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# Eating Wonderland: Recent Work by Sue Johnson

University of Richmond Museums

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# *Eating Wonderland*

RECENT WORK BY SUE JOHNSON



FEBRUARY 8 TO JUNE 15, 2008  
LORA ROBINS GALLERY OF DESIGN FROM NATURE  
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND MUSEUMS

## Introduction

We are very pleased to present the work of Maryland artist Sue Johnson at the Lora Robins Gallery of Design from Nature, University of Richmond Museums. The exhibition premieres recent ceramic work created by Johnson at the Arts/Industry residency program of the John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and funded by Kohler Company, Kohler, Wisconsin. This unique residency provides visiting artists the opportunity to learn techniques and work with materials and equipment in Kohler's pottery, iron, and brass foundries. Johnson's participation resulted in her "Incredible Edibles" series, which consists of ceramic castings of dinnerware and popular foodstuffs that focus on themes of food, consumption, marketing, and mass production.

Her accompanying series of two-dimensional works on paper, "Episodes in a Fantastic Landscape," explores the creation and use of imagery in popular culture, the influence of context on these images, and how simple manipulations can result in humor, possible aversion, and complex commentaries on contemporary society. Finally, her more than sixteen-foot-wide painting on paper "New Stories

from Wonderland (Life of the Dodo)," created specifically for this exhibition, merges all of these themes while including specific references to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and to current environmental issues.

Organized by the University of Richmond Museums, the exhibition was curated by N. Elizabeth Schlatter, Deputy Director and Curator of Exhibitions, University Museums, with assistance from the artist. The exhibition was made possible in part with funds from the University's Cultural Affairs Committee.

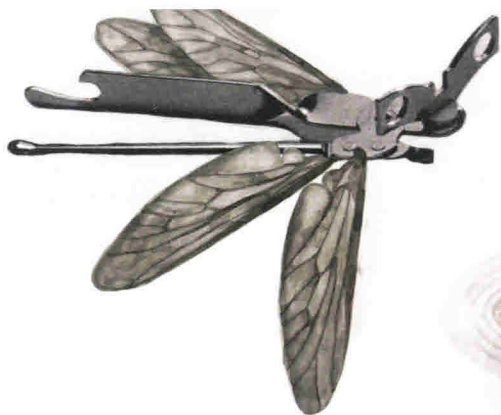
RICHARD WALLER

*Executive Director*

*University of Richmond Museums*

Cover: Sculptures from the series *Incredible Edibles*, 2007, slip-cast vitreous china, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist

Below: *New Stories from Wonderland (Life of the Dodo)*, 2007, digital ink-jet print with ink and ink wash on paper, 18 x 195 inches, Collection of the artist



## Eating Wonderland

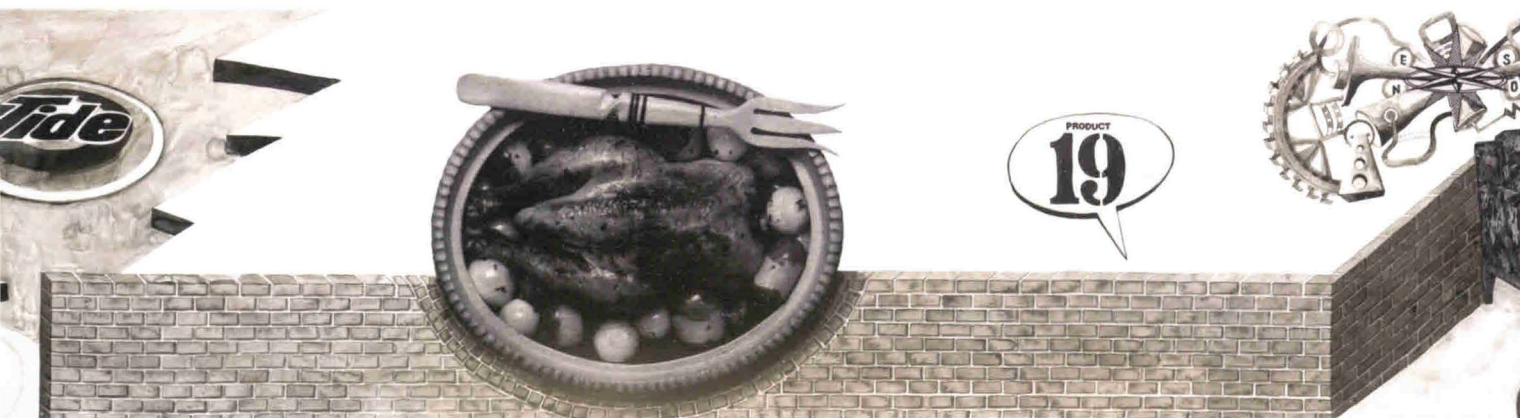
With these two words — eating wonderland — Sue Johnson’s exhibition title succinctly conveys elemental aspects of her recent art. Many of her two- and three-dimensional works are centered on issues of food and consumption, and they typically involve surreal imagery and subtext while a sense of impending violence or doom lurks within each piece. By considering different interpretations of the phrase “eating wonderland,” layers of meaning can be inferred while also recognizing various artistic and cultural influences and connections.

