

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

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Opposite page: Chris Johanson, *Untitled*, 1996, acrylic on wood, 60 x 40".

Above: Chris Johanson, *Same Brain, Same Body, Different Day*, 2011, acrylic and latex on wood, 28 x 49".

## Golden State

JON RAYMOND ON THE ART OF CHRIS JOHANSON

**AS THE STORY GOES**, about 12,000 years ago human beings migrated to the West Coast of North America. They came from Siberia by way of the Bering land bridge and brought with them a system of spiritual beliefs based in rituals of astral projection, animal metamorphosis, and the healing séance. Approximately 11,500 years later, another migration arrived at the Pacific Coast, this time from Europe—human beings of a decidedly more monotheistic bent, intent on transforming the wilderness into an open-air factory of resource extraction.

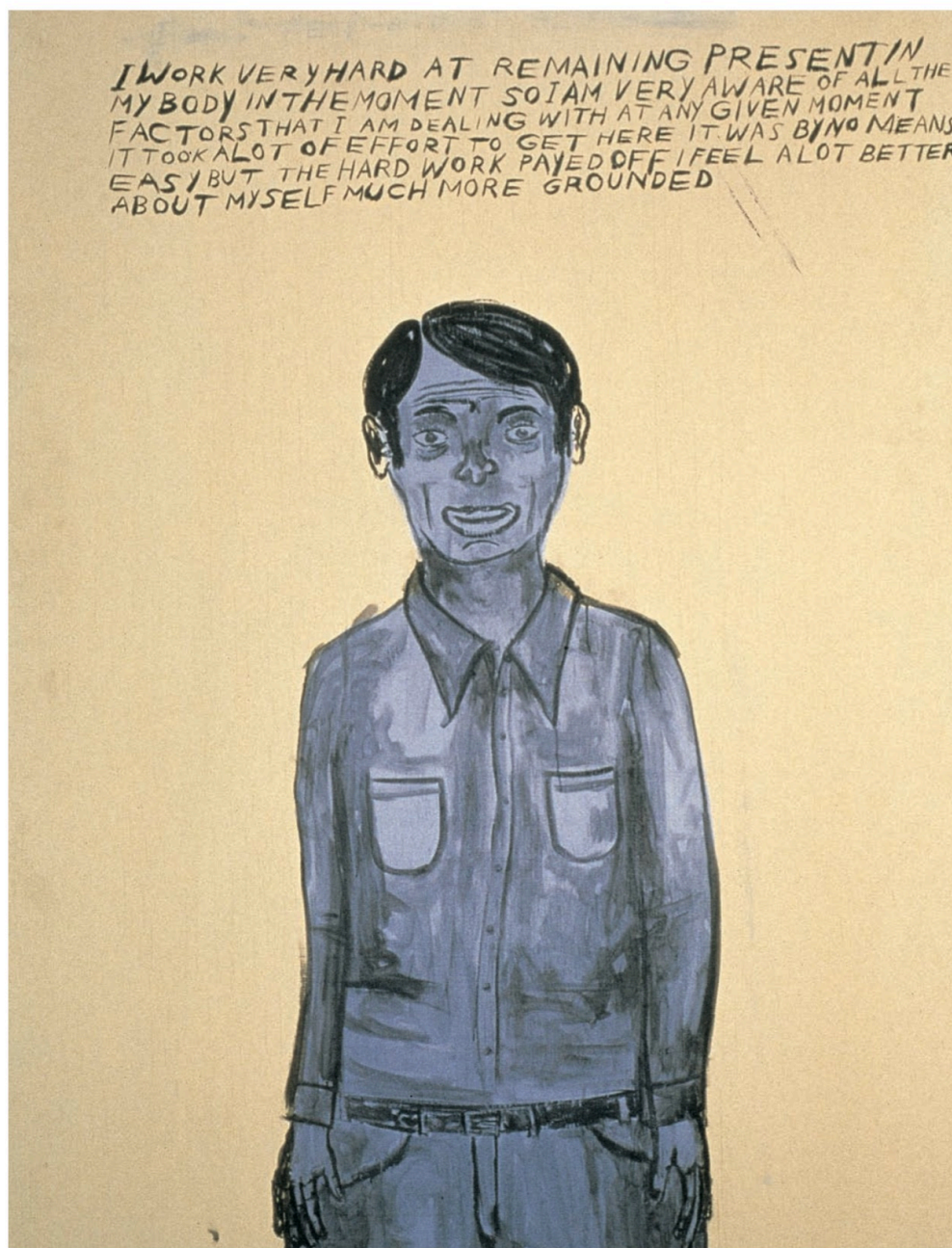
At this axis of magic and enterprise, ritual and engineering, Chris Johanson was born in San Jose, California, in 1968. After passing his childhood in the pre-Silicon Bay Area, he spent his teenage years skateboarding and listening to punk. He went to college briefly but withdrew before graduating, to pursue the more pressing destiny of becoming a painter—

