Arts Council.