

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

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## FINANCIAL TIMES

Woodcock, Victoria, “Open your mind to meditative art,” *Financial Times*, January 19, 2022



In The Past Again, With The Faintest Tremors Of The Guilty Sunrise, 2017, by Chris Johanson © Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York



Unknow Know What Is 3, 2021, by Chris Johanson © Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

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In Portland, California-native [Chris Johanson](#)'s swirling "abstract flows of colour" also reference mandala paintings. "I focus on not knowing what I am doing while my body carefully and slowly paints these colours next to each other," writes Johanson in *Considering Unknow Know With What Is, And* (published by New York gallery [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#)). "All the while, I think about everything else – past, present and future, myopic and hyperopic." Working on raw canvas slows down the painting process. "You think about things slowly, too," he says. "The process is perfectly time consuming; it just mellows me out completely. They're peaceful paintings to make. And I think you can see it. That's why they resonate."



Chris Johanson at work © Jeff den Broeder, courtesy of Chris Johanson and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York



# T The New York Times Style Magazine

Hartman, Eviana, "An Artist Couple Who Live Among the Furniture They Create Together," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, October 4, 2021

T PRESENTS

## An Artist Couple Who Live Among the Furniture They Create Together

Though they maintain separate practices, Chris Johanson and Johanna Jackson regularly collaborate on hand-hewn pieces that are subtly autobiographical.



The artists Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson in Portland, Ore., with a Johanson-built side table, a chair they co-designed and a porcelain vase by Jackson. Mason Trince

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For the artists [Chris Johanson](#) and [Johanna Jackson](#), the border between art and design is as blurred as that between work and life. The couple, based in Portland, Ore., and Los Angeles, have been married for 18 years and have worked under the same roof, more or less, since first striking up a friendship in a San Francisco bookstore in the '90s. And though the bulk of their oeuvres are distinct — Johanson is considered a linchpin of the [Mission School](#), the post-punk movement that borrowed from both graffiti and folk art, for his colorful semi-figurative paintings, while Jackson is known for exploring the poetic and surrealist potential of handmade household objects, as with a U-shaped porcelain candelabra or a sculpture that incorporates sweaters she hand-knit — the couple have also been quietly collaborating for a decade on collage-like salvaged-wood furniture and functional structures, which populate their own home and studios. This fall, some of these pieces will make their way into his-and-hers solo shows in New York (Johanson's opens in October at [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#), Jackson's in November at [Tennis Elbow at The Journal Gallery](#)), each offering an immersive view of the artists' range and overlap during this recent housebound era.

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Upholstered cushions crafted by Jackson arranged with found-wood furniture made by Johanson.  
Mason Trinca



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The duo's exploration of furniture began in 2010, when they moved into a Los Angeles apartment in a building that had "like 300 oddly shaped stairs," as Johanson recalls over Zoom from the couple's living room, "and we didn't feel like lugging furniture up there." Instead, Johanson, 53, who had fabricated a chair out of discarded seating elements for a Deitch Projects show a couple of years earlier, began collecting odd pieces of wood and broken furniture segments that he found around the city, while Jackson, 49, enrolled in an industrial sewing class at L.A. Trade Tech, a community college, to learn pattern making and sewing. Together, they created an entire home's worth of functional art objects — and gained a new perspective on their individual practices. "Before that, we were making things that weren't meant to be touched and that were getting sent away," Johanson explains. "To make objects meant to hold our bodies felt like flipping some kind of scarcity switch."

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The pieces, all one-of-a-kind, are as sculptural as they are functional, with a levity and poetry of detail that sets them apart from the category of collectible design. Johanson's blocky wood structures leave imperfections and construction techniques exposed as they play with asymmetry and negative space, like Brutalist forms viewed through a kaleidoscope; and Jackson's cushions, which are covered in colorful abstract forms, lend an inviting tactility. Not long after they began experimenting, [Altman Siegel Gallery](#) asked the couple to make seating and tables for a fair booth. Someone from the [Hammer Museum](#) in Los Angeles saw the display and promptly requested a set of sofas for a visitors' lounge area; eight years later, they're still in use. The couple have also created group-show installations and collector commissions (Jeffrey Deitch has living room chairs and benches of theirs) and were even enlisted to build out the [Warby Parker store in L.A.'s Silver Lake](#) neighborhood, a project that Johanson is perfectly happy to discuss. "There is no 'cool' and 'lame,'" he says. "They were great. We like to work. It's fun." The duo have fully outfitted subsequent spaces they've lived in since that first experiment, too, and are now at work restoring and furnishing a getaway cabin, chock-full of irregular built-ins, in the Santa Monica Mountains.

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Jackson paints a citrus pattern onto the cutout section of a vessel, which comes with a corresponding slice. Mason Trinca



A chair, the fruit of the couple's recent collaboration, with vessels by Jackson, plus fruit-shaped miniature sculptures and a functional stopper. The side table was made by Johanson. Mason Trinca

Their collaborative efforts make good use of their relationship skills: Each object takes shape one detail and one compromise at a time. Jackson sources high-end textiles and nontoxic latex foam to balance out the raw fundamentals of each structure (“the ugliest pieces of wood I can find,” Johanson says with a laugh). “Sometimes I’ll want the table legs to be tapered, or he will want the cushion to be a flatter form,” Jackson explains. “But we stay pretty in tandem for the whole process.” The rest of the time, Johanson paints in the Portland house’s basement while Jackson develops her own pieces in the garage, or at her studio at her father’s house 10 blocks away. “We do need some separation because of big and small energies and moon and sun energies, negotiating all of that,” she says. “But we like to be together.”



At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Johanson’s dry-brushed gestural abstractions will be paired with found-wood frames and staged in and around a small, houselike structure. Also on view will be a Johanson-built chair with upholstery by Jackson. “There’s a meditative quality to Chris and Johanna’s furniture,” says gallery director Josephine Nash. “When incorporated into an exhibition, the tables and chairs lend themselves to solitary reflection and invite the viewer to coexist peacefully with the work” — in this case, work Johanson produced during the social isolation of the pandemic. “Everything is autobiographical to me,” he says. “Instead of having the pieces be separate things, the way that the space is used, it’s all completely life experience.”



