

Olin exhibit: sticks and stones she made her own

BY MICHELLE SANTANGELO
Senior Staff Writer

A little bit of central Ohio has found its way into the Olin Art Gallery with the exhibit of artist Rebecca Johnson. The sculptures and paintings in "A Matter of Being" reflect not only her experiences while teaching at Kenyon College last year, but are made from materials she collected from the surrounding areas.

The exhibit runs through Dec. 7. There will be a reception with the artist tonight at 7 in the Olin Art Gallery.

Professor of Art Claudia Esslinger said "She has a great sense of form in that she juxtaposes stone and logs. Her work has a little bit of a quirky side to it, this personal nature, the relationship of the materials to the space around them, with a little bit of a sense of humor."

"I think most people live sort of detached from their environments," said Johnson. "The pieces in the exhibit point out the importance of our environment."

No one could accuse Johnson of being detached. While in Gambier she collected pieces of trees from her walks along the Kokosing Gap Trail and scoured bottle dumps in farmers' fields. She explored the piles of stone and rubble behind the Woodland Apartments in search of materials for her

IF YOU GO

What: Reception for artist Rebecca Johnson

When: Today, 7 p.m.

Where: Olin Art Gallery

projects, all of which she assembled during her visit.

"When I get to a place," said Johnson, "It's like going to a site to work, so one thing I do is to create things that are site-specific. Also, I'm interested in what sort of small industries are in an area, and how they use the resources."

With that interest in mind, Johnson visited some family owned and operated lumber mills, specifically one owned by an Amish family, where she procured some of her lumber.

She frequented antique shops in search of lenses to old glasses, old books out of which she cut text, and other oddities. The stands that some of the pieces sit on are made from panels of black slate she got from Wiggin Street School.

Of the pieces, which she estimates number upwards of 30, Johnson said, "I see them as small, visual poems about my experience at Kenyon."

Esslinger said, "I think she has a pretty strong reverence for organic materials, wood and stone primarily. She has very organic forms and a very interesting sense

of color."

Although she is primarily a sculptor, Johnson has included some paintings in her exhibit. In an effort to get away from toxic oil paints, Johnson used a milk-based paint, which gives a matte effect she particularly likes.

The paintings might be called landscapes, but Johnson said, "Basically, they're more like memories of a landscape. You get a veiling effect, a washed out, sanded look."

Her favorite piece is a sculpture, "The Matter of Being," made of a large, branching red elm. A small chair is found at one end.

A recurrent chair motif occurs throughout the show, with small, chair-like figures hidden away in odd corners of the sculptures, according to Johnson.

"I feel like the show is about the search for your place in life," said Johnson.

"I don't necessarily see a story," said Esslinger, "but I do see a relationship between the objects and their surroundings, and a relationship of one being to another, and the place of oneself in that milieu. There's a sense of these chair-like characters taking on a personality and a human-like relationship to one another."

"The main thing I really get a kick out of is finding the materials," said Johnson. "It's a way of me being in a place, about always being on a treasure hunt, and it's about observation, too."

For practical reasons, Johnson does not bring home every log and stone that catches her eye. "Generally, when I find something, it triggers a thought or an idea. Sometimes they are mementos, too, but it has to be unusual, not just any stone or any feather," said Johnson.

A burl of wood which she found and described as a "swirling energy mass" typifies what she looks for in her materials.

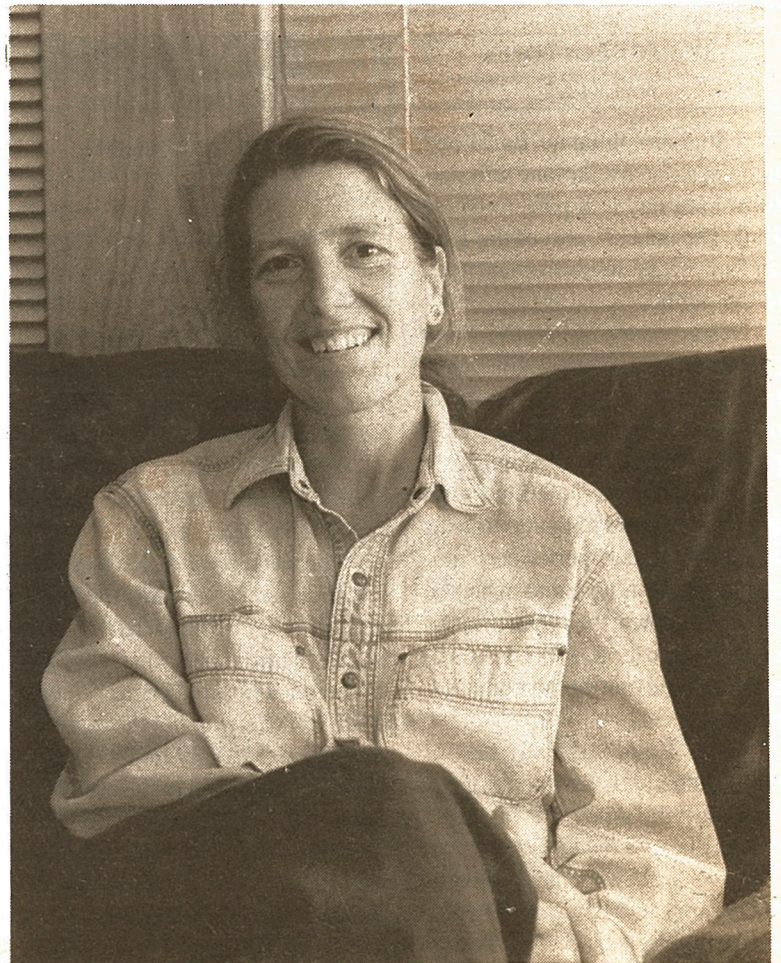
According to Esslinger, the art department would have liked to arrange a show for Johnson while she was in Gambier, but the gallery's schedule was already filled for the year. "In a way," said Esslinger, "this [show] is in part an extension to her relationship to Kenyon."

