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Johnson's Hybrids: A Breed Apart



"Surf and Turf Combo Dinner (Tasty John Doree fish wrapped in savory bacon strips" from Convenience Food Engineering, gouache on paper, 1998

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OCCASIONALLY, as a cost-cutting measure, printers will make proofs, or trial impressions, on previously printed pages. This avoids wasting valuable paper while adjustments are made to the press. At times, it can lead to a felicitous visual serendipity, as when two seemingly unrelated images (or discordant images and text) are combined in fresh ways.

But this is not, or not exclusively anyway, what Sue Johnson does.

"Fragments From the Alternate Encyclopedia: Works by Sue Johnson," now at the Emerson Gallery of the McLean Project for the Arts, is never one thing. The artist, one imagines, wouldn't have it any other way.

But let's begin at the beginning. In 1995, Johnson, an art professor at St. Mary's College on Maryland's Western Shore, began work on a large-scale, ongoing project titled "The Alternate Encyclopedia." Using the notion of a faux natural history reference text as a conceptual umbrella, she started creating imaginary entries based on a world of nonexistent hybrid creatures: bird heads fused with beetle bodies, chipmunks turning into stinkbugs, a cow growing out of a bush.

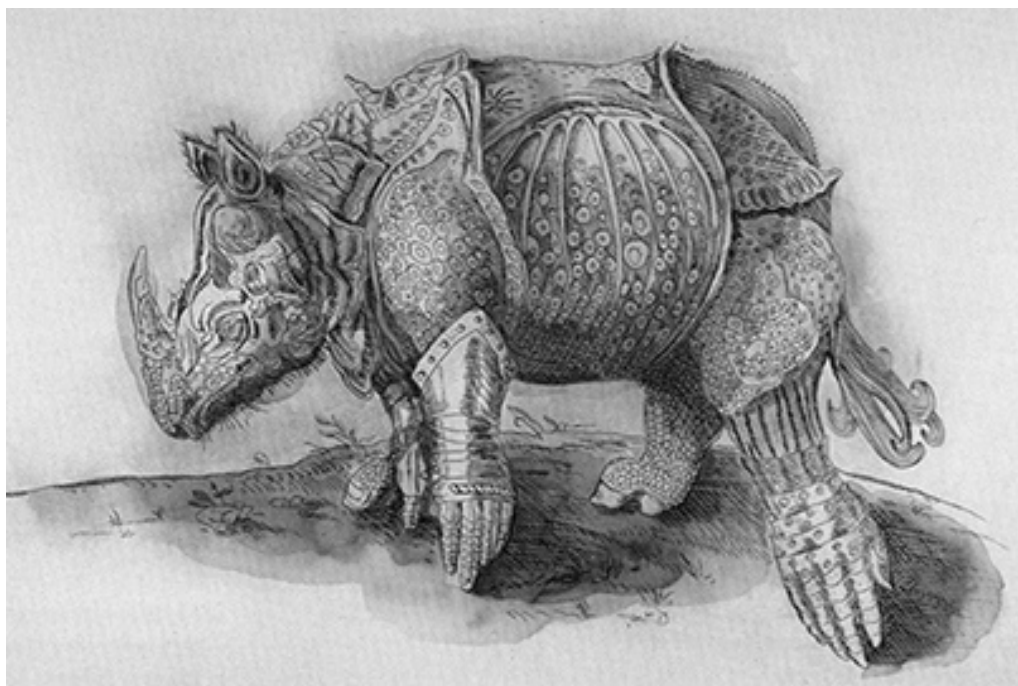
It was and remains a fertile premise for her exploration of such issues as truth in representation, sexism and the scientific gender gap, genetic engineering, animal exploitation and scientific arrogance, the nexus of art and nature, the museum as con artist and the nature of knowledge itself. With Johnson's art, it seems, everything has invisible quotes around it, as though the whole point of her oeuvre were to remind the viewer to take what he or she sees -- both inside and outside the art gallery -- with a grain of salt.