More of Jackson’s ceramic creations, which will be on view at her upcoming show at Tennis Elbow at The Journal Gallery, New York. Video by Mason Trinca

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“I think about that all the time!” Jackson chimes in (even in pixelated form, the twosome come across as a particularly adorable match). Her Tennis Elbow show features hand-hewn oversize porcelain vessels with curious nesting properties — fruit sculptures serve as bottle stoppers, or are tucked away inside — and painted tile work embedded in a Johanson-built table. “I’m thinking a lot about parts and wholes, and about making the same thing at the end of this human civilization as people were making in the beginning,” she says. “There were many years that I tried to make things that were stuck to the wall, but I feel like making things that ask to be touched and that touch you back. It’s hard for me to believe that’s less valuable.”

“I like to think about how our biomes are shared; we’re all enmeshed in some ways,” Johanson adds. “So art versus design, I don’t really think about it in those terms. It’s just the art of life. The niceness of intention of the way you decide to cook or go shopping or put things together. It’s all a continuum.”

## office

Zanes, Anna, "Chris Johanson X Johanna Jackson / The Middle Riddle," *Office Magazine*, May 5, 2017

# Chris Johanson X Johanna Jackson / The Middle Riddle



May 05, 2017

Just walking into the Middle Riddle installation by artist power couple Chris Johanson and Johanna Jackson, the energy is of absolute humanity.

Media ranging from woodwork, ceramics, textiles, paintings, and drawings immediately transports you from a white-walled gallery space into the eclectic brain-space that epitomizes these two artists and how they strive to exist.

The space is filled with furniture, objects, and wall hangings made by either Jackson or Johanson, and these pieces only emphasize the feeling of being in a home—one that you definitely want to get invited to.

*Interview & photos by Anna Zanes*

**How does this installation reflect your actual living space?**

**JJ** I mean, this is our actual living space. These are our cups. It's hard to part with them. That was my special cup.

**CJ** Yeah, we were using these just before we left.

**Has media affected your living space, and your art? These mediums and practices are so 'old-school', compared TV, electronics, phones... it's almost arcane.**

**CJ** Oh, wow, TV. I mean, I've never lived with a TV, really. And TV kind of mutated so many times over the years—other people think it's normal, but to me I can't even watch it. It's difficult to understand.

**JJ** We're slow.

**CJ** I mean, it's crazy, if you really don't watch it very much and you see it again—the people presenting the news don't even act like normal people in any regard. I don't even know-- they're not human.



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**JJ** It's almost Kobuki Theater. People acting like puppets, moving like wooden statues and talking about human feelings. I like it.



**Well, I was also raised without TV so I get that. Parents told me it would melt my brain.**

**JJ** When I do watch it I find myself imitating the expressions on the actors' faces, and they're always distressed. A lot of the gross stuff in me comes from TV. I mean, gross stuff comes from being a baby and wanting to be picked up, though.

**CJ** And especially when we were kids, enforcing gender stuff-- that bullshit came from TV. If you're a guy you are going to be a good baseball player or girls being ballerinas. You're so saturated as soon as you walk out of the house. To go behind the door and have no TV. You can be tranquil without the cacophony. A space.

**Talking about gender, it's interesting in terms of domestic and utilitarian art. How do you think gender roles have affected the evolution of your work?**

**JJ** We reach towards each others' gender. I feel like these domestic materials really interest me. Your body is truly your very first world, and then comes the kitchen. Not even because I am a lady or a 'Hearth-keeper', but...

**CJ** Well, you need food. And you want the food to be special, like a ritual, to set it out, make it with intention, use good ingredients, cook with color. You have food in a way that is peaceful to eat, the drink that goes with it. It's natural.

**JJ** Try to be there, feel there, inside both your body and the room.

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**I can't even imagine learning all these mediums. What did you start with?**

**CJ** Drawing. Like children, but for ever. But I am not even sure how we got into crafts.

**JJ** Well, it was basic need. We got this place in Silver Lake that's at the top of 120 outdoor steps, and we didn't feel like carrying a bunch of furniture up them. So we started make it there. Also the economic aspect of things, being working people, we just couldn't afford things.

**CJ** We just have to make everything.

**JJ** We get to make everything.

**Where do you find the wood for this table?**

**CJ** These legs were found here. The chairs were done but the table wasn't when we got here. T top was made in LA but all the legs we dumpster dove like two blocks from here.

**I actually was dumpster diving on the way here, my pockets are full of fridge magnets I found outside the gallery.**

**CJ** This town has gold all over. People don't realize. Just walk around.

**That's harder in LA, and that can be lonely. The driving. Do you feel that?**

**JJ** Yes! Walking around here you can see faces, smell them...

**CJ** You acclimate to the dynamic, though. That isolating layout of the city. You have to go to a specific area, and repeatedly create a walk until you know everybody.

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**JJ** I have more relationships there, actually. There is so much trickle-down hysteria from the actors. I am hysterical, and I love it. Acting up, the suffering. People really feeling themselves.



**And Chris, you're a musician, too, right?**

**CJ** Sort of. I used to put stuff out more. But I'm involved in the music situation still whether or not I am still doing it. I play in a band sometimes though, called Sunfoot.

**The convergence between visual art and music seems inescapable. Even if you just practice one.**

**CJ** Well, I think it's because they've both just been happening all these years. It's the most beautiful thing.

**JJ** Yeah, I don't play, but crafts and music are so similar. Tactile. Our friend, he's a brilliant pianist. That's his painting over there.

**He told me he plays piano for six hours a day, and then goes and paints. I see the connection though with these crafts being so hands on.**

**CJ** Well, this is it— life is the art. So if life is the art, then everything you do should be, and can be, artful. We just moved away from professionalism and moved towards 'art life'. That's what this is. A gentle space in a fascist world.