Johnson received her bachelor's degree from Tyler School of Art in 1980 and earned her master's degree from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1994.

She has taught in a variety of academic atmospheres and traveled to the United Kingdom in 1991, where she delivered a lecture and studio critiques at the Technical College in Bangor, Wales.

Her affinity for natural materials goes back to her childhood. Her mother was a potter and her father was an industrial designer. Of art, Johnson said, "It was just like second nature to me."

"I grew up in a little bit of



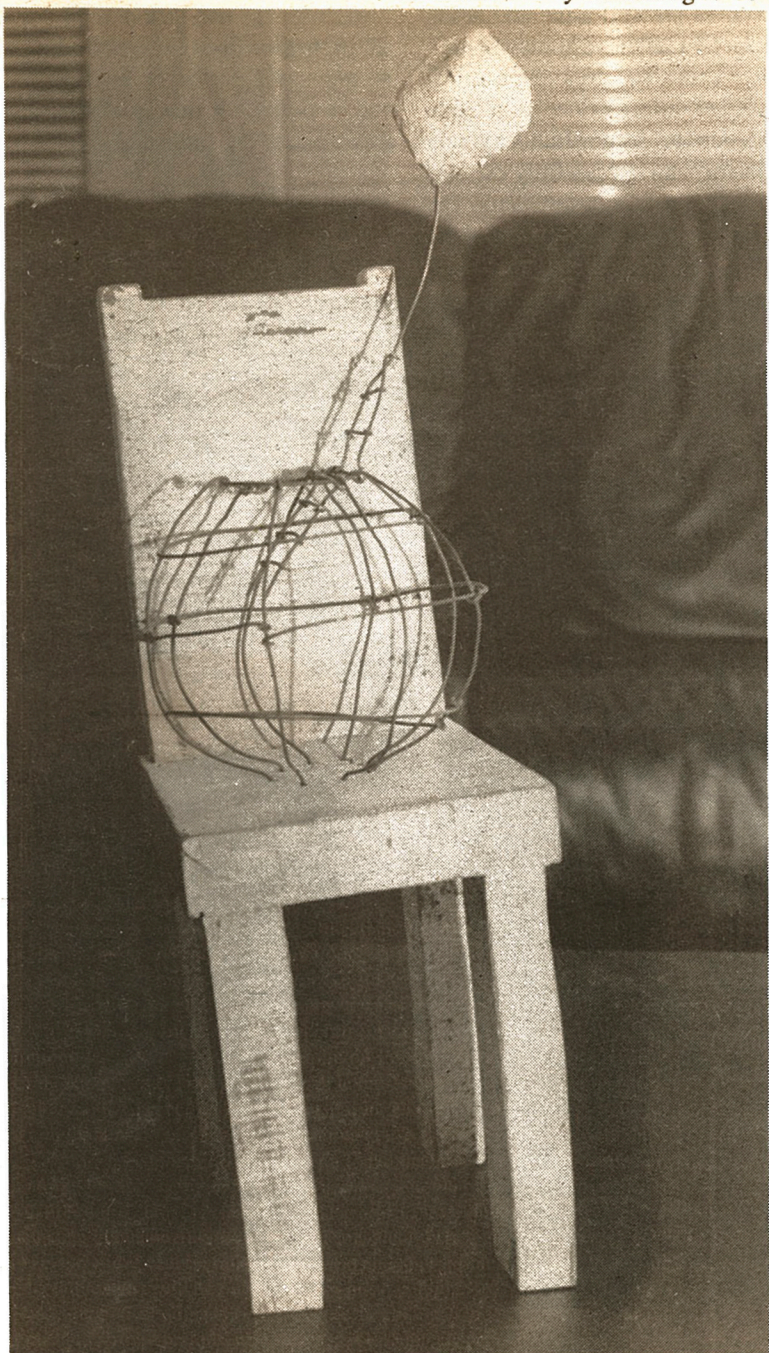
Rebecca Johnson's work will be displayed through Dec. 7

Kate Bennett

farmland outside Trenton and Princeton," said Johnson. "I was just real used to being outside, playing in the barns and the fields and the woods and using whatever was

available."

The gallery is open 8:30 a.m. to midnight Monday through Saturday, 9:30 a.m. till midnight Sundays.



A new piece by Rebecca Johnson called "Moon."

Kate Bennett