

OKTP

CHRIS JOHANSON

11.01.2007

Chris Johanson seems most comfortable making things, creating an order from different kinds of chaos. Material chaos, psychological chaos. While he uses words in his art, he does not depend on lengthy verbal explanations. An interview with him resembles the work itself—large open patches punctuated with vibrant bursts of energy. Most of his answers veer off in a new direction. In his work, there are frequent criticisms of advertising, capitalism, the war—contemporary American society—but they are balanced with expressions of compassion for human struggle. Despite the fame

that exhibiting in the Whitney Biennial has brought him, he seems unchanged by the notoriety. Yet he is aware of the pressures that art world expectations can bring. He has relocated to Portland from San Francisco's Mission District, in part because of the cost of housing. While he misses the Mission, he is also determined to both retain and make a new kind of community. There is no guile in Johanson; he shares whatever is happening at the moment you are talking to him. His well-received show in New York in 2002 was aptly named, "Now is Now." We spoke to him in March 2007.

—Kenneth Caldwell

Q: Was there a point when you knew that you were supposed to be an artist?

A: I just drew from the time when I was a kid. This is basically what I've been doing my whole life. I had a learning disability and this has been a peaceful thing to do forever.

Q: This is your third visit to Paulson Press. What are you working on this time?

A: These are small prints. They are kind of quiet, quick sketches. I like to do small pieces because there is not so much weight to them.

Q: You mean they don't have to be so important?



(Left) **Forever Is Both Ways for All Time (Perceptions #2)**, 2007

Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 37" x 45"; Edition of 40

(Bottom) **Perceptions #5**, 2007

Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 22" x 23"; Edition of 20





(Above) **Perceptions #7**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

(Left) **Do You Know the Answer to the Riddle (Perceptions #3)**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 28" x 25"; Edition of 30

(Right) **Perceptions #4**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 22" x 28"; Edition of 30

A: They are not such objects, so there is not that kind of weight on them. They are thoughts that I want to share. Sometimes with the text pieces, I like them to be more ephemeral. Sometimes I do a huge painting and only put a little dot on it, like a planet.

Q: When you come here, do you come with some sketches in your notebooks? Or do these images come to you as you're here?

A: Both. I usually carry a few notebooks with me at any given time – the one I'm working on now and one from the past.

Q: Can you talk a little more about your imagery?

A: Some days I might spend a lot of time painting people walking out on the street, but with the emphasis on the sandals. I just came here and I remembered that I loved walking down the beach with the sandals on.

Q: What are some other images you've done that with?

A: The last one I did was circular – it just says circular energy is real. There is no end. It goes on, both ways, forever, I think. I just don't think there's any end.

When I think about life and death that way, then I feel better. Sometimes you get anxiety about your individual demise, about leaving this reality. So, that's kind of like my cross, or my symbol.

Q: Did you grow up watching a lot of TV?

A: Yeah. There's advertising everywhere – we get our information that way. So these pieces are all symbols, or peaceful visuals.

Q: In your work, there's recognition of something ominous, but at the same time a kind of aspiration for something better. I look at these new prints, and they seem very hopeful to me.

A: Yeah, I'm very hopeful. When I have a show at a museum, I take all the factors

really seriously. If I have some negative stuff in it, I will balance it out. I will talk about the absurdity of the advertising and then I will simplify – because this is not about humiliating people and making people feel bad, it's about making a language that offers a lot of ins to people's brains. I'm not trying to be a negative manipulator, I'm trying to be a positive communicator. These are my tools to share my personal philosophy, because I consider myself more of a visual communicator than a verbal communicator.

Q: Can you talk a little more about the specific symbols present in your work? Tell me about the trees in this print.

A: They're going to be cut out. This is supposed to be the harsh angle of mortgage and school – the white noise. The two people here are having a picnic out in the country, to be in peace with their lives. Remembering to take a moment out.



Q: What's this print that looks like a townscape with factories? It feels distinctly urban.

A: A long time ago I used to do just a ton of these urban pictures from the Mission District, when I lived there. So I just did all these paintings of the neighborhood. I just never did a print of anything like that. So I am experimenting to see if I can do that. I am layering things on—but in this more ordered way.

Q: Why did you move to Portland?

A: I wanted to buy a house.

Q: By removing yourself from the Mission and going to Portland, did your art change?

A: Definitely. It got more introspective.

Q: Because you were more removed?

A: Because I'm having this different experience up there. I believe that the older you get the less you just want to hang out.

Now I like watching things grow, looking at the birds. I want to ride my bike by myself. It's just my relationship to my internal clock.

Gradually I'm meeting people. When I lived down here I painted houses for a long time, and did construction stuff, and I hung out with more people that were interested in stuff like that. Up there I meet more people who don't have that relationship, and I really miss that. I really loved being a part of my community, which included a lot of artists, film-makers, poets, performers, drug addicts, musicians, transvestites.

Q: In terms of the progression of the art itself—and this is related a little bit to print-making—it seems like some of the earlier work had this urgency, like you had to get it out?

A: I am a documentary picture maker. I make these abstract paintings because there is abstract energy that is so horrible

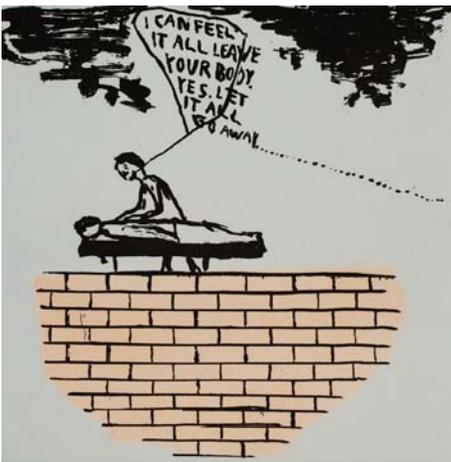
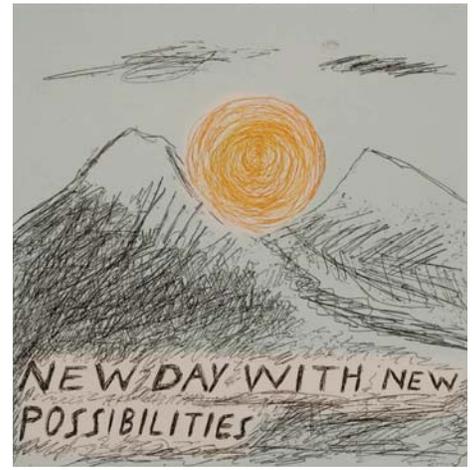
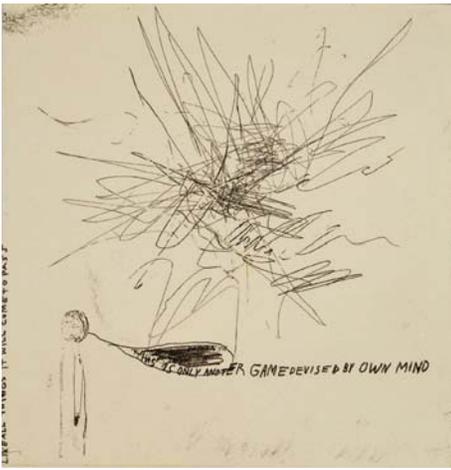
and I just have to get it out of my system. Then I'll surround that with these peaceful paintings because it is so—it's so selfish—I call it selfish expressionism, that kind of art is selfish expressionism.

Q: Yet print-making is a very slow, almost tedious process.

A: But it perfectly coincides with that I'm doing now. My stuff is slower now and more methodical.

Q: Has your work changed as you became more recognized? Are you willing to take more risks to make more frail art, more ugly art, more angry art?

A: No, I was always the same. There were reviews where people were saying I was an outsider artist. I was not trying to be an outsider artist. I had mental problems and I just felt bad and I was irritated and irritable. I wanted to make pictures that looked like a little kid did them because I hated school, and I hated education.



Q: But something has changed in your work?

A: I realized the power of having the room to present some information. I wanted to make it more intense, so I went from paintings on a wall to paintings on the floor to paintings hanging from the ceiling, and then to total installations – just trying to make it more intense.

Now I just can get it all over, because now I have this full body of work and I know all these different types of ways to do it.

Q: Are you still building these three-dimensional installations?

A: I'm doing my next installation in Basel. It's a site-specific painting, sculptural installation that's going to be there on these stages.

There's a circular stage and a square stage that intersect, and where they intersect, it's kind of like a Venn diagram. Venn diagrams made it into art.

Q: When you do an installation like the one in Basel, how much of it is drawn out or planned out before you get there?

A: It's pretty immediate.

Q: On the spot?

A: Yeah. This will have paintings and drawings, but the way it comes together will be – the moment and the people will dictate a lot.

Q: In the early days dumpster diving was a necessity and now it's just a continuation of the way you work?

A: I always was a scavenger. ✂

(Top Left) **Perceptions #3**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

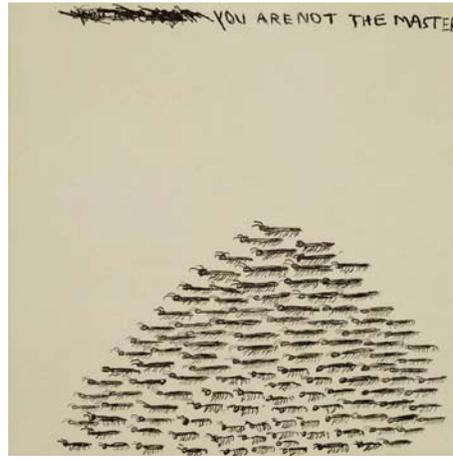
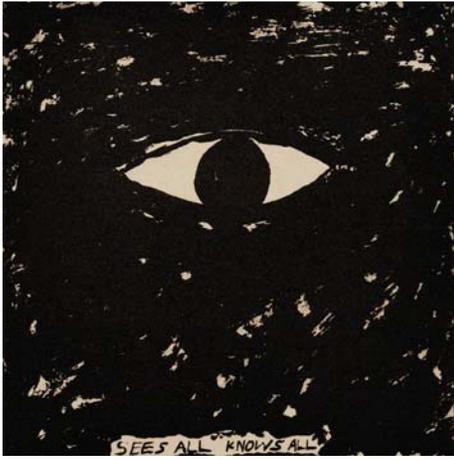
(Top Middle) **Perceptions #1**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

(Top Right) **Perceptions #8**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

(Bottom Left) **Perceptions #6**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

(Bottom Middle) **Perceptions #4**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

(Bottom Right) **Perceptions #5**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30



(Left) **Perceptions #9**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

(Right) **Perceptions #2**, 2007
Color sugarlift aquatint etching;
Paper size: 11" x 11"; Edition of 30

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