*Chris Johnson x Johanna Jackson / The Middle Riddle is on show at The Journal Gallery May 2 - June 18.*



Thibault, Sarah, "Solve for X: Chris Johanson's Equations at Altman Siegel," *SFAQ*, November 16, 2015

## SFAQ

*Solve for X: Chris Johanson's Equations at Altman Siegel*  
by Sarah Thibault, November 16, 2015

Being in a room of works by Chris Johanson is like standing on a noisy street corner. The works seem to be talking—or shouting—at one another. Beams of energies expand and contract, mingling at a frenetic pace, and you the viewer are caught in the middle. In contrast to his Mission School compatriots Barry McGee or Alicia McCarthy, who find the sublime in the grit of the street, Johanson ham-fists his way through his subject matter to portray a world mired in shit-like paint squirts and urgent swipes of the brush. It is perhaps this directness that always makes me aware of Johanson's presence, his awareness of the outside world—a world he catalogues with a watchful, discerning eye, then excretes onto a painted surface.

In *Equations*, Chris Johanson's second solo exhibition at Altman Siegel, the artist tries—with a signature combination of sculpture, drawing and installation that he calls *Life Arts*—to solve for X. The variable X in this case represents that special sauce in a work or body of artworks—a je ne sais quoi that separates the good from the forgettable. With titles like *I Am In My Body Now* (2015), *The Self* (2015), and *The Big Picture Escapes Me* (2015), Johanson is also clearly after another more ambitious formula for peace of mind and understanding amidst the information overload of contemporary life.



Chris Johanson, *Equations*, 2015.

In this exhibition, the impact is in the whole and not the parts. The works are made up of repurposed wood made into panels and painted on both sides, as well as wall-hung painting conglomerations that combine new age-y imagery with his idiosyncratic painting style. Each of his sculptural works stand like billboards or street signs, positioned close at perpendicular angles so that the viewer has to navigate around them. The front panels depict Bruegel-esque scenes of daily life in California with people driving, a man doing yoga in his speedo, someone playing guitar, a woman talking on her cell phone, and bits of text describing conversations or thoughts. The other side, the back of the panel which reveals the stretcher bar construct, is painted with abstract compositions that hint at larger concerns with arrows signifying time, a question mark and text reading "life." The moments of text often end up feeling a bit trite in their literalness, but are saved by the earnestness with which they are painted, a characteristic of Johanson's work.

Abstraction in Johanson's work takes the form of colorful shapes and prismatic rays, often swirling around or emanating from the figures in his paintings. This painterly vocabulary (copied a million times over by subsequent generations of Mission School artists) indicates an emotional resonance or otherwise unseen connection between subjects akin to Star Wars' "the Force," as seen in *Los Angeles with Pills* (2015) or *Lecture Series/ Abstract Mass* (2015). Abstraction is also employed as a referent to the Modernist canon as a way to drive his personal narrative as in *Reimagining the Square Trying to Make It Round Like a Circle* (2015) or the back of with *Dominoes and Impermanence with Love* (2015), which harkens back to Mondrian's geometric portrayal of Manhattan streets.

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Chris Johanson, *Los Angeles with Pills*, 2015. Acrylic on found wood, 168.9 x 193 cm (66 1/2 x 76 in).

A recurring theme throughout the work is the ubiquity of technology in the day-to-day lives of his subjects, and its connection to privilege. A small bas relief painting, *I Did Not Yet Know/ Technology* (2015), shows a brown face hovering over two lines intersecting an obtuse angle. It took me writing this to consider that those two lines, presumably the profile of a laptop, could have been anything else. Johanson relies on that shape's indelibility in our collective psyche both here and again in *Los Angeles with Pills* to communicate this symbol of technological agency and affluence.

*Los Angeles with Pills*, a wall-hung work, portrays a vivisection of Los Angeles depicted in varying thicknesses of oil paint and painted wood cutouts. Multiple perspectives show us a person working on their laptop, a panorama of the ocean, people grocery shopping, an overhead view of people eating at a cafeteria. The title suggests a level of self-medication within the culture through shopping, eating, and working. Shopping carts symbolize both agents of consumerism and a survival tool for the homeless—a common sight in both Los Angeles and here in San Francisco.



Chris Johanson, *Equations*, 2015.

The cell phone looms large as an image of social connection/isolation and gentrification in *The Big Picture Escapes Me*. Locals will recognize the intersection of 17th and Capp Street in the Mission District next to a large figure of a woman on her mobile. Long-time residents will know that formerly sketchy corner as a site of gentrification, now home to a slew of tech live/work collectives.

In mathematical formulas, a variable is a quantity that can change within a given problem. In *Equations*, Johanson seems conflicted on what exactly is the problem as he conjectures about the nature of art and life. His intuitive mishmash of a studio practice that makes up *Life Arts* keeps the work open-ended, making X a variable we must solve on our own terms.



ARTSY

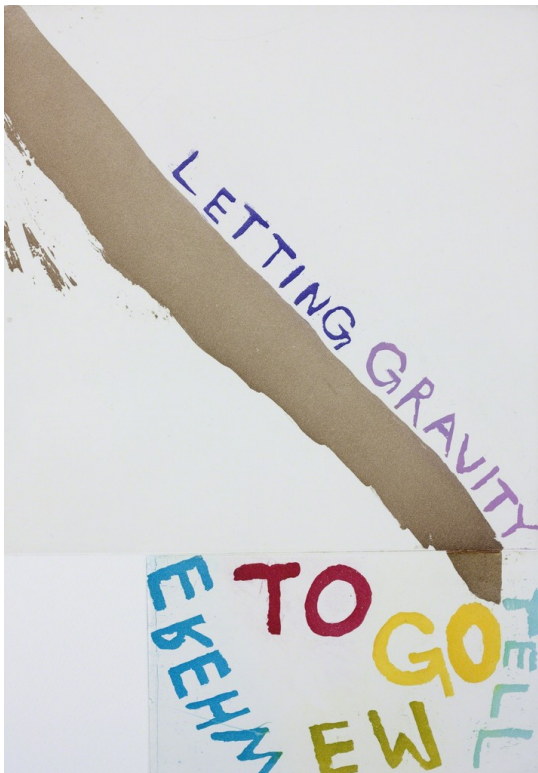
Gregory, Hannah, "Mission School' Artist Chris Johanson Captures California's Singular Ethos," *Artsy*, July 24, 2015

The lo-fi spirit of Chris Johanson's drawings, prints, and paintings comes from his formative years in the Californian skate and punk-rock scenes of the 1980s and '90s and the lively DIY culture that went with this. His latest series of limited-edition prints, released by San Francisco-based Paulson Bott Press, continues to emit the mellow aura and ground-up ethos of these origins.

Johanson began making zines, painting skateboards, and designing concert posters amongst the street, graffiti, and folk art aesthetic of this period in San Francisco, which came to be known as the Mission School, a name coined by critic Glen Helfand, though in actuality refers to artists in the wider Northern California region. Johanson's naive hand, relentless use of color, and sourcing of the wood on which he paints (he never uses canvas) from scrapyards or the street, align him with the sprawling movement's ideology.

In this new crop of aquatint prints—an intaglio color etching technique to produce varying tones on Somerset white paper—paint letters falling into one another in precarious relations. In *Letting Gravity Tell Me Where To Go* (2014) words mirror the force's downward pull, a slide of childish letters faced with grown-up concerns. In *From Here To Here With What Happens Between* (2014), a mottled color wash cushions the poetic letters: the prints' mottos could be read like titles to Miranda July short stories.

They resonate West Coast warmth, while their letters, shapes, and figures remain a little rough around the edges. Johanson's style has been described as "abstract positivity," and though they emit good vibes, it's not all sunshine. *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson notes that Johanson and his peers were born "during or just after the euphoric peak of the hippie counterculture and at the start of a darker, less hopeful time."



Chris Johanson, *Letting Gravity Tell Me Where To Go*, 2014, Paulson Bott Press



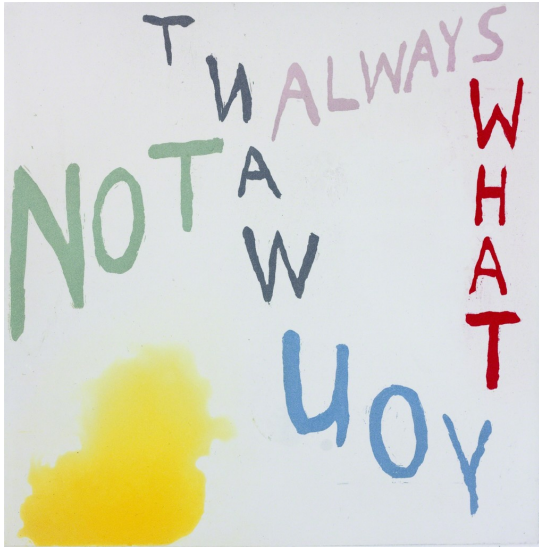
Chris Johanson, *From Here To Here With What Happens Between*, 2014, Paulson Bott Press

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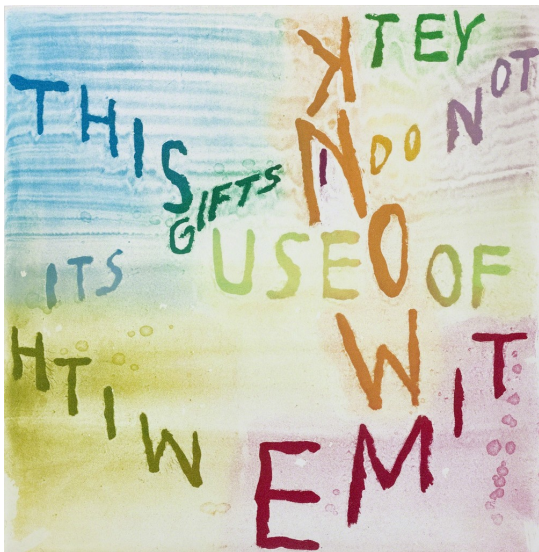
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Chris Johanson, *Not Always What You Want*, 2014  
Paulson Bott Press



Chris Johanson, *Moving Toward/See You Later*, 2014  
Paulson Bott Press



Chris Johanson, *This Use Of Time With Its Gifts I Do Not Yet Know*, 2014, Paulson Bott Press



Chris Johanson, *Being In My Life*, 2014, Paulson Bott Press



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Chris Johanson, *Abstract Art With Cosmic Narrative*, 2014, Paulson Bott Press

It's as though Johanson wants to believe in the positive energy his paintings are charged with, but is caught between the will to retain a state of youthful wonder and the need for a critical eye on humanity. *Being In My Life* (2014) makes a comment on the self-absorption of modern life, with a book on the shelf titled *Selfish Living*. In *Abstract Art With Cosmic Narrative* (2014) the unknown of a textured black sky borders a sea whose geometric blocks of blue recall the pureness of color and form in Etel Adnan's watercolors—where vibrancy contains philosophical depth. Johanson's work continues to be free-spirited and brave at heart.

Vanin, Deborah, "Chris Johanson MOCA art show: life, death and the 'River of Time'," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 2013

## Los Angeles Times

### Chris Johanson MOCA art show: life, death and the 'River of Time'



Chris Johanson poses in front of one of his artworks at the Pacific Design Center. A show of his work is opening at the MOCA branch there. (Wally Skali, Los Angeles Times / June 22, 2013)

**Chris Johanson's exhibition 'Within the River of Time Is My Mind' at MOCA Pacific Design Center will reflect deep themes, but he also strives for 'a positive, peaceful show.'**

By Deborah Vanin, Los Angeles Times  
7:50 AM PDT, June 26, 2013

Silver Lake-based artist Chris Johanson swiftly glides up to the entrance of the Museum of Contemporary Art's branch at Pacific Design Center on a skateboard. His fluid trajectory is not unlike the elevated swirls of blue wood that flow throughout the gallery space of his upcoming exhibition. His sunny yellow T-shirt and bright purple socks echo the color palette of the show, "Within the River of Time Is My Mind," which is awash in Chiclets-like pink, light blue, yellow and lavender.

