

June 7, 2013

## Standing Above the Cookie Crowd

By DAVID COLMAN

The word from Venice, and the 55th go-round of the world’s oldest biennial of contemporary art, is that the hotshot young curator Massimiliano Gioni has a hit on his hands: “a quiet success,” the New York Times critic Holland Cotter wrote, that was largely achieved through a refreshing approach of mixing — desegregating, if you will — outsider and insider artists.

Then again, some artists have been doing that in their own work for years. The West Coast artist Chris Johanson has long been part of the Mission School of in-and-out art that emanates from the San Francisco area. Self-taught in painting and sculpture, Mr. Johanson was better versed in the teenage arts of doodling and skateboarding before he moved to San Francisco from his native San Jose, Calif. It was there that he stumbled into a career as an artist, with brightly colored works that crossbreed the Fauvist, folk-art innocence of, say, the Rev. Howard Finster, with the arch-hepcat angst of the modern city dweller.

It’s a winning formula: this year alone, Mr. Johanson has shows in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Glasgow. He has a monograph on his work out from Phaidon; he is curating a show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles; and he is designing a fountain at the Standard hotel in New York with his wife and fellow artist, Johanna Jackson.

They divide their time between houses in Los Angeles and Portland, Ore., and he doesn’t get attached to many objects. But there is one that broke the rule. It’s a strange, primitive-looking kitchen gadget that was a gift from his early days in San Francisco: an extra-extra-large cookie cutter.

Crudely rendered out of what appears to be tin or zinc, 10 inches tall and 2 inches deep, it was given to Mr. Johnson by William Passarelli, a friend and artist as well as an art dealer, around 1990. It was in Mr. Passarelli’s gallery in the Mission District, Emmanuel Radnitzky Found Objects, the name taken from Man Ray’s real name, where Mr. Johanson had his first solo show.

The gift was actually something of a paradox, given that the colorful, witty Mr. Passarelli helped shatter some of the cookie-cutter ideas about art that the young Mr. Johanson had held.

“He had this beautiful space up on Potrero Hill,” Mr. Johanson said. “He had all these incredible things, and would make these amazing found-object sculptures. He would show some of them in the gallery alongside paintings he found in thrift stores, and then he would have a proper show of one artist’s work.”

“I was not very art-educated at the time,” he added. “So that experience was a big deal.”

The primitive charm of the cookie cutter also worked a certain magic on the young artist. It looked almost handmade, with a shape that a child might have drawn. It would not produce Martha Stewart gingerbread men.

“I’ve always been attracted to figurative art,” he said. “But what I like about it is that it’s so minimalist, which makes it more universal. It’s not a real person, it’s not telling you exactly what it is, so it reflects the experience of living. It’s open to interpretation.”

But as anonymous as it is, the piece is also a very vivid memento of Mr. Passarelli, who died in 1993. “He was so feisty and determined and witty and colorful,” Mr. Johanson said. “I was just this 20-year-old, and he was exactly the kind of person I wanted to meet and be friends with.”

What the memento has never suggested is that it be used in the kitchen, Mr. Johanson not being much for gingerbread. But between signifying the vagueness of Everyman and the acute specificity of Mr. Passarelli, it might be said that the cookie cutter has its hands full. If it had hands.