*Throughout the work of “The Alternate Encyclopedia” (1995-present), many people have remarked on relationships to the Alice stories and my penchant for anthropomorphizing of all sorts of inanimate objects and zoological creatures. As I have worked on the project, works often suppress the well-known human characters of fairy tales and mythologies and instead elevate the role of the flora and fauna by giving voice and agency to what is commonly perceived as the inanimate in nature (Pegasus, Peter Cottontail, Peapod from the Princess and the Pea, etc.).*

— Sue Johnson

Johnson’s wonderland refers to the setting of Lewis Carroll’s 1865 novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a story the author originally fabricated to entertain children of his friends and colleagues. Carroll (whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) based his main character on Alice Liddell, daughter of the dean of Christ Church in Oxford, England, where the author studied and worked as a deacon and a mathematician. After drifting into a dream while relaxing under a tree, Alice follows a white rabbit down a rabbit hole, falling into Wonderland where she encounters outrageous characters, preposterous situations, changing senses of scale, and unpredictable permutations of logic.

Similarities in tone, aesthetics, and content were noticeable between Carroll’s style of nonsense writing and Sue Johnson’s artwork in her 2004 exhibition “The Alternative Encyclopedia” at the Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth. But the Alice books have become more of a focused theme for Johnson since beginning work on a project while she serves as artist-in-residence for the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. This forthcoming project will fuse the work of American poet Marianne Moore and that of Carroll; in both subject areas the Rosenbach holds significant archives including many original drawings by Carroll and drawings and prints by John Tenniel,



the illustrator of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*.

Like Carroll, Johnson creates scenes in which certain natural laws prevail while others are flagrantly ignored. The painting "Edge of Town" features a bow-tied snow-cone "man" welcoming viewers to the panorama behind him — a bridge featuring a mammoth TV-dinner and a pâté mold, and a motel from the 1950s or 60s along with a large peanut and a piece of unpeeled ginger enjoying each other's company on the lawn. Johnson's playful use of scale and freely invented creatures, such as the squirrel/turkey in "Fundamental Laws of Levitation," likewise mirror Carroll's imaginary world, which presents to Alice almost never-ending surprises that the heroine attempts to navigate using conventional wisdom and her grade-school knowledge.

Johnson includes a few Alice-related characters in her work, providing ample opportunity for visual and verbal puns. The artist's ceramic "Turtle Soup" features two cast turtle figurines floating in a bowl (see illustration); clearly artificial, the figurines thereby suggest adding "mock" to the work's title. In chapter nine of the book, when Alice says she does not know what a Mock Turtle is, she is told, "It's the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from." The novel's original accompanying illustration by Tenniel features the creature with a turtle's body

and a calf's head, hooves, and tail, referring to English Mock Turtle soup, made of leftover calf parts rather than actual turtle meat — the original ingredient in Green Turtle Soup.

Johnson's painting "New Stories from Wonderland (Life of the Dodo)" from 2007, illustrated below, resembles in format a traditional Asian handscroll and combines images and themes for a contemporary contemplation of the environment, consumer culture, mass production, and marketing. The focus of her painting — the dodo bird — is one of the first documented examples of a species' extinction caused by the presence and destruction of Western intruders. Interest in the dodo's plight elevated when Carroll included the creature in a mélange of birds Alice encounters early in the story. Carroll intended the novel's dodo to be a caricature of himself; with his stammer the author would introduce himself as "do-do-Dodgson." In Johnson's version, the dodo's fate proceeds from left to right. A stylized illustration is next to an image of a combination lamppost/tongs holding a cooked poultry leg, followed by an image of a fully cooked bird on a serving platter. At the far right, an airliner and a satellite represent humanity's so-called "improvements" upon nature; after all, the extinct bird could not even fly.