The exhibition of paintings, sculpture and found wood installations, organized by guest curator Andrew Berardini and opening Saturday, is a simplified, physical representation of the deeper themes that Johanson says plague him: the time-space continuum, the flow of energy, death, ghosts. "But I'm trying to make the show not too bittersweet," Johanson says. "I want it to be really playful, a positive, peaceful show."

**The theme of this exhibition, you've said, is "the personal river of life connected to the greater river of life." Toward that end, how do wood, water and time collide in this show?**

I just like water, how it sounds. And how it takes you on a journey: It's just a nice, simple thing to me. I paint on found wood because there's so much of it everywhere. All those 2-by-4s are from an apartment complex that we found; they were tearing it down. There are these wood geometric shapes [in the show] painted blue, like waves. This loop of painted wood, 2-by-4s, will wrap around the whole installation. A circle. Time-wise, it's what we know: birth, your whole life, to death. Life, death, life, death, I've been thinking of those issues a lot.

**Text is a recurring element in your work. Can you speak to the multiple functions it provides both in the creation process and on the canvas?**

I want to share my thoughts. I really labor over the poetry of the words. I try to say complicated things in a simple way — [addressing] death, existential thought processes and anxiety. And I try to decompress that, move that away and bring in more peaceful thoughts. The repetitive quality of [placing words on canvas] creates serotonin in my brain. It's like a peaceful, meditative ritual. It's something I've been doing since I was a little kid. When I was a child, I couldn't focus; I didn't like school at all, that was not my thing. But I really liked to do this, art, it's always been a really good friend of mine.

**You spent over a decade immersed in San Francisco's underground art and music scenes in the 1990s, painting and playing bass in a band. Yet you've also shown your work at museums internationally and in New York, including at MOCA director Jeffrey Deitch's gallery Deitch Projects in 2008. Where do you feel most at home?**

The New York artwork, I'm not really into it — I'm into the world of art. I'm into all scenes. I've shown with [video artist] Bill Viola, and also what they call street art now. Some street art can be kind of bad, I think. But I'm probably more proud of being part of that scene — the cafe/have-a-show-in-a-garage art community — than being part of the commodified, capitalist giant art world scene. It's way more down-to-earth. I might not like all the art, but it's not very exclusive. I'm more interested in socialism than capitalism.

**Why are all the paintings in this show at night?**

Nighttime is restorative. Nighttime is a super yin time, and I really believe in that. I believe that without a balanced life you're playing with fire. It's a thing to be really mindful of. When you go to sleep every night, that's like your body's way of dealing with life and death. It's like a peaceful, gentle reminder of calming down. I've been doing portraits and non-abstract paintings of nighttime for the last four years. But this will probably be my last time around on that certain issue.

**Peace, positivity and what you call "well-wishing" are such a big part of the show. Why?**

My old art is really gnarly, it's really negative ... my art from the '90s. I would never make art like that ever again — people scoring drugs and ripping people off and guilt spirals and people sweating. But you change. I'm trying to have a positive life now — I am having a positive life. It was a slow process of becoming more positive from being a negative person. It was very conscious. I came to the decision by paying attention to my life and the natural rhythms of life I saw around me. There are schools of life around you every day.

Last accessed June 27, 2013:

<http://latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-chris-johanson-20130626.0,6409905.story>

# The New York Times

Colman, David, "Standing Above the Cookie Crowd," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2013



Chris Johanson at home in Portland, Ore. Photo: Leah Nash

The word from Venice, and the 55th go-round of the world's oldest biennial of contemporary art, is that the hotshot young curator Massimiliano Gioni has a hit on his hands: "a quiet success," the *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter wrote, that was largely achieved through a refreshing approach of mixing — desegregating, if you will — outsider and insider artists.

Then again, some artists have been doing that in their own work for years. The West Coast artist Chris Johanson has long been part of the Mission School of in-and-out art that emanates from the San Francisco area. Self-taught in painting and sculpture, Mr. Johanson was better versed in the teenage arts of doodling and skateboarding before he moved to San Francisco from his native San Jose, Calif. It was there that he stumbled into a career as an artist, with brightly

colored works that crossbred the Fauvist, folk-art innocence of, say, the Rev. Howard Finster, with the arch-hepcat angst of the modern city dweller.

It's a winning formula: this year alone, Mr. Johanson has shows in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Glasgow. He has a monograph on his work out from Phaidon; he is curating a show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles; and he is designing a fountain at the Standard hotel in New York with his wife and fellow artist, Johanna Jackson.

They divide their time between houses in Los Angeles and Portland, Ore., and he doesn't get attached to many objects. But there is one that broke the rule. It's a strange, primitive-looking kitchen gadget that was a gift from his early days in San Francisco: an extra-extra-large cookie cutter.



The vintage cookie cutter he was given by William Passarelli. Photo: Leah Nash

Crudely rendered out of what appears to be tin or zinc, 10 inches tall and 2 inches deep, it was given to Mr. Johanson by William Passarelli, a friend and artist as well as an art dealer, around 1990. It was in Mr.

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Passarelli's gallery in the Mission District, Emmanuel Radnitzky Found Objects, the name taken from Man Ray's real name, where Mr. Johanson had his first solo show.

The gift was actually something of a paradox, given that the colorful, witty Mr. Passarelli helped shatter some of the cookie-cutter ideas about art that the young Mr. Johanson had held.

"He had this beautiful space up on Potrero Hill," Mr. Johanson said. "He had all these incredible things, and would make these amazing found-object sculptures. He would show some of them in the gallery alongside paintings he found in thrift stores, and then he would have a proper show of one artist's work." "I was not very art-educated at the time," he added. "So that experience was a big deal."

The primitive charm of the cookie cutter also worked a certain magic on the young artist. It looked almost handmade, with a shape that a child might have drawn. It would not produce Martha Stewart gingerbread men. "I've always been attracted to figurative art," he said. "But what I like about it is that it's so minimalist, which makes it more universal. It's not a real person, it's not telling you exactly what it is, so it reflects the experience of living. It's open to interpretation."