What gets you in the door is her sense of humor. But after the wry punch lines of her paintings, prints and artifacts fade, what keeps you there is the percolating stew of ideas that gives her punning pictures their punch. Look closely at the "Cell Structure of the Bell-of-the-Ball Plant." Its microscopic cross section of a leaf actually contains a network of tiny corsets and women's handbags, a witty commentary on the notion that a woman's place has traditionally been in the home or boudoir, not the laboratory or field.

Perhaps best known for her hybrid flora and fauna (a fish bred to grow its own bacon strips for the convenience of the human chef, a crab engineered with extra claw meat and a side of red beans growing out of its shell, a chimera that is half-bird, half-cactus and a crocodile with duck heads sprouting like pimples from its hide), Johnson has more recently begun investigating the correspondences between the real and the artificial. In a series of digital prints called "The Textbook of Comparative Anatomy," she places side by side such disparate images as a real seashell, a handful of processed cat food and the cover of a pulp paperback about divorced female roommates called "It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World" (how appropriate, given Johnson's surreal, crossbred bestiary).

Across the room is also a vitrine containing several of the the original artifacts in further recombinations: a decorative flower made of mink fur, some bouillon cubes, a purple rabbit's foot key chain and a pile of aubergine dryer lint, to name just a few. In my view, this last item is the most purely beautiful object in the show, yet it's also one whose madeness -- more random than intentional -- is debatable. Yet it did come out of a machine, not an egg or a seed. In this context, adjacent to strange neighbors, the tangents it inspires -- the notion of the Duchampian "readymade," the idea of "women's work," the tyranny and failure of narrative when it comes to really making sense of the world -- kept me staring at this unassuming little item long past what it might otherwise deserve.

Looking at these juxtapositions, you might ask what does one thing have to do with another? Or perhaps more pertinently: When does something stop being natural and start being manufactured? "Exactly!" you can almost hear Johnson say. At least you're asking the right questions. After all, this "Encyclopedia" is not about the answers you can find in books, except to the extent that it wants to debunk them.



"Reversed Rhinoceros, After AD", intaglio print with ink wash, 1996

Another question that occurred to me as I strolled through: How is the tradition of scientific illustration like a game of "telephone"? Historically, it was accepted for one artist to draw from another's picture, which itself might be

based not on direct observation but on the distortions of a degraded specimen or, even worse, a verbal description. The perpetuation and exaggeration of errors were, to say the least, not uncommon. (See Johnson's "Reversed Rhinoceros With Gauntlets, After A.D," a picture based on Albrecht Durer's 16th-century representation of a rhino, one of which he had never seen. In Johnson's version, she not only keeps such anomalies as the extraneous horn Durer inserted just above the shoulders but adds her own additional mutations.)



"Purist Moth" (left) and "Suprematist aphid (aphididae malevichis)" (right), gouache on paper, 1998

In a sense, then, Johnson's work is as much about art as it is about science, and not just in the pieces in which the union of the two disciplines is obvious. (See her Mondrian-inspired moth and her scientifically named *aphididae malevichis*, an aphid whose wing camouflage is based on the art of Russian Suprematist painter Kasimir Malevich.)

To divorce fevered imagination from cool observation, Johnson posits, is not just impossible but to be avoided at all costs. The process of experimentation, or science itself, Johnson seems to be saying, is itself an art form, less hard than soft.

On the one hand, she is a collector -- of toys, ephemera, everyday monstrosities. But Johnson is also an inventor. The stuff she makes up -- self-basting poultry, a miniature universe of ladies' undergarments, slippers, curtain tassels and lace and oversize stereograms that can be viewed only with equipment that hasn't been built yet -- may be fanciful, but what is fancy except the mind given free rein? And what does that lead to except the joy of discovery? Every scientist knows that.

FRAGMENTS FROM THE ALTERNATE ENCYCLOPEDIA: Works by Sue Johnson -- Through March 3 at the McLean Project for the Arts Emerson Gallery, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. 703/790-1953. Web site: www.mcleanart.org. Open 10 to 5 Tuesdays through Fridays; Saturdays 1 to 5. Free.