

ARTFORUM

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Chris Johanson

DEITCH PROJECTS

Comprising paintings and one large installation, Chris Johanson's second solo exhibition at this gallery was equal parts cryptic and clear-cut, lighthearted and sarcastic, comic and tragic. Most of the artist's new works employ a Crayola palette and are composed of wood he gathered from Brooklyn Dumpsters and discarded art-shipping crates. While recycling and revitalization were evidenced throughout the show, Johanson did not apply such strategies to his own output. Indeed, the elements that one might most readily associate with the artist's earlier work (cartoon thought bubbles, copious handwritten text, crudely rendered figures languishing in urban and suburban environments) were almost completely missing. In their place, the new series of abstract paintings offers ecological visions of the past, present, and future, Johanson now directly confronting themes he has only flirted with before.

Visitors entered the exhibition via an enclosed gray-painted ramp, a metaphoric birth canal, which led into a large dome featuring nineteen rectangular paintings on interconnected billboardlike supports. In this awkward, labyrinthine art-yurt, the recorded sounds of a drum circle (Johanson's band, *Is*) gave the space a primordial feel; likewise, a few primitive-looking figures lurk in the paintings. Several of them display imagery the artist has employed since the 1990s, such as bodies kneeling and praying, multicolored bricks, and circles resembling abstract heads. The paintings here faced a massive gray rotating mobile resembling a meteorite with a mirror shard stuck to its side. The arrangement imparted a fractured narrative, as if a comic book's frames had been rendered in three dimensions and dispersed; the



environment was all-encompassing and experiential, conveying a sense of unity supported by the exhibition's title, "Totalities."

Exiting the installation into the gallery's bright lights, one encountered an angled minimalist plank covered in blue carpet remnants that extended to a wall where a yellow orb, perhaps a representation of the sun, was installed above a painting featuring various splotchy circles, suggesting faces in a church congregation, with built-up surfaces and interconnecting lines. Across from this area, rows of wooden chairs faced three colorful panels, the first depicting another abstract headlike circle, the second a psychedelic swirl of colors, the third a network of paint globules. With a meditative tone imparting a feeling religious and ceremonial, these works hint at something beyond aesthetic contemplation. The two installations seem to emphasize different devotional modes: one active, with forward movement, suggesting a pilgrimage; the other passive, and seated, with obstructed views. Both works stress organization and individuality, crunchy New Age schmaltziness and something much deeper, more sincere and personal.

The upstairs gallery housed paintings on paper reminiscent of Johanson's earlier work. Standing atop the staircase, one had a clear view of the entire exhibition landscape, wherein all the installations, the "totalities," as it were, seemed just as, if not more, important than the individual works. Here it was apparent that Johanson has grown increasingly adept at translating, with considerable resonance, his narrative figuration into abstraction, following an experimental and energetic trajectory that has served his work well. The exhibition also showed the artist carefully balancing lofty, enigmatic subjects and cultivating, as he tends to do, a personal garden to thoughtfully develop his practice and preferences. Yet, as idiosyncratic as it looks, Johanson's work continues to tap unassumingly into a collective unconscious of fears and anxieties, hopes and dreams, allowing the unknowable and intangible to feel as salient as the everyday.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler