

The artist at work in his Los Angeles studio. Photo by Angelique Groh. All images © Chris Johanson

WORKING PRACTICE

CHRIS JOHANSON

A multi-talented California artist reemerges on the scene with a major show at Los Angeles's MoCA and a new monograph from Phaidon.

BY CAROL KINO

AUGUST 2013



SHOPPABLE STORY

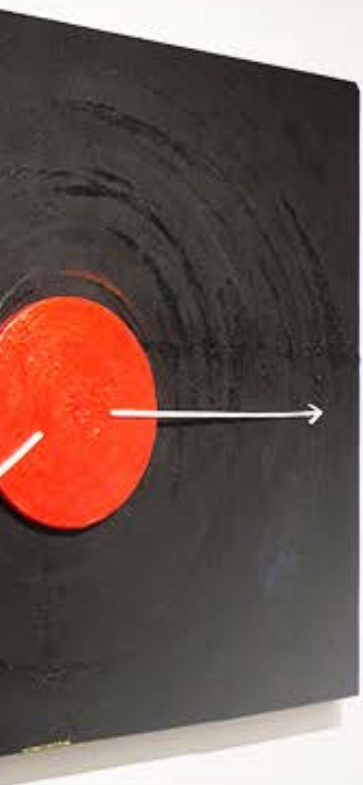




Not too many artists would take time off from a buzzing career to sell bread in a farmer's market in Portland, Oregon. But that's precisely what Chris Johanson did for nearly two years, starting in 2009.

"I just decided to not travel," he says, talking to me on the phone as he strolls down a street in Silver Lake, the Los Angeles neighborhood he moved to from Oregon in 2011. "Art-making had become like a job, and I'm just not interested in that. So I just backed off." After the Portland period, when, he adds, he "learned a lot about life rhythms," he gradually returned to creating art. "I'm more a part of that system again now, but I take my time."

Window Painting #5, 2012, was included in "Windows," Johanson's first solo show at New York's Mitchell-Innes & Nash.



Yet Johanson's current level of activity suggests he is back in a very big way — starting with his first major American museum show (“the biggest show I’ve ever had in the U.S.,” he explains), which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in late June. Called “Within the River of Time Is My Mind,” and running through October 13, the installation takes over both floors of MoCA’s outpost at the Pacific Design Center, filling it with dozens of Johanson’s recent paintings and sculptures, all of them mounted in and around a colorfully painted wood armature that suggests the rooms of a house. A sinuous blue river-like ribbon, built from found and painted wood, travels up the staircase and through the various galleries, linking everything together.



An installation view of Johanson's current MoCA show, which runs through September 22, reveals a pair of paintings and the river-like ribbon of blue-painted wood that runs through the exhibition's various galleries.



In contrast to Johanson's earlier work, which often addressed larger political themes (such as "how our time is being determined by how much money you have and stuff like that," he says), many of the paintings here are intensely personal. One depicts Johanson alone in a room surrounded by artworks made by friends. "I wanted to talk about the community of artists that I appreciate, and life in L.A.," he says. Four more show him sitting at a table with his

wife, the artist Johanna Jackson; her features are carefully rendered, while his own are abstracted. "The theme is the personal river of life connected to the greater river of life," he explains in the show's press release.

Also in June, Phaidon released Johanson's first major monograph, which includes a career survey by curator Bob Nickas. In the works for years, the book examines the artist's multifaceted career, which has run the

gamut from his drawing for punk and reggae concert posters and skateboarding 'zines in the early 1990s to showing at museums and galleries around the world to making and producing music. (Johanson's band, Sun Foot, also known as Post Aluminum Foil Band, is touring this summer and will perform at MoCA on August 30.)

The series *Being in My Life* #1-4, 2013, is a highlight of the MoCA show.



