The Curious Nature of Objects

Sue Johnson at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford





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Curious Nature of Objects (Part One)
Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Oxford, England
28 January - 19 June, 2011

Curious Nature of Objects (Part Two)
Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Oxford, England
January - February 2012

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Curious Nature of Objects

In a project designed especially for the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, Sue Johnson creates paintings that on one hand serve to document collection items while at the same time she imagines a new contemporary life for these objects. Johnson has been researching the illustrated catalogue of the more than 20,000 objects in the 'second' collection of General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900); that is, the collection he made *after* he had given his 'first' collection to the University of Oxford in 1884. This 'second' collection is now scattered around the world in hundreds of public and private collections. All that remains of the collection as a whole is a 'paper museum' in the form of a nine-volume illustrated inventory.

Part One: Natural History

In the first part of the project focused to natural history, Johnson blurs the boundaries between the natural and cultural worlds. At first glance, her watercolors appear to be authentic natural history illustrations documenting newly discovered plants and animals. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that each vision depicts a hybrid organism with origins in the world of objects made by human hands in diverse cultures. Johnson has created a transformative space in which inanimate objects—pots, lamps, masks, weapons, shields, smoking paraphernalia, ceremonial objects, musical instruments, canoe paddles, and more—become animate. In Johnson's hands, objects that have been made in nature's image—by mimicking shapes and patterns—morph into plants and animals. Johnson's fantastic landscape is populated by such new hybrid species as the *Domestic Gourd Plant* and *Paddling Bush*. In *Birds Without Feathers*, it is a place where decorative and functional objects made in the shape of birds now 'perch' precariously on branches of a most unusual tree. Plants are often named after things they resemble in the world, and in the artist's hands such familiar species as the *Prickly Shield Fern* are now transformed into the thing that inspired its name.

As the pace and scope of genetic engineering increases in the twenty-first century, with results and consequences that cannot fully be controlled or imagined, Johnson's work explores the gap between the artificial and natural, as she creates a magical space to contemplate the secret lives of objects and the complex cross-pollination between the natural and cultural worlds.













Part Two: Still Life

In paintings for the larger second exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Johnson shifts her focus from imagining new nature to creating animated landscapes composed on the shelves of still life paintings. Rare and unusual objects from across the cultures are juxtaposed to botanical and zoological images culled from famous natural history publications and sometimes-anonymous amateur portfolios of birds and flowers. Rhyming and morphologic pairs and triads signal unexpected resonances between living creatures and functional and ritual objects. Like the works in the first group, collection objects are rendered with a high degree of verisimilitude and so can be identified easily within the illustrated Pitt-Rivers catalogue.

Rethinking Pitt-Rivers

These exhibitions by Sue Johnson have been developed in association with the major three-year research project 'Rethinking Pitt-Rivers: Analysing the Activities of a Nineteenth-Century Collector' (2009–2012) of which Johnson is an associate researcher. Funded by a grant from The Leverhulme Trust, the project will provide a comprehensive account of the collecting activities of General Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900) in the context of the second half of the nineteenth-century. The project team, led by Jeremy Coote and Alison Petch at the Pitt Rivers Museum, are looking in detail at how he acquired his collections, but also at what he did with them, including the gifts he gave, the exhibitions and displays he organized, the talks and lectures he presented, and the papers he published. A primary focus in the early stages of the project has been the nine-volume manuscript catalogue of Pitt-Rivers's 'second' collection held in the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives at Cambridge University Library (MS Add. 9455), the images in which have inspired the work presented by Sue Johnson in these exhibitions.

Sue Johnson and the Pitt Rivers Museum are pleased to acknowledge the support and cooperation of Mr Anthony Pitt-Rivers, The Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, Oxford and St Mary's College of Maryland, The Leverhulme Trust, and the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives at Archives at Cambridge University Library. Works created for Part Two have been supported by time and space to work at The Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, Oxford, and through a residency fellowship supported by the Tenot Fondation at CAMAC/Centre D'Art Marnay Art Centre, Marnay-sur-Seine, France.