But as anonymous as it is, the piece is also a very vivid memento of Mr. Passarelli, who died in 1993. "He was so feisty and determined and witty and colorful," Mr. Johanson said. "I was just this 20-year-old, and he was exactly the kind of person I wanted to meet and be friends with."

What the memento has never suggested is that it be used in the kitchen, Mr. Johanson not being much for gingerbread. But between signifying the vagueness of Everyman and the acute specificity of Mr. Passarelli, it might be said that the cookie cutter has its hands full. If it had hands.

A version of this article appears in print on June 9, 2013, on page ST11



Walsh, Brienne, "Chris Johanson," *Art in America*, December 26, 2012

## Art in America



Chris Johanson: *Window Painting #4 (with self)*, 2012, acrylic and latex on found wood, 42.5 x 42.5 x 6.75 inches

### Chris Johanson

Mitchell-Innes & Nash

12/26/2012

By Brienne Walsh

At first glance, Chris Johanson's "Windows" felt something like a show of grade-school art projects. The 19 works of various sizes, some acrylics on paper, many large-scale wall-based sculptures of found wood, employ a bright Crayola color palette; they are crudely made, featuring simple geometric shapes and imperfect lines with clumpy layers of paint. But the amateurishness of their rendering belies a deep sophistication. Dealing, almost intangibly, with subjects like failure, loneliness, contentment and joy, Johanson's works are microcosms of the universe seen through the eyes of an adult struggling to express impossibly complex ideas in simple forms.

In past exhibitions, Johanson used installation schemes—for instance, a ramp and a circle of paintings facing inward in his 2008 show "Totalities" at Deitch Projects in New York—to bring viewers into the center of his work. In this exhibition, the works simply hung on the walls, a rhythm established between them by their shifts in density. See *It, Energy* (2011), a word painting on wrinkled 18-by-24-inch paper, was weightless compared to its neighbor, *Window Painting #4 (with self)*, 2012, a construction of acrylic and latex paint on found wood. In the latter work, a tiny house and a midnight blue sky are painted against a background of circles arranged somewhat in the shape of a flower, which immediately recalls Was-

sily Kandinsky's color studies (in fact, the Russian master's theories on hue and shape were evoked throughout the exhibition). Through a picture window, a loosely rendered man and woman can be seen sitting at a table, captured in an achingly intimate moment. The house itself stands on a promontory—a three-dimensional shelflike piece jutting out from the composition.

Many of the works incorporate such sculptural elements. In *Are (my) Brain Within Universal Consciousness* (2012), a multicolored two-panel construction featuring a painted octagonal shape (presumably a head) is thrust an arm's length away from the wall by wooden supports. The effect is like confronting a comet head-on in deep space. In *Window Painting #2* (2012), a scaffoldlike structure, also in many colors, is affixed several inches in front of a 94-by-66-inch blue rectangle painted directly on the wall. In an untitled work from 2012, a slight ledge separates the bottom of the composition from the top. Below is a churning, deep sea. Above, a patchwork of rectangular vignettes, showing solitary figures sitting in empty space; organic forms erupting like supernovas; and abstract patterns, some reminiscent of Stella's rectangles, others of Matisse's paper cutouts, rendered in wavering, hand-drawn lines.

Johanson, who is associated with San Francisco's Mission School of the 1990s, has spent many years carving out his own space in the art world. With the works in this astonishingly moving exhibition, he has found a point of equilibrium in the main struggle of his career, reconciling his early figuration with his later abstraction.

Last accessed 1/2/2013:  
<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/chris-johanson/>

Nelson, Arty. "He Walks the Line." *LA Weekly* June 9<sup>th</sup> 2006, pg 60

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A R T

# He Walks the Line

Chris Johanson finds the space between humor, hatred and love

BY ARTY NELSON



Fucked up and beautiful. Chris Johanson likes it like that.

In his early 20s, Chris Johanson moved to San Francisco. It was there, in the early '90s, that his real-life education began. "You know, I started working with dykes and gay dudes and pagan dudes, and you know, it was awesome to be around so many kinds of really amazing people and perspectives," the artist remembers fondly while lounging on a couch and sipping iced tea at the downtown Standard Hotel following the recent opening of "I Can Feel It (Co-Exist in Modern Death): Alright Yeah!" at Jack Hanley Gallery in Chinatown. Fully immersed in this brave and groovy new world (especially to a kid from suburban San Jose), Johanson began obsessively making quick painterly sketches on found wood and recycled canvases. His early works were predominantly in black and white, and often laced with simple but prophetic text that reflected the gritty drama he witnessed on the streets of the downtown, yet culturally fertile, Mission District. The sketches depicted people wandering aimlessly, grasping to fill tattered souls with drugs and alcohol and power and material things; praying, flailing in piss puddles, looking for a moment of salvation, or even just a fleeting sense of okayness despite all evidence to the contrary. At a glance, Johanson's visual style appears a half-notch above stick figure, coyly naive, but his sense of composition is flawless and extremely sophisticated, and what's more, his message takes aim at all sides of the human condition with an unrelenting gravitas. Johanson's art is an art of ideas that far exceeds the sum of his brush strokes. Over the years, his aesthetic has never stopped evolving. Johanson almost compulsively adds to his repertoire: a full spectrum of color, coarsely rendered sculptural installations, video, tinfoil, huge helium balloons, and, more recently, a surge into abstraction and modernism, all without ever losing the inimitable Johanson-ness at the core of the work.

Art enthusiasts still remember his stairwell installation from the 2002 Whitney Biennial. Every landing

representing another layer of Johanson's worldview—stores, cars, buildings, seekers, charlatans, shamans and lepers; a wide swath of life brimming with the chaos of humanity, all culminating at the top of the stairwell with one of the artist's "energy burst" paintings—a dazzling and inspired reversal of Dante's

layers that ascended to pure energy, warmth and love. "I couldn't possibly give you an honest answer about anything I'm doing, because I'm doing it," Johanson confesses, his words seeping slowly in a California twang from behind a long untrimmed beard. "Everybody has an amazing amount of denial. I don't think I know what I'm doing at all. I mean, on some levels, I could tell you about my heart, but at the same time, there's so much ego involved when you're dealing with something selfish like . . . your survival. I could tell you more honestly about my love for my wife, or my dog, or my family and friends, but with my art, probably all I could really tell you is that humor and hatred and love are why I do it."

