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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 Skalj, 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
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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.

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