

# 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.

chris-johanson/