

DisCerning Eye

Susan R. Johnson fashions the past

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Susan R. Johnson, "Small Combine No. 6 (Cool Cat)" (Gallery Neptune & Brown)

FOR HER RECENT COLLAGE-PAINTINGS, Susan R. Johnson has abandoned her former strategy of combining idealized women's bodies with sleek mid-20th-century machines. That idea hasn't been entirely forgotten, however. The southern-Maryland artist's Gallery Neptune & Brown show is titled "Blueprint for Happiness," an advertising slogan for Silex coffee makers. Silex merged into Proctor Silex in 1960, which gives a sense of the era Johnson means to evoke: the United States during her childhood and its triumphant post-WWII economic boom, before the discontents of the late 1960s.

One of those discontents, of course, was second-wave feminism, which challenged the definition of women as primarily consumers and custodians of clothing, makeup, and the domestic realm. Johnson offers a similar challenge, but in a sly, ironic manner. (One composition places a halved avocado, in the '60s known more as a color than a vegetable, on

an avocado-green field.) Her subjects, derived mostly from French fashion magazines and clothing-pattern catalogues, are nearly, well, perfect. But their bodies are sometimes distorted, notably with elongated necks. The tension of fitting into the dominant paradigm has twisted these women and girls in uncomfortable ways.

In this set of artworks, which layer wax and acrylic paint over digital prints, Johnson sometimes brackets women with Barbie-like dolls. Whether flesh-and-blood or plastic, the figures usually appear in lineups, as if on a symbolic catwalk, often with a larger one atop three or four smaller ones below. The arrangements are very tidy, although the clothing -- flowery, billowing, vividly hued, and influenced by Asian and Middle Eastern motifs -- hints at the imminent Age of Aquarius. Johnson's art couldn't be more meticulous, but the epoch she revisits is about to get messy.