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The Dude Is New Age And He's Proud of It

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

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 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

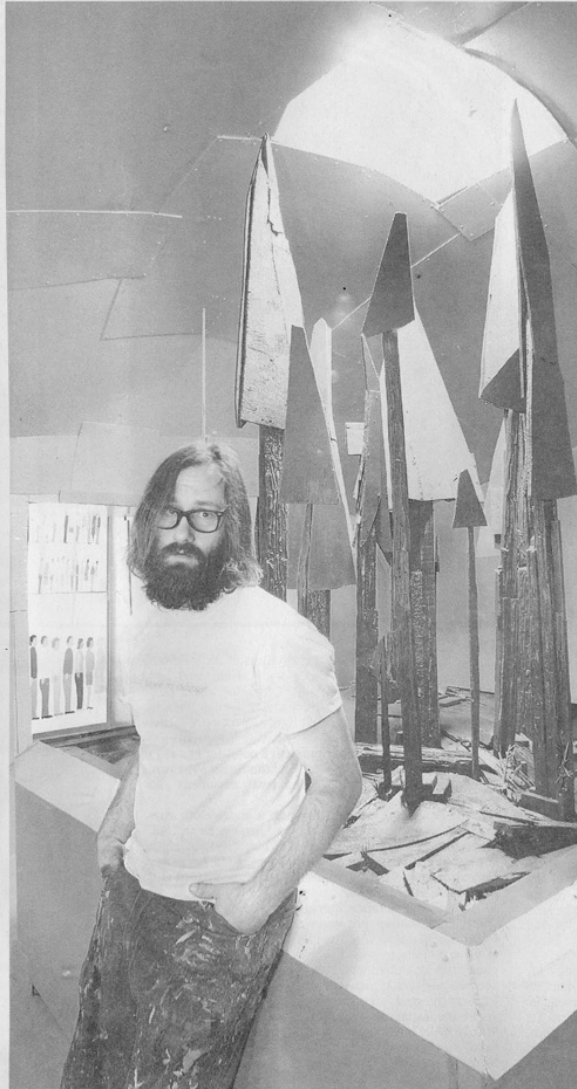
Chris Johanson's conglomerations have an 'inescapable' San Francisco energy.

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 promi-



Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times

Chris Johanson with his installation "This Temple Called Earth" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

nent 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!"