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UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

A food industry critique, with a side of humor: "Sprout and Dog Soup," from Johnson's University of Richmond show.

Galleries

Sue Johnson, Bringing Fresh Ideas to the Table

By JESSICA DAWSON
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RICHMOND — Visiting Sue Johnson's sculpture show at the University of Richmond is like dropping in on a quirky dinner party.

Johnson's titles may promise "Venison Dinner Platter," but your entree won't arrive medium rare. Instead, you'll get seven ceramic Bambis circled up on a platter, their saucer-round eyes blinking

up from the plate.

The artist, who teaches at Maryland's St. Mary's College, lends dinner a social conscience in these recent sculptures. Sometimes Johnson's work suggests real food — the goopy mac and cheese in one sculpture might pass for a blue-plate special. But more often, Johnson favors food's mercantile mascots. Thus the Pillsbury Doughboy, Sprout (the Jolly

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Green Giant's peewee friend) and Mr. Potato Head all appear on Johnson's plates.

To make them, she cast entrees, food mascots and the occasional side dish in shiny slip-cast vitreous china — the same material toilets are made of. Called "Eating Wonderland," the series gleams with antiseptic shine.

The project marks Johnson's first foray into three dimensions, and it looks to be her best work yet.

Simple and straightforward, these pieces pack a punch more direct than the baroque, collage-based works that the 50-year-old artist has built her career on. Here, she wraps food industry critique in a humorous, nostalgic package.

Johnson created the works last winter during a two-month residency sponsored by Wisconsin's John Michael Kohler Arts Center. She worked in the same Kohler plant that produces toilets and sinks, firing her creations alongside the commodes.

With food as its subject and bathroom equipment its medium, "Eating Wonderland" flirts with the scatological. A sense of child's play — and children's jokes about digestion, poop and vomit — lend the show a comical, if slightly icky, undercurrent.

Johnson enjoys posing food characters in suggestive or compromising positions. She imagines the Pillsbury Doughboy as a submissive, positioning him face down with a pat of butter melting on his tush. As for Sprout, he floats face up in a bowl of soup next to a long, brown wiener. Sprout's placid expression implies he's cooling off on a hot summer day, but his

embalmed state suggests he may have eaten his last split pea.

These tableaux ring comical, but serious ideas emerge, too. Johnson has the number of those child-focused marketing campaigns, one assumes, when she plops the Doughboy on a plate. What with charming mascots initiating tots into consumer ritual at ever earlier ages, walking through Johnson's show makes one wonder if the distance from the Green Giant to Joe Camel isn't so far after all.

Before Johnson embarked on her residency, she'd made fantasy-based collage works alluding to botany, anatomy and encyclopedias. A recent series of digital ink-jet prints hand-worked with gouache, also on view in Richmond, recall these earlier efforts.

Yet compared with her vibrant sculptural works, these prints fall flat. Their imagery, while occasionally intriguing, feels pat.

Johnson's most appetizing ideas inhabit three dimensions, where her success rests on the precision of their balance. Her nostalgic evocations of diners, childhood commercials and '50s-era optimism risk miring us in treacle. But Johnson's wicked sense of humor and her sharp use of materials deliver the works from excess.

The Doughboy's charm may grab our attention, but it's Johnson's smarts that give us food for thought.