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ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; Chris Johanson -- 'Now Is Now'

By KEN JOHNSON

Deitch Projects
76 Grand Street, SoHo
Through Dec. 21

An inspired simpleton sharing a feel-good holistic vision: that's the impression you get from Chris Johanson's art. In comical, faux-naïve painting, drawing and sculpture, this young San Franciscan spoofs New Age therapy culture, yet his art also conveys a genuinely religious urgency.

Inside a walk-in, clumsily cobbled wooden igloo, impenetrable darkness is relieved only by a small, glowing light bulb bearing the word "us": humanity's tininess within the vastness of space. In the gallery's main room, a wheeled ship is driven round and round on a blue dome by a motorized pivot arm balanced by a cartoon money bag: the futility of materialism.

In addition to these installations, colorful abstract and representational paintings depict social and psychological experience. An abstraction radiating stripes symbolizes fascism. Cityscapes populated by crudely drawn little people speaking in word bubbles represent democratic pluralism. In a picture of people dancing around in silly catsuits, one exclaims, "This is an excellent workshop!" A painting of a kneeling man with rainbow stripes pouring into his head is captioned, "Prayer is really important to many people that live among us."

The message is that with a little effort and receptivity to divine energies, we might all just get along. The goofy, ramshackle bridge Mr. Johanson builds between existential despair and a yearning for true belief is funny and touching, and possibly even inspirational. KEN JOHNSON