Part One: *Natural History*



Paddling Bush
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Birds without Feathers
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Domesticated Gourd Plant
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Music of the Spheres
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Prickly Shield Fern
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Still life with Bear, Napoleon, Lion and Dandelion 2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper 30 x 22 inches



Enigma of a Pig
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Goldfishing Bowl
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Two Birds
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches



Spoonbill 2011 Watercolor and color pencil on paper 30 x 22 inches



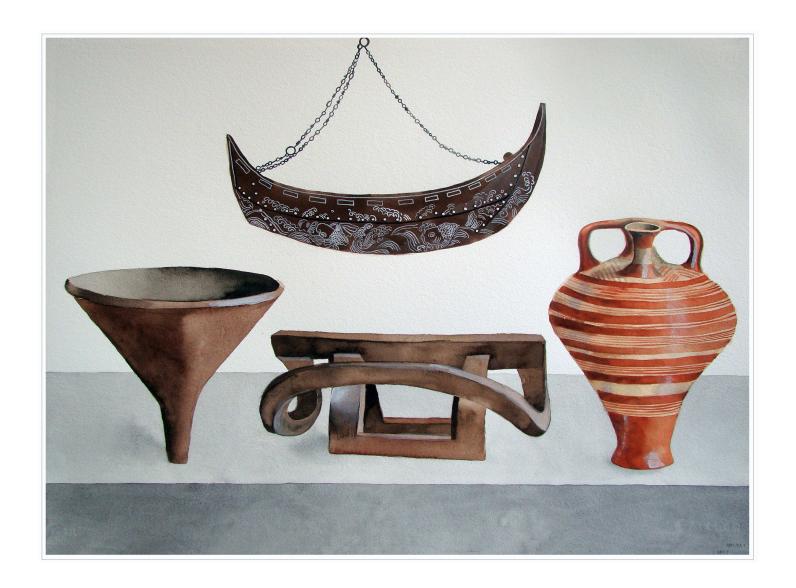
Part Two: Still Life



Dove and Cinquefoil
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



Funnel
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



Forsythia
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



Black Yellow Bird
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



Melon with vessels
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



Fan
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



Three Vessels
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



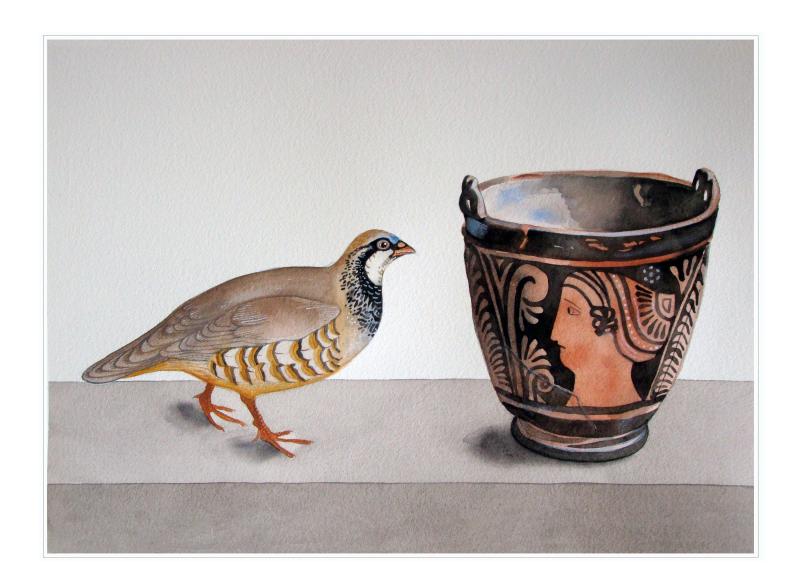
Sideways
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 inches



Vessel from Rhodes with Bird 2011 Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



Italian vessel with Quail
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
15 x 19 inches



Icelandic Falcon with Owl Vase
2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper
15 x 19 inches



Southern Italian Bowl with vegetation 2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



