



## This, This, This, That

By Cherie Louise Turner | Jul 17, 2011



"Now I Know That the Best Place For A Starfish Is In the Ocean," 2011; Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Chris Johanson's work makes you feel good, great even, like walking out into sunshine. *This, This, This, That*, Johanson's solo show of recent work at Altman Siegel Gallery, expectedly includes some real mood lifters. This selection of brightly colored sculptures and paintings continues in the naïve, raw style that has earned the self-taught Johanson, a former graffiti artist, critical praise and recognition as part of San Francisco's street-inspired Mission School. Here again, Johanson's aesthetic is simple, direct, and rough. The sculptures are painted on pieces of wood propped up like stage flats, and the paintings are childlike in their hand-hewn simplicity.

Words also feature in a great many of the pieces, both in their titles and as part of the pieces themselves, demonstrating Johanson's knack for transmuting language to image. *Easy Listening* (2011), for instance, is a simple acrylic painting on paper with the words "Easy Listening" surrounded by softly edged shapes in various shades of blue. The painting looks exactly like the way easy listening sounds: float-y, soft, lovely. You can practically hear the elevator music.



*It is Good to Think Good Thoughts for Everyone Not Just You*, 2011; Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

The beauty of a painting such as *Easy Listening*, like much of Johanson's work, lies in its ability to make the simple poignant. Johanson is like a poet who scraps big words for small ones, making it all look easy while offering up laserlike, well-digested insights. *It is Good to Think Good Thoughts for Everyone Not Just You* (2011) serves as another prime example of this: a dark blue border becomes increasingly lighter toward the painting's center, which contains an oval-like space in the middle painted with the phrase "Day Time Comes Again Tomorrow." These five words touch on the passing of time, which is also referenced visually in the painting's shifting blues: they evoke the sky transitioning between day and night. Taken together, the text and its ombré background convey a hopeful message: if you've thought only of yourself and haven't considered others, you can always start afresh tomorrow.

Johanson's art is far from didactic. In fact, it's funny. Not laugh-out-loud funny, but the kind of funny that comes out of a well-phrased idea or an original take on something, or something odd that catches you by surprise. Johanson's sly humor -- whether found in his quirkily painted lines, his fondness for word play, his riotous color palette, or his goofy caricatures of people -- elicits small, thoughtful laughs. *Now I Know That the Best Place For A Starfish Is In the Ocean* (2011) is a nice example. It features one of Johanson's caricatures of a young man, blue sky overhead, and the title of the work painted small at the bottom of the canvas. The utter incongruity between the words and the image is the key to the painting's humor.

Johanson's work also nods to various other well-established genres and artists, perhaps an indication of his interest in having a richer dialogue with the established art world, something one might not expect, given Johanson's "outsider" status and unfinished style. The allusions aren't overt, but there's enough subtle transitioning of styles among the works that it appears he's testing out art historically recognizable aesthetics. The angular, bold colors of *This, This, That, That* (from which the show takes its title) and *Same Brain, Same Body, Different Day* (both 2011) evoke the Neo-Geo movement, whereas a Hans Hofmann-esque breaking down of space into well-defined component parts and colors is

evident in *Fall Apart and Let It Go*, *Basic Landscape for Basic Life*, and *Human Planetary Landscape Within Universal Time* (all 2011). There's even a nod to Post-Impressionist pointillism in the messy landscape *Today* (2011). All said, it's also worth considering that Johanson could be playing with us here, goading on viewers to over-intellectualize what, for him, might just be gently poking fun at the academy.

Johanson's strength is in creating well-crafted juxtapositions of unexpected complexity within something that at first appears to be silly, crude, or simply not painted "well;" that's what's so fun to sink into. However, his work runs the risk of falling flat when the apparently simple turns out to be just simple, which happens a couple times in *This, This, This, That*. For instance, *Contemporary Flower Painting #3* (2011) -- a large (46.5 x 31.25 inch) acrylic-and-latex-on-wood painting featuring six rows of differently colored rectangles against a mostly green background -- is basically a stylized painting of a flower farm. And while artists such as Wayne Thiebaud (who Johanson might be referencing here) can rely on the painting to stand on its own, Johanson's skills as a painter aren't always strong enough to guarantee that.

Where Johanson excels is in creating art that makes its humorous point without pushing or shoving. It says what it has to say plainly, from the heart and with a wink, as if to say, "There's more than meets the eye here. Look again." When it does that, it's worth a second look.

*This, This, This, That* is on view through through July 30, 2011 at Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco. For [more information](#) visit [altmansiegel.com](http://altmansiegel.com).