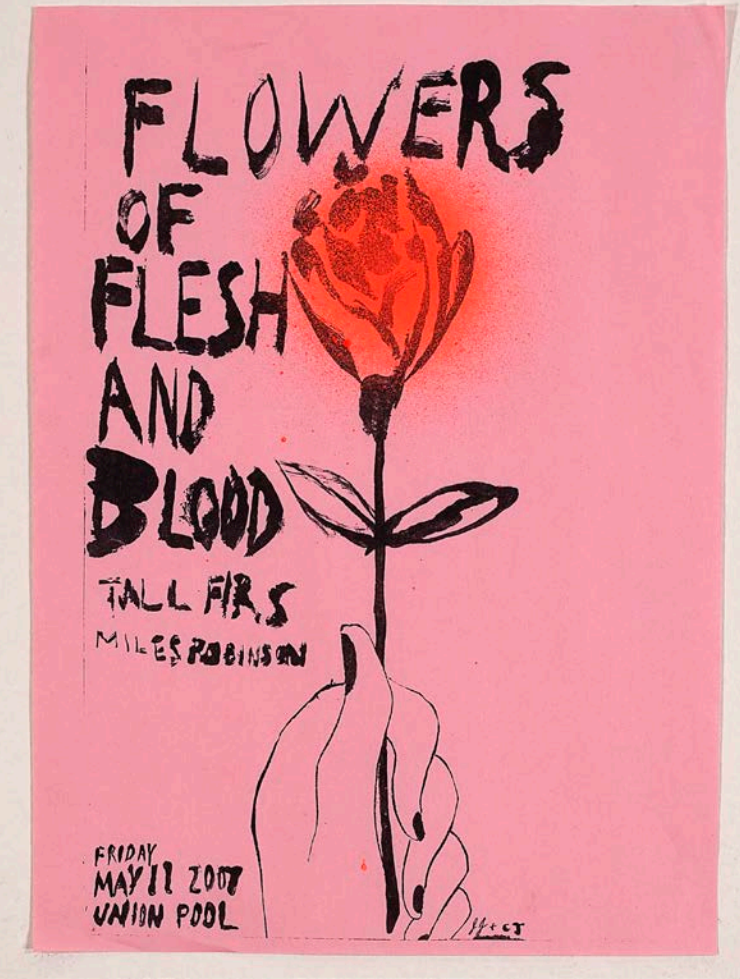
Untitled, 2012, was shown at Mitchell-Innes & Nash's "Windows" exhibition.



This month, Johanson will visit New York to create a ceramic fountain for the Standard, East Village, in collaboration with Jackson, who frequently works with ceramics and textiles. “We had never made a fountain before,” he says. “I haven’t worked in ceramics since I was a little kid. I took the opportunity just to do something different.”

He’s also gearing up for more projects, including a show he’s curating for Los Angeles’s Craft and Folk Art Museum. Opening September 29, it “celebrates art-making as a ritual,” he says, and will exhibit others’ work. Another solo show, this one at the Modern Institute gallery, in Glasgow, Scotland, opens October 25, and, in November, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will unveil a group of new public sculptures for an off-site exhibition in nearby Los Altos.

Another view of the MoCA exhibition shows off the colorfully painted house-like armature in which Johanson has placed his sculptures and paintings.



Clockwise from above: Johanson at work in his New York studio, 2008; *Untitled*, 2013, courtesy MoCA; *This is a picture about a place we live in called Earth that is inside of this place we call space*, 2002, was included in the Whitney Museum's Biennial of that year; band poster for *Flowers of Flesh and Blood*, 2007, which Johanson created with his wife, the artist Johanna Jackson; *Untitled*, 2013, courtesy of MoCA; *The Next Master Will Not Know This Master's Games*, 2005-06, courtesy of Phaidon

In addition to making art (and selling bread), Johanson plays with the band Sun Foot, a.k.a. Post Aluminum Foil Band.



Johanson's supporters say that this multifaceted approach to life and art is the key to understanding his work. "Some artists can get really scattered when they're involved in all sorts of projects," says Corinna Peipon, an assistant curator at the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles. "But with Chris it allows for a kind of distillation in his themes and his style."

Peipon, who contributed an interview with Johanson to the monograph, has known the artist since he was making Sharpie-drawn posters for bands and showing his paintings and assemblages, usually created with recycled canvases and wood, in galleries and cafes in San Francisco's SoMa district. But his overarching theme, she adds, always involves "how human beings negotiate

relationships, but also how they wrestle with their own self-perception as an individual within society."