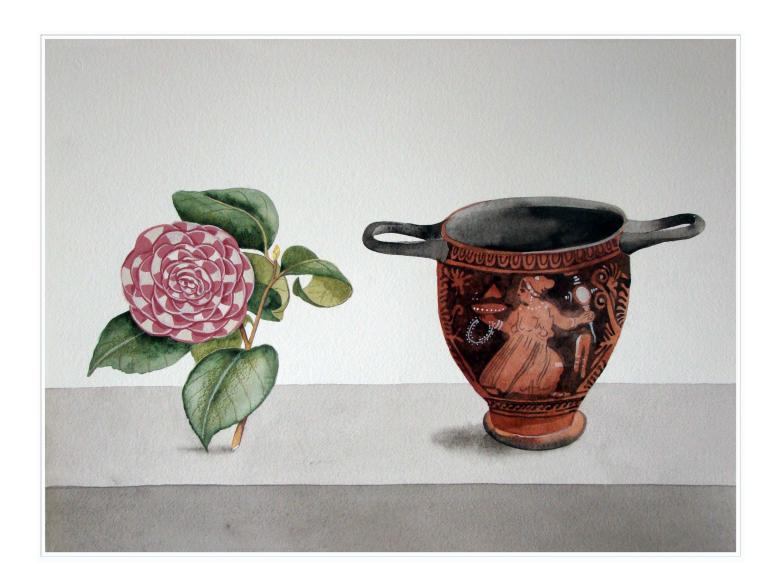
Gesner's Tulip, African Wooden Goblet and Greek Vessel 2011 Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



Flying Duck over Black Lacquer with Tulips 2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



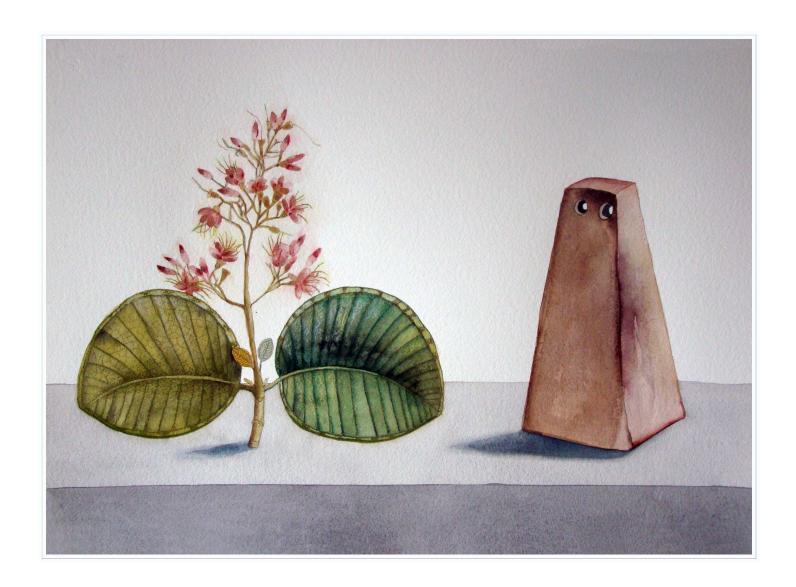
Camellia and Italian Two-handled Vessel 2011 Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



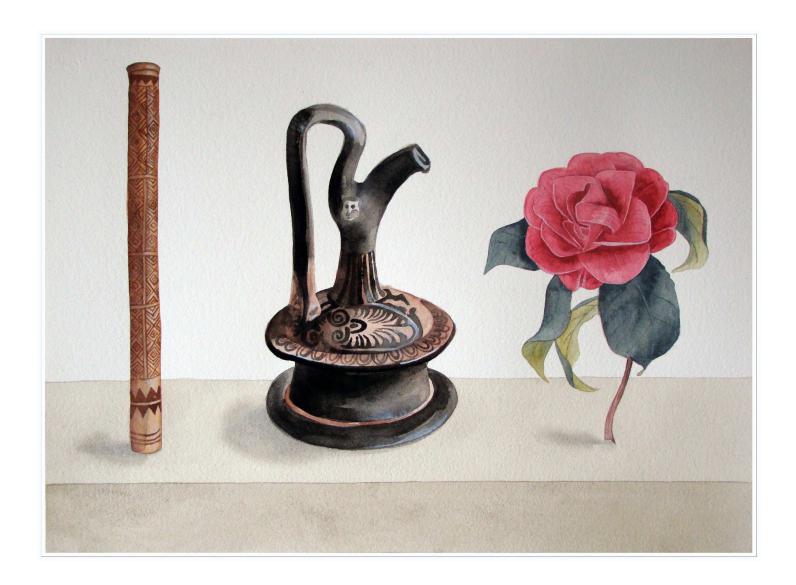
Red-headed Black Yellow Bird with Italian Goblet 2011 Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



