



SUE JOHNSON
RICHMOND, VA

Attoe's confrontational work seems to be a direct affront to the tight conceptual practice of artists such as Joseph Kosuth, whose *Five Words in Orange Neon*, 1965, hangs in one wing of the Portland Art Museum's permanent collection.

While Attoe wears his regional identity on his sleeve, to great effect, other work in the exhibition stops short. In Clifford's *Trying to Leave the Frame*, 2008, she stages a Nauman-esque performance in an empty meadow, curling her body from side to side in an attempt to leave the frame defined by the camera. In the video, as in much of Clifford's work, nature serves as a substitute for the studio. But in this case, the results are trite and slapstick, and the work seems quaint in comparison to her predecessor. In the context of an exhibition where the issue of regionalism predominates, one is hard pressed to disassociate regionalism from provincialism.

—Katherine Bovee

This is the way I remember going to see the shrunken head at the Pink Palace Museum in Memphis when I was a child: a waterlogged crawl through heavy summer air past flower gardens towards the pink marble mansion built by the founder of the Piggly Wiggly grocery stores to stand in front of the glass case containing the wizened head with its tufts of hair and sutured lips, surrounded by other cases filled with stuffed birds, patterned animal skins, teeth, tusks, and trophy heads. The Piggly Wiggly seemed strangely similar—bins of shaved ice stacked with slabs of raw flesh, pig's feet, silvery, headless fish; steaming freezers of packaged food; rows of gaudy cans and boxes; bulbous mounds of varicolored produce.

The Piggly Wiggly and the shrunken head have much in common with Sue Johnson's recent exhibition *Eating Wonderland* [Lora Robins Gallery of Design from Nature, University of Richmond Museums; February 8—June 15, 2008]. A spectrum of stuff arrayed, pictured, encased, and offered as enticement, all speak to a human obsession with *things* as mesmerizing embodiments of imagination and import, as well as to the disappointing hollowness of this obsession. In practice, as Johnson's work implies, it plays out as arbitrary, overblown, and profligate.

The Lora Robins Gallery of Design from Nature where Johnson's work was shown is as odd as the Pink Palace in the 1960s. Rows of tall, illuminated glass cases are filled with shells intricately laid out in spirals, a Chinese jade tiger, a nineteenth-century lacquered Buddha, petrified wood, Inuit carvings, Boehm Studio porcelain birds, an African elephant tusk, an ox horn, and so on. There are geodes, quartz crystals, a model of the Taj Mahal, English silver, a Coke bottle, a Mason jar, a nacreous green and yellow Dale Chihuly, and a room full of rocks glowing under fluorescent lights. Most ironic is

a concurrent exhibition of Royal Doulton ceramic portrait mugs combining such odd couples as Ulysses S. Grant with Robert E. Lee and Chief Sitting Bull with General George Armstrong Custer.

Johnson's moderately imaginative work occupies the center of this eccentric and elaborate environment. *Incredible Edibles*, a series of slip-cast vitreous china sculptures, serves up Jell-O molds, renditions of porcelain figurines, mounds of processed foods like frozen peas, baked beans, and mac'n'cheese, and advertising icons like the Pillsbury Doughboy and Sprout—the Jolly Green Giant's sidekick. Together, these subjects, their kitschy pallor, and their queasy shine create a series of pointed but familiar puns.

In *Pork and Beans*, 2007, a smiling pig emerges from a bed of brown beans. A "venison" dinner platter becomes a nest of spotted fawns. *New Stories from Wonderland (Life of the Dodo)*, 2007, a scroll-like ink painting over digital print, features a progression of imaginative contraptions—such as a can opener with dragonfly wings and a chicken leg gripped between tongs on a candlestick—with the flotsam and jetsam of mid-twentieth-century domesticity and technology. The most compelling work in the exhibition, *Incredible Edibles (black set)*, 2007, sits on the shelf beneath this print. Its black glazed surfaces gleam like obsidian or an oil spill, shrouding their subject matter, abstracting and obscuring its obvious message. Another set of *Incredible Edibles* takes the form of TV dinners while *Episodes in a Fantastic Landscape*, 2007, a series on paper in which Johnson used the surrealist method of free association to collage ordinary and fantastical elements, are on view in a small side room.

Absurd associations abound in everyday life, and this is something that Johnson understands and explores. The problem is that the irony she mines has already

BOVEE: Sue Johnson, *Sprout and Dog Soup (black version)* from the series *Incredible Edibles*, 2007, slip cast vitreous china, 9.5 x 6.5 x 3.5 inches [courtesy of the artist]