Johanson does credit his marriage to the artist Jo Jackson for widening his perspective. "I mean, I still can have some really supernegative times, but my brain is better now because of Jo. She's totally at peace with life and death in a way that's really helped me and made me more calm."

And it's the artist's devotion to the love thing that's so essential to the resonance of his art: the obvious passion and care that leavens what is often harsh criticism of the state of man. "I'm a cynic, and I think, in particular, right now the world is a very grim place," he continues, motioning down the length of his body until he arrives at the desired minor epiphany. "But, hey, I'm wearing shorts and drinking some really good iced tea. You can't waste your whole life bumming out about everything. I can't go to *No Exit* all the time in my brain. It's a bad place and a waste of precious time on Earth."

Johanson says that more and more he's become attuned to the fact that plants and animals and our

ability to coexist with them over the long haul is where the future is at. Naturally, this new urgency is increasingly reflected in his recent work, including what the artist calls "Warning Paintings," which often focus on the quest to find refuge in the shiny emptiness of mass consumerism. In one, slick party people snort coke in contemporary living rooms, offering each other hollow compliments as they scramble like rats for more. Another telling work featured in "I Can Feel It," *Untitled (Cave and Green shit, 2006)*, shows a couple wallowing in a dark cave surrounded by their store-bought possessions, the woman exclaiming, "I'm so glad that we moved here!" even though they're burrowed down in a mire so deep that they're beyond the sun's reach.

Dominating "I Can Feel It" are a half-dozen or so large paintings on panel wood. In the past few years, Johanson's cityscapes have become almost entirely abstracted into geometric forms, the pieces elegantly jigsawed into a cubist assemblage of architectural and figurative representations of city life. In this show as well, the artist has taken one of his energy-burst paintings and added a handful of three-dimensional panels that jut out from the surface of the piece. "These days, I'm totally into abstraction. I just think that as humans, we are much more honestly rendered as abstract forms," says Johanson, adjusting his white-framed spectacles.

The colors on the canvas blend, seeking to find a working amalgam in the same way that people clamor to strike a balance between their thoughts, feelings and influences. Another fairly recent addition to Johanson's visual vocabulary is his "blob paintings," which the artist says represent the effects of living in a world increasingly dominated by plastic. "All this plastic everywhere. It's like plastic and cancer, it's sketched out," he says. "Blobs are more of what we really are. Like Venn diagrams, abstract thoughts, a little bit of drugs, a little bit of TV." In *Untitled (White Alien Blobs, 2006)*, four figures move horizontally across the surface of the painting while various multicolored blobs inhabit the space above their heads. Sometimes nearer, sometimes farther away, the chunky floating masses appear to depict an externalized confession of each figure's inner life.

**"What I was trying to do with that was make the most wrong thing I could think of."**

At the heart of the show is a wooden, cubelike installation rimmed by a modicum of blinking lights and a many-colored mountainous mass spinning on a wheel, while nearby a phalanx of simple, multicolored wooden figures observes the action. "What I was trying to do with that was make the most wrong thing I could think of," Johanson explains. "Just total contemporary art with the most wrong colors spinning on a pedestal and the people all just standing there, like in awe, watching the nothingness."

Johanson reiterates his awareness that he's walking a fine line—celebrating both the rightness and the supreme wrongness of what he sees around him—though he seems equally aware that when you hold both sides up to the light, you take a gamble: One man's satire is another man's gospel. Having dubbed his own style "Selfish Expressionism," Johanson seems fairly comfortable working from a place of decided ambiguity. With his recent move toward abstraction, he says, he wants "to make both the most beautiful and also the most fucked abstractions I possibly can."

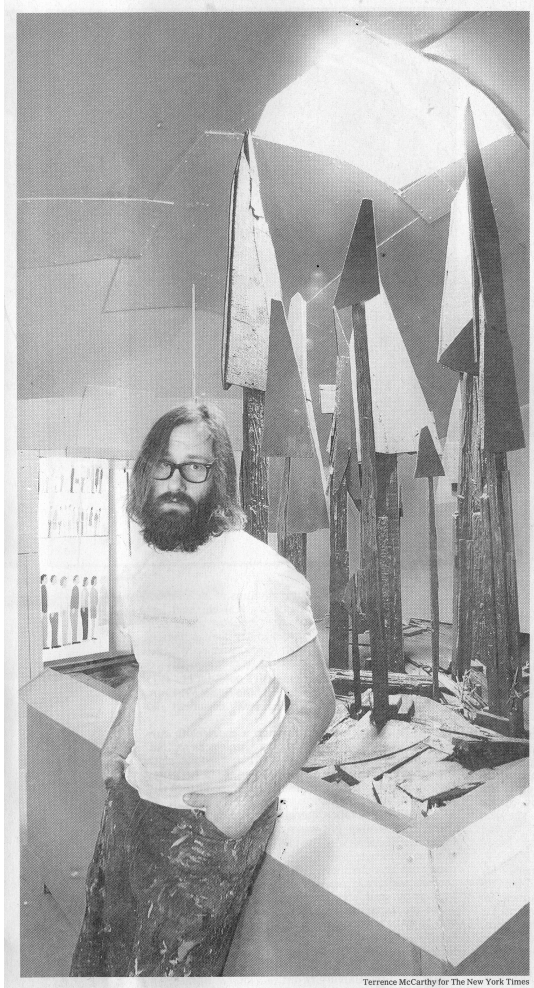
It's a tightrope walk that requires not only real confidence but also a kind of faith that the artist, when pressed, quite readily admits he possesses. "Yeah, I'm probably kind of religious. I think you have to have some kind of belief. I don't know what it is, but I think you have to have it. It's like a friend of mine once said when he was asked if he believed in God and he replied, 'I know of God . . . Ultimately, you gotta work out your issues and keep on breathing until you die.'"