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## Johanson's rough-hewn cartoon style taps a realist vein, documenting his peculiar, late-new age, Northern California milieu, home of Wavy Gravy, Alan Watts, and Steve Jobs.

first of houses, then of art. His work met with rapid acclaim, with early shows at Alleged Gallery in New York and inclusion in Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' 1997 Bay Area Now triennial. In 2001, he exhibited in the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia's "East Meets West: 'Folk' and Fantasy from the Coasts," and in 2002 he mounted a major installation for the Whitney Biennial. Since then, he's become a recognized figure around the globe, known for his crude-seeming but conceptually acute drawings, paintings, installations, music, and curating efforts and also as an ambassador of a certain vibe-smacked West Coast mind frame. As his charismatic, often comedic work has flourished, he's come to embody that rarest of breeds—an artist who actually means something to people outside the precincts of the art world, and who might even be leading his audience somewhere on a moral plane.

He was first known as a mere punk drawer. Loosed on the lo-fi music world of the Bay Area, Johanson made his early contributions to the scene in the form of scrawled pictures on discarded wood and wrinkled paper, much of it purposed as flyers,

zines, posters, and other underground ephemera, offering a primitive rebuttal to the city's storied countercultural graphics—*Zap Comix* as drawn by a hungry child. The images of that period—what have become known as "neighborhood pictures"—were by and large products of a homegrown Ashcan School ethos, depicting the life of the Bay Area streets as Johanson experienced it on ground level: the hunched bums, junkies, commuters, and random pedestrians traveling the blocks in isolation, encountering outbursts of conviviality and violence, dogged at all times by their own mental demons. In empty, Hopperesque compositions, his work bore witness to an American scene's continual decline: One man robs another at knifepoint outside a liquor store. Two dudes attempt a handshake, or possibly a drug deal, on a busy sidewalk. Many people look like angry clowns.

Johanson's early work was aggressively raw and distinctly cartoony—borderline hobo art—and aimed at a select audience of peers. As an acolyte of the California punk culture of the 1980s, exemplified by mildly elder statesmen like Jello Biafra (Dead

Chris Johanson, *Untitled*, 1996, acrylic on wood, approx. 48 x 72".



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Above: Chris Johanson, *This Will Pass*, 2011, acrylic on paper, 17 1/4 x 23 3/4".

Right: Chris Johanson, *Untitled (Easy to Deal with Shape Picture)*, 1999, acrylic on paper, 14 x 10".



Kennedys) and Darby Crash (the Germs), Johanson pursued a method of artmaking that was reflexively antisocial, secretive, and heavy on antihippie sentiment. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the early pictures bear a resemblance to those of Raymond Pettibon, whose single-panel, text-laden images were already iconic in the punk scene via the samizdat of Long Beach-based record label SST. But even as the artists' handwriting reflected similar tendencies and their draftsmanship overlapped, their oeuvres were always distinct in tone. Johanson's never contained the graphic allusiveness of Pettibon's, for instance—the *Krazy Kat* quotations or the film-noir references—or any of the Angeleno's ornate diction. Rather, in Johanson's hands, the rough-hewn cartoon style tapped a more realist vein, documenting his peculiar, late-new age, Northern California milieu, home of Wavy Gravy, Alan Watts, and Steve Jobs. To quote one figure from a 1996 drawing, directly addressing the viewer: I WORK VERY HARD AT REMAINING PRESENT IN MY BODY IN THE MOMENT SO I AM VERY AWARE OF ALL THE FACTORS THAT I AM DEALING WITH AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT IT TOOK A LOT OF EFFORT TO GET HERE IT WAS BY NO MEANS EASY

BUT THE HARD WORK PAYED [sic] OFF I FEEL A LOT BETTER ABOUT MYSELF MUCH MORE GROUNDED. Or this text, accompanying a messy abstract shape on a page ripped from a spiral notebook: HI I AM AN EASY TO DEAL WITH SHAPE PICTURE. ENGAGE WITH MY CASUALNESS.