"He doesn't just make objects — there's a whole world-view that goes with it," says Jeffrey Deitch, the departing director of MoCA. "One of the reasons I wanted to do the show was because of this community that he brings with him."

Johanson, 45, was born and raised in San Jose, California, at the heart of the area known as Silicon Valley. One of his first public artworks — a poster for the punk band Dead Kennedys that depicted a slain Robert Kennedy — was made for a theater in nearby Palo Alto around 1984, when he was still in high school. By 1989, he was living in San Francisco, where he briefly attended community college and found work painting houses. “People were showing their art in cafes,” he says, “so I showed my art in cafes. I just started having more and more shows.”

Johanson’s solo exhibition at Deitch Projects in 2002 was called “Now is Now.”





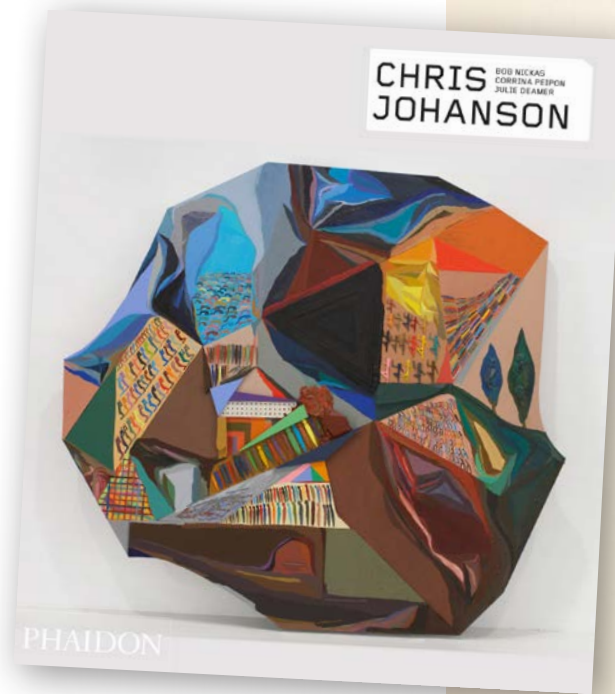
Deitch met Johanson in the late 1990s, having been introduced by the San Francisco graffiti-turned-gallery artists Margaret Kilgallen and Barry McGee, who later showed at Deitch's commercial gallery, Deitch Projects, in New York. "There was a very vibrant community of artists, writers, musicians and social activists in the Mission District in the 1990s, and Chris was a central part of that," Deitch says.

Deitch first showed Johanson's work in 2001, in a group show called "Widely Unknown," and presented a solo show of his paintings, sculptures and installations in 2002. That same year, Johanson appeared in the Whitney Biennial, contributing a huge sculptural environment that started with subway tunnel-dwellers on the ground floor and culminated in a cosmological mural at the top of the staircase.

An installation shot of Mitchell-Innes & Nash's "Windows."

From there, Johanson's career really took off, so much so that by 2009 he felt overwhelmed and in need of a break — which led to his rest period in Portland. Since returning from that self-imposed hiatus, however, he has begun showing with the New York gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash. His first outing there came in 2011, in a group show that matched him with abstractionists like Alfred Jensen and Andrew Masullo, followed by a solo show in 2012. "I've liked his work for a long time," says Jay Gorney, who runs the gallery's contemporary program. "It's at once crude and very, very sophisticated."

Yet despite his re-entry into this blue-chip realm, Johanson still insists, "I'm over the art world. I'm interested in the world of art-making."



"I'm over the art world," says Johanson. "I'm interested in the world of art-making." Photo by Johanna Jackson



➤ *Mental Window Painting #1, 2012*



➤ *Forever is Both Ways for All Time (Perceptions #2), 2007*



SHOP CHRIS JOHANSON ON
Istdibs



➤ *Window Painting #2, 2012*



➤ *Navigating the Minds Reasons, 2010-12*



➤ *I Like to Occupy My Time with Games, 2012*