Important object from Troy and a plant from Alexander von Humboldt's journey 2011 Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15×19 inches



Camellia, Bamboo Pipe and Greek Vessel 2011 Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



Delft bottle, Protea radiata and clam shell arm ornaments 2011
Watercolor and color pencil on paper 15 x 19 inches



About the Artist

Sue Johnson has worked collaboratively with museums and rare book libraries for many years, creating exhibitions based on works from collections at The Museum of the American Philosophical Society and the Rosenbach Museum and Library, both in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Since 1995, her work has comprised an episodic project under a loose conceptual umbrella entitled *The Alternate Encyclopedia*, with a series of exhibitions in museums, galleries, and alternative spaces throughout the United States of America. For this work she has created fictitious publications and artefacts based on authentic materials, the overall amalgam comprising a *Wunderkammer* to be constructed and held in the mind, a new kind of cabinet of curiosities. Individual series of her works explore genetic engineering and environmental crises, consumer culture in history, the role of women in science, as well as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and other literary works. Throughout this work, the role of the artist in picturing new knowledge has been underscored.

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, Pitt Rivers Museum/University of Oxford, Jan Cicero Gallery, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Midwest Museum of American Art, Swarthmore College, Anderson Gallery/VCU, The Rosenbach Museum and Library, and University of Richmond Museums. Her work has been included in exhibitions at Artists Space, Reyes + Davis Independent Exhibitions, Katzen Art Center/American University, Worcester Center for Crafts, Civilian Art Projects, Lehman College Art Gallery, Wave Hill, The Painting Center, Maryland Institute College of Art, Everhart Museum, Caren Golden Gallery, Illinois State University, Trans Hudson Gallery, The Drawing Center, Steibel Modern, Art in General, White Columns, Thread Waxing Space, Bergen Museum of Science and Art, Bard College, Bennington College, Soho Center for the Visual Arts, Jan Cicero Gallery and the Indianapolis Museum of Art among others. Grants include awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts/Mid Atlantic Foundation Fellowship, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, and

four Individual Artist Awards from the Maryland State Arts Council. Selected residency fellowships include the Arts/Industry Program/John Michael Kohler Art Center, Mac Dowell Colony, American Academy in Rome/Visiting Artist and Scholars Program, Millay Colony, Art Omi International Artist Colony, CAMAC/Centre D'Art Marnay Art Centre, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, City of Salzburg/Salzburg Kunstlerhaus Residency Fellowship, American Philosophical Society/Andre Michaux Library Research Fellowship, and American Antiquarian Society research fellowship. Reviews of her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New Art Examiner, and Art Papers.

Johnson's work is represented in many public collections that include Arts of the Book Collection/Yale University, U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Museum of Modern Art/Franklin Furnace Archive, Smithsonian American Art Museum/Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Bristol-Myers/Squibb, The Prudential Life Insurance Company, Francis J. Greenburger Foundation, Chelsea College of Art & Design/London, Joan Flasch Artists' Books Collection/School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Tweed Museum of Art, University of California-Irvine, Rutgers University Libraries, Fleet Library/Rhode Island School of Design, Maier Museum of Art, Hunt Library/Carnegie Mellon University, F.W. Olin Library/Mills College, Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, Art Omi International Art Colony, and the Bucknell University Art Collection.

In 2010-11 Johnson served as *Visiting Scholar in Residence* at the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies in Oxford, England. As she prepares new works for the 2012 exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, she continues to serve as an associate researcher for the Rethinking Pitt-Rivers project. Johnson has held teaching positions at Parsons School of Design, Herron School of Art, I.U.P.U.I., and Marymount Manhattan College, and is currently professor of art in the Department of Art & Art History at St. Mary's College of Maryland where she has also served as the *Steven Muller Distinguished Professor of the Arts*.





