

ON Exhibit

21



Sue Johnson's "Bozo," part of the Washington Project for the Arts' "Options '09" exhibit at Conner Contemporary Art.

SUE JOHNSON

'Options': Unexpected Possibilities

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN
Washington Post Staff Writer

"Options '09" is full of little surprises. Surprise No. 1: It's not just another MFA parade.

Recent versions of the Washington Project for the Arts' biennial exhibition of regional contemporary art by emerging and/or under-recognized talent have tended to skew young, bending so far backward to find what's hot, fresh and never-before-seen that they've felt like graduation day at art school. The only thing missing were the recently discarded caps and gowns.

Sue Johnson is among the show's 13 artists, chosen by curator Anne Collins Good-year of the National Portrait Gallery. Johnson, a teacher at St. Mary's College, got her master of fine arts degree in painting . . . in 1981. That's well before several artists in this show were born. And that's a good thing.

Johnson's work, part of an ongoing investigation into unseen connections she calls "The Alternate Encyclopedia," more than holds its own among the contributions of her younger colleagues. Combining images of household objects, logos and seemingly unrelated flora and fauna, her works are both conceptual and wry. They share a neo-Dada sense of humor with several other works in this show, at Conner Contemporary Art.

And yeah, it is okay to laugh in an art gallery. Jenny Mullins's "The American Reincar-

Options '09

Through Oct. 31 at Conner Contemporary Art,
1358 Florida Ave. NE (second floor)

Contact: 202-234-7106. www.wpadc.org

Hours: Open Wednesday-Saturday
from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission: Free.

Public programs: On Saturday at 2 p.m., artist Graham Coreil-Allen will lead a neighborhood tour, including a stop at the soon-to-be-famous "lot of grassy rubble," in conjunction with his performance piece "New Public Sites." Meet in the gallery courtyard. The tour will be repeated Oct. 17 and 24 at 2 p.m. Also on Oct. 17 at 3 p.m. there will be a curator and artist talk, during which Andy Holtin will demonstrate his machine "We All Need a Creation Myth (2.1)."

nation Machine" — an interactive, refrigerator-size contraption that tells you what animal you will be in your next life, based on a series of ethical questions you answer — seems designed to elicit just that reaction. Along with some deeper reflections on the Western antipathy toward enlightenment, unless in the form of fast food.

There's another machine worth taking a look at here. Andy Holtin specializes in art that's about art-making itself and how we process the idea of representation. Using a

couple of simple motors and a flour sifter, "We All Need a Creation Myth (2.1)" is programmed to "sculpt" five mountain landscapes, dumping various-size heaps of blue powdered pigment onto a kind of moving conveyor belt. Produced during the show's opening reception, the five finished sculptures will be on view for the duration of the show. But if you come Oct. 17, you can hear Holtin talk about his work and see the art-making robot in action.

Speaking of robots, there's only a bit of what's called new media here, meaning it needs not just a nail, but an electrical outlet. The works that involve video (Ding Ren's "Moment of Silence") and computer animation (three short works by Leah Beferman) are few and far between.

Another surprise, in this day and age.

One of the show's standouts uses 19th-century technology, in fact. Younseal Eum's work in "Options" is half jewelry, half sculpture: small silver cages hanging from chain-like necklaces or mounted, brass knuckle-like, on rings. But it is her "Over the Rainbow" that drives home her point — about the confusion between freedom and bondage — most strongly. As a tinkling music box plays "Over the Rainbow" over and over, a tiny red airplane flies above silver-plated clouds. But it never really goes anywhere, since the whole scene is encased in a cage.

Other surprises: the sheer amount of painting. Work by Johnson, Mullins, Kim



ANDY HOLTIN

Andy Holtin makes a statement with his installation "We All Need a Creation Myth (2.1)."

Manfredi and Polly Townsend may give hope to those who have heard rumors of its demise, and the shortage of great photography. True, Ren, Matthew Smith and Matthew Wead all contribute interesting photographic works. But where are the others?

The show's title is telling. The works (old school, new school, conceptual and performance) are just a few among the many options out there. They aren't definitive, or encyclopedic, or representative of anything, really. But they may just include an unexpected choice or two.

In the bathroom:
"Why Does All Conceptual Art End Up Looking the Same? (Example 0)" by Ding Ren.



DING REN

The Story Behind the Work

Two of the not-to-be-missed pieces at "Options '09" are so hard to find you might easily overlook them. Don't.

Called "Why Does All Conceptual Art End Up Looking the Same? (Example 0)," the first can be found in the bathroom, in the corner next to the toilet. It consists of the word "nothing" in plastic signboard letters taped to the wall just above a small hole. That's the easy one to spot. The second, called "Why Does All Conceptual Art End Up Looking the Same? (Example 1)," is an overhead thread — nearly invisible — that runs the length of the

largest of three rooms. On one wall is written the tiny word "here"; at the other, the word "there."

One thing you shouldn't look for: deeper meaning. They're both goofs on the all-too-frequent silliness of conceptual art. The fact that the artist Ding Ren (herself a conceptual artist) has hidden the first one next to the john — a sly nod to Marcel Duchamp's 1917 "sculpture" of a urinal — is no accident.

And it's one of the show's most pleasant surprises.

— Michael O'Sullivan