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A R T

He Walks the Line

Chris Johanson finds the space between
humor, hatred and love

BY ARTY NELSON



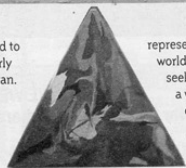
Fucked up and beautiful:
Chris Johanson likes it like that.

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.

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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 Mun Way, Chinatown | Through June 30 | (213) 626-0403