**I CAN FEEL IT (CO-EXIST IN MODERN DEATH): Alright Yeah!** | Jack Hanley Gallery, 945 Sun Moun Way, Chinatown | Through June 30 | (213) 626-0403



## The New York Times

Sheets, Hilarie M., "The Dude is New Age And He's Proud of It," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2003



Chris Johanson with his installation "This Temple Called Earth" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times)

**SAN FRANCISCO— CONSULTANTS.** Whales. Credit cards. Ulcers. These are just a few of the topics that sent Chris Johanson careering down intensely considered and often hilarious tangential paths on a recent morning as he took a break from building his installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Tangents are not really so beside the point, though, in Mr. Johanson's sprawling, hectic environments, which are cobbled together from recycled materials and populated with crudely painted figures going about their business. Floating throughout them are bubbles of text with random thoughts and aphorisms that offer a reading of our collective mental climate: "I love peace and promotions at work and job security"; "Prayer is really important to many people that live among us"; "Waste and things you don't want to deal with can be found here and everywhere else"; "Say no to aggressive cycles." It's all a little goofy and strangely on target.

"To me he's sort of a poet of the people," said Janet Bishop, curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Modern. She was part of the team that selected Mr. Johanson, along with John Bankston, Andrea Higgins and Will Rogan, as recipients of the 2002 award from the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art honoring Bay Area artists of exceptional promise. The curators picked the four winners from more than 200 applicants nominated for the biennial award by local arts professionals, and Ms. Bishop said it was notable how many people put forward Mr. Johanson's name.

"He has this incredible lens into all these different realities of people that come up against each other, especially in an urban setting," Ms. Bishop said. "He's so connected to both personal and bigger issues and has a way of communicating his observations in a simple and often very funny way. The humor is a really important part of it, but it's not light work."

Mr. Johanson, 34, grew up south of San Francisco and moved here in 1989. "The diversity of San Francisco changed my life," he said. "There's a lot of culture here that's overlapping and so hard-core -- conservatives and liberals, Christians and drug addicts, Jewish Orthodox lesbians. I'm trying to be democratic about the presentation of art and the perspectives I feel exist, which I do a sampling of."

As Mr. Johanson talks, he punctuates his thoughts with sketches on a paper napkin. Drawing came naturally to him as a child, he said. He didn't finish college, and after moving to the Mission district in San Francisco, he worked as a house painter while making art, as well as designing T-shirts, album covers, stickers and

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skateboard graphics for friends. Around 1995, the installation aspect of his art began to evolve.

"I was just hanging paintings in a line, and that got less interesting," he said. "So you hang your paintings in rows, salon style," he continued while making grids on the napkin. "And then you decide that's boring. So you put your paintings in a vertical line, and that's boring. So you put your paintings in a triangle, and that's boring. So you paint off of the painting onto the wall, and then that gets boring." By now he was expanding his napkin matrix feverishly.

"And then you go on to the floor with the paintings," he continued, "and you hinge the paintings, and put them on a makeshift stage and have two by fours holding them up, and then you have the paintings on two by fours, but up above your head, and then you hang the paintings from the ceiling like people floating. And then you make a mountain out of cardboard that's 16 feet tall with a tunnel in it and stairs going down and rooms. You just go on and on. It's problem solving with the space. I think it's more likely for information to resonate in these kinds of environments. I'm really interested in communicating with kids and the kid area of the adult mind."

As a self-taught artist who continues to discover his predecessors, Mr. Johanson said he was pleased to see how many artists -- he mentioned H. C. Westermann and outsider artists in general -- mined similar territory.

While Mr. Johanson had been showing his art at cafes and small neighborhood spaces, it wasn't until Margaret Kilgallen, a prominent local artist he had never met, recommended him for "Bay Area Now," a 1997 show at the Yerba Buena Center, that his career gained momentum. What put him on the map nationally was the 2002 Whitney Biennial in New York, where he filled the four-floor stairwell with a vertiginous spectacle of bustling city life that stretched from the underground habitat of mole people up to the heavens.

The Whitney offered Mr. Johanson the choice of a conventional gallery or the entire stairwell, and he chose the latter because he liked the confines of a difficult space. "It was so hard from an engineering standpoint," he said. If it hadn't been for three friends who arrived to help, he would not have met the one-week deadline, he added. "We had major scaffolding and tools on every level. Basically there was one shot, because once the scaffolding's down, it's really hard to get up there to do touch-up."

Today his friends are on hand as he works to meet his deadline at the Modern. Here, in his installation titled "This Temple Called Earth" (on view through July 27), he has built a sky-blue geodesic dome in which a forest of stylized redwood trees are held captive -- or exalted -- on a pedestal encased in Plexiglas. Visible through one opening to the dome are rows and rows of people painted stiffly upright in profile, looking just as objectified as the trees. What began as a piece specifically about the local environment has evolved into a more general comment on the state of the earth. Viewers can roam around inside the dome, which on one side has a painting of a man in a canoe stacked with all his personal belongings and trying to high-tail it out of there.

Suffusing all Mr. Johanson's work is an engagement with New Age thinking -- both spoofing it and embracing it -- as his little people struggle with their puny thoughts and things of more cosmic proportions.

"I think if you're from the Bay Area, it's inescapable that you're New Age," said Mr. Johanson, who will be having solo shows at Georg Kargl in Vienna and the Art Statements section of ArtBasel in Switzerland in June, as well as at Jack Hanley, who represents him in San Francisco, in September. "If you say, 'Man, my energy's heavy,' anyone here would say: 'I feel for you. That's unfortunate.' The squarest or most outer-spacey person would jell on the topic. What can I say, we're irritating!"

He laughed. "But I think, in art, if you can bring it down and try to be playful, you can communicate less offensively, even though I really like to talk about offensive things -- a lot!"