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In the galleries: A satire on images of women and the objects they advertise



Installation view, “Hall of Portraits from The History of Machines,” VisArts, 2020. Right: “Ready-Maid” (2019) by Sue Johnson. Acrylic painting over print on canvas with imprinting with Sparkle brand paper towels and Brew-Rite brand coffee filters. Left foreground: “Golden Triangle” carafe with candle warmer, Inland Glass Co, with mixed media acrylic paintings over prints on canvas. (Courtesy VisArts)

By Mark Jenkins
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The creatures in Sue Johnson’s “Hall of Portraits From the History of Machines” are more than the sum of their parts. But the parts are pretty great — sleek, stylish and erotic, if in an airbrushed, antiseptic way.

Central to Johnson’s VisArts show are satirical paintings of mid-20th-century American women and the home and office products designed for their use. The impeccably clad and coifed housewives and secretaries don’t simply employ the steam irons, sewing machines and other devices — they actually meld with them. One subject has a coffee pot for a torso, and another traded her hips and thighs for a hard-sided suitcase. A blonde, with a coy expression and demonstrating plastic wrap, flaunts the ultimate wasp waist: the stem of a glass goblet.

Johnson doesn't hide her sources. Also on exhibit are the vintage magazine pages from which she clipped the spokesmodels and products. She collages them to make large prints, over which she paints. The renderings are faithful to the originals, but with looser backgrounds that suggest wallpaper or wood grain — or paper towels. The results suggest a mash-up of Ovid's "Metamorphoses" and the Saturday Evening Post. But that's not the whole story.



Installation view "Hall of Portraits from The History of Machines," VisArts, 2020. Right foreground: "(I am) Not an Iron" (2019) by Sue Johnson. Acrylic over print on canvas. (Courtesy VisArts)

The artist, who teaches at St. Mary's College of Maryland, is both inspired by and skeptical of Dada and surrealism. Johnson sees ironic parallels in how women were represented by mostly male 20th-century artists and advertising executives. The surrealists' female muse was "sometimes literally depicted like an inanimate object or dehumanized to be acted upon," she notes in her statement. Her work, Johnson continues, portrays "cyborgs . . . who are both consumers and . . . the consumed at the same time."

"The Hall of Portraits" makes explicit reference to Marcel Duchamp's 1915-23 "[The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even](#)," an enigmatic glass sculpture whose imagery includes various mechanisms. By design, Johnson's portraits are the exact height of Duchamp's piece. The show has one other component: Such actual items as a suitcase, a coffee carafe and a telephone-operator headset. These objects, mostly made between the late 1940s and the early '70s, may be obsolete, yet have contemporary relevance. The seductive curves of the Western Electric Sculptura "doughnut" phone, which debuted a half-century ago, has much the same appeal as the tapered lines of the iPhone. Both are mass-manufactured products with the juju of a fetish object.

Sue Johnson: Hall of Portraits From the History of Machines Through Jan. 3 at Gibbs Street Gallery, [VisArts](#), 155 Gibbs St., Rockville.