As in almost all Johanson's dialogue, the satiric spark is hard to miss: a funny, illuminating confusion between the confessional and the delusional, the intimate and the utterly generic. With a kind of amazed irony, and in the most colloquially flaccid syntax and vocabulary, Johanson nails the daily speech of an entire population for whom ambitions personal and corporate have become almost indistinguishable, and whose quest for spiritual fulfillment has become only one more component in the bureaucracy of daily life. The inner voice, in other words, of California itself.

By the mid-1990s, Johanson was already identified as a member of the so-called Mission School (joining artists such as Barry McGee and Margaret Kilgallen) and had begun to explore the format of the installation, producing blown-out, 3-D cityscapes related to his flat images. Dubbed a street

artist in his early reviews, he now made street art in the most literal sense, using discarded wood, paper, and house paint to build small indoor cities, dioramas that again tapped into the vernaculars of West Coast culture. In low-built metropolises and awkward suburbs, in scrawny forests, on snaking highways clogged with message-emblazoned cars, his beaten-down people traveled their daily circuits, attending drum circles and dance workshops, doing drugs and mowing lawns, as all the while their collected mental energy pooled into menacing clouds above their heads. The junky, Funk-y aesthetic of Johanson's installations could bring to mind another California artist, Ed Kienholz, but mostly they extended the broader physics of his own, idiosyncratic galaxy, a place of wonky angles, jerry-rigged construction techniques, and constant, jockeying tension, if not battle, between the individual and the community, the neighborhood and the cosmos. If on occasion his decrepit style discouraged close viewing, appearing too rickety and oblong to approach, the carnival colors and satisfying, ungainly shapes were inviting, too, obviously pitched less against the audience than the user-friendly, corporate minimalism



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Above: Chris Johanson, *The Award of Self*, 2009, found wood, acrylic, paint. Installation view, Davidson College, NC.

Below: Chris Johanson, *Untitled*, 2008, found wood, acrylic, paint, 100 1/2 x 101".

**In low-built metropolises and awkward suburbs, Johanson's people traveled their daily circuits, doing drugs and mowing lawns, as all the while their collected mental energy pooled into menacing clouds above their heads.**



that was already the house style of the South Bay's digital capitalism.

In the past decade, Johanson has also made forays into abstraction, arranging his signature color schema (always drawn from buckets of house paint) across a variety of segmented wheels, modular grids, faceted shapes, even an occasional rainbow swastika. He's established an outer-space frame of reference, populated by distant planets, stars, and gnomic, often tautological statements of wisdom (THE VAST SPACE OF YOUR OWN MIND IS INSIDE THE VAST SPACE OF YOUR OWN LIFE, as an example). He cycles through these motifs, finding new seams and pockets, adamantly refusing to improve his craft. In fact, if anything, Johanson's drawing skills have only further deteriorated over the years, becoming more rudimentary, leaving the viewer often with little more than stick figures on barren ground. He's never been an "outsider" artist per se, but he's done an excellent job of protecting the skewed inner child at the wheel of his creative intuition.

But as raw as the work becomes, it never feels thin or calculated, and it pulses with an affable, ironic sense of wit. It's a volubility that comes out in Johanson's curatorial activity, too, a stream of events and collaborations in galleries and improvised spaces around the world. Always an inveterate orchestrator of gatherings and a wrangler of sponsorship, Johanson has only accelerated his curatorial activity as of late,

abetted by his long relationship with Deitch Projects. In 2007, he founded the record label Awesome Vistas to disseminate albums by such art-altered musicians as Portland, Oregon's Dragging an Ox Through Water, San Francisco's Enablers, and Johanson's own bands, such as Sun Foot and Is. He has helped organize punk shows in independent grocery stores, Ethiopian restaurants, vacant lots, and art fairs. This year, he's collaborated on a sprawling local-history show in San Francisco, "Streetopia," incorporating performance art, theater, muraling, gardening, installation, and more. His prints appear in bookstores and record shops, on album sleeves and posters; his figures on murals and skateboard decks and Pendleton blankets. Since Johanson's days as a teen zine maker, he and his work have become an elemental part of the West Coast cultural landscape, a hardy species clambering from the rocks and dirt like blackberries or the songs of the Grateful Dead, welcomed by the art world and Opening Ceremony alike, but dependent mainly on the informal institution of DIY bohemia to survive.