*The work itself is created in a free-association collage technique akin to Surrealist practice: although I begin assembling the collage elements in the computer using popular and scientific images, I do not know how the whole will unfold. I want to preserve a certain amount of mystery for myself in the painting process, and often I will paint out collage elements that I no longer see as part of the narrative.*

Both Carroll and Johnson construct their wonderlands with recognizable people, places, and things that become inverted or transformed and act in illogical ways. Alice's dream environment contains countless references to the Victorian era that often require deciphering for contemporary readers such as slang phrases, common medicinal procedures, and poems memorized by children. Johnson's presented reality combines imagery from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a definite fondness for popular advertising from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The colors she employs, such as sea-foam green and baby pink pastel glazes on the ceramic works and the Technicolor photographs of processed meats and prepared foods in her paintings, sensorially convey a time and place no longer present. She titled her series "Incredible Edibles" after a Mattel toy from the 1960s that came with an edible gel that could be molded and baked into various animal and plant shapes.

The artist's process of collaging and removing visual elements echoes the working methods of the Surrealists, particularly in their seemingly spontaneous combination of disparate shapes, images, and designs. However, such randomness inevitably succumbs to choices of inclusion and placement. This evocative restraint is evident in Joseph Cornell's lyrical assemblages, particularly those that present only a few items — a photograph, a stuffed bird, and glass eyes — that when placed together within a distressed box with cracked glass become imbued with meaning and symbolism. Although some of Johnson's paintings are visually



*Turtle Soup* from the series *Incredible Edibles*, 2007, slip-cast vitreous china, 7 1/2 diameter x 1 1/2 inches, Collection of the artist

exuberant, several, such as "Above the Flood Plain" and "White Squirrel," possess a bluntness and almost threatening quality due to their limited number of visual elements. The "Incredible Edibles" are likewise simplified by virtue of their size, technique, and their creation as an edition.

The popular cultural references liken Johnson's work to that of Pop artists, especially Richard Hamilton and James Rosenquist whose montages included advertisements and images from popular magazines. Johnson's "What Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?" (2007) reconfigures Hamilton's 1956 collage of a similar title into a mirrored image of a perfectly manicured woman and her groomed show dog calmly gazing at a fantasy blender/vacuum cleaner/android in the center of her living room. Johnson's sequential combinations of imagery, and of processed foods in particular, recall Rosenquist's compositions and his oft-repeated, overly gooey spaghetti that appears in several of his paintings, such as "I Love You with My Ford," (1961) and "F-111" (1965). These

hyper-realistic foods, stylized to appeal to potential consumers in the 1950s and 1960s, seem repulsive to contemporary viewers opposed to food syndicates that are leeching non-renewable natural resources.

*“Eating Wonderland” is a reference to consuming and digesting one’s way through a wonderland of sorts — an everyday wonderland where creatures like Sprout (friend to the Jolly Green Giant) hawk food products and are in effect saying, “Eat me.”*

Johnson’s wonderland is a warped ersatz world, first conceived by advertisers then filtered and transformed by the artist. Hence the word “eating” in the exhibition title suggests consumption — meaning both eating and purchasing — through internalizing this invented reality. But by eating the foods created and touted by these mass-market food producers, can one ever achieve utopia?

What would an “eating wonderland” consist of anyway? For children perhaps, an ideal world of food might resemble Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory where you drink chocolate from flowing streams or eat dinners made of chewing gum. With so much emphasis today on obesity, another person’s ideal may consist of “off-limits” foods full of flavor yet void of calories, fat grams, and carbohydrates. One imagines a place where gluttony suffers no consequences, which turns out not to be the case in Roald Dahl’s 1964 novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

The exhibition title also suggests an end to childhood and innocence; after all, eating something ultimately destroys it. The violence of eating is evinced in several of Johnson’s pieces, particularly her ceramic works, such as the Pillsbury Doughboy who lays face down, buttered and ready for tasting, and the fawn figurine placidly awaiting her fate.

In the case of Sue Johnson’s artwork and exhibition, eating becomes an albeit sometimes humorous metaphor for critiquing unfettered capitalism, consumer culture, and the roots of an

environmental crisis. The “wonderland” of the past has been destroyed and cannot be re-assembled (like Humpty Dumpty). And yet one wonders if it ever existed in the first place. Perhaps, as in Alice’s story, it was all a dream anyway?

N. ELIZABETH SCHLATTER  
*Deputy Director and Curator of Exhibitions  
University of Richmond Museums*

[All quotations in the essay are from the curator’s conversations with the artist.]

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in San Francisco in 1957, Sue Johnson received her B.F.A. in studio art from Syracuse University and her M.F.A. in painting from Columbia University. She has had one-person exhibitions at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, New York; Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania; Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, New York, and a traveling exhibition organized by the Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth. She has received several national grants, fellowships, and residencies including the Arts/Industry Program, John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin; City of Salzburg/Salzburg Künstlerhaus Residency Fellowship, Salzburg, Austria; the American Philosophical Society, André Michaux Library Research Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship Award. She is currently Professor of Art in the Department of Art and Art History at St. Mary’s College of Maryland.



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