The two-year-old Quiet Music Festival in Portland offers a case study in his grassroots organizing practice and its relation to his studio output. Born of Johanson's persistent tinnitus, the event is grounded in the simple conceit of people gathering to hear music at low volume. Only in the context of loud rock does this idea become notable. But as with many

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Cover of *Totalities* (Awesome Vista, 2008). Cover art: Chris Johanson, Johanna Jackson, Neil Burke.

of Johanson's endeavors, this one has the odd effect of transmuting the pedestrian into the prophetic. With thrift-store rugs scattered over the floor, thrift-store lamps illuminating the space (the alternative art organization Disjecta), a congregation of listeners assembles to sit cross-legged and lie supine, grooving to mellow tunes, sending their many discrete thought bubbles into the ether, incidentally transforming themselves into a living illustration of a recognizably Johansonian cosmology. A group of thinking, feeling bodies coursing with passive-aggressive currents. A crowd of solitary idealists joining together for a briefly shared Experience. One could place the event within the legacy of Happenings, but probably even more so in the lineage of L. Ron Hubbard and Werner Erhard—a group encounter in the grand California tradition. Indeed, in a land lacking entrenched religious institutions, in a culture conditioned by consciousness-raising trainings of every type and duration, one could argue that almost any massing of citizens becomes an occasion for self-discovery and improvement, possibly even revelation.

In his review of the 2002 Whitney Biennial, critic Peter Schjeldahl chided Johanson's work for its air of "forced high spirits." What Schjeldahl seemed to miss, however, is just how starkly recognizable Johanson's characters are to those on the West Coast, a region where the phenomenon that William James called "Mind Cure" long ago became an indigenous



Above: Chris Johanson, *This is a picture about a place we live in called Earth that is inside of this place we call space (detail)*, 2002, acrylic paint, wood, latex paint, wire. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From the 71st Whitney Biennial. Photo: Tom Powe.

Below: Chris Johanson, *Untitled*, 2001, cardboard, paint, wood. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Photo: Adam Wallacecavage.





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**Johanson's talk bubbles read as straight X-rays of consciousness, precise and discomfiting dissections of the strident positivity and astrological superstition that feed our everyday morality.**

folk religion. A perennial magnet for seekers of all kinds, the Pacific Coast has always served as backdrop to magical thinking in its most warped and disappointed varieties. Which is to say: At home in California, Johanson's talk bubbles read as straight X-rays of consciousness, precise and discomfiting dissections of the strident positivity and astrological superstition that feed our everyday morality, from our relationship to food to our feelings toward the poor. Long ago, the jargon of vibes, energy, and quantum mysticism—what Bay Area writer Erik Davis terms "California consciousness"—became so ubiquitous as to be unnoticeable and seeped into the institutions of commerce, family, and friendship on the cellular level. It by now constitutes a tradition that's generations deep, an all-American spiritual discourse whose affirmational structure of feeling programs corporate boardrooms, public classrooms, television studios, and professional locker rooms alike. We hear it in the confessions of reality TV and the apologies of fallen political leaders, in halftime pep talks and ad-industry brainstorming sessions: a wishful will to power at the very center of American innovation and decline.

Johanson's attention to the weave of this coastal talk—and thus to coastal thought—is both corrosive and deeply sympathetic, burning with irony but never outright judgment. Maybe that's because as a de facto child of the Be-In and a student of the Esalen Institute by simple proximity, Johanson is himself a California new ager by dint of birth. Over the years, in many ways, he has emerged as not only a great chronicler of this culture but one of its great shamans. Using only his mind and his hands, he has created a wild path for himself, and a vision of hard, hilarious truth for his community. One imagines that the words emanating from one of his faceted abstract shapes might be speaking in Johanson's own voice: PLEASE LISTEN, the shape says, I HAVE SOMETHING TO TELL YOU ABOUT WHAT IS. □

JON RAYMOND IS A WRITER WHO LIVES IN PORTLAND, OR. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



Opposite page: View of "Chris Johanson: Alright Alright," 2011, Malmö Konsthall, Sweden. Center: *Celebration of Time Goes Both Ways Forever*, Painting no. 5, 2011. Photo: Anders Sune Berg.

Above: Larry Yes performing during the Quiet Music Festival, Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, Portland, OR, August 18, 2011. Photo: Aaron Rose.

Below: Chris Johanson, *Easy Listening*, 2011, acrylic on paper, 18 x 23 1/4".

