

ARTslant

Backwards Towards the Future by Joel Kuennen

CHRIS JOHANSON

Kavi Gupta Gallery | 835 West Washington, Chicago, IL 60607
September 10, 2010 - October 16, 2010

Gallery season is now officially in full swing as witnessed by the glut of art kids and young professionals that swarmed the West Loop Gallery district this past weekend. While I find these conditions annoying to say the least, it does at least give one confidence in a functioning art market.

My assigned objective for the night was to scope out the Chris Johanson show at Kavi Gupta Gallery. Johanson, b. 1968 in San Jose, CA, has now come to be known as a Mission School artist as he matured in the Mission Valley art community. Johanson unexpectedly arrived on the art scene in 2002 with a site-specific installation at the Whitney Biennial. Johanson is a self-taught artist and most notable perhaps for bringing a street-sensibility to his work that relies productively on plainness and directness. The Johanson show at Kavi Gupta, however, is a different Johanson.



Installation view of Chris Johanson's "Backwards Towards Forwards" at Kavi Gupta Gallery | Chicago. Image courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery | Chicago.

Person Walking Over Bridge.

They push me to the far right wall, and fade quickly into the background as I'm pulled along into the swirling cul-de-sac of artwork. Set up as concentric rings, the interior room is oriented around a black, amorphous nugget-core of a sculpture. Orientated in four directions from the center there are a series of three artworks, the *Suburban Night Painting* series is the first painting in each group.

Using dark, quasi-natural colors, these paintings are simple: a house, a tree, a yard, a sky. They are eerie

Bright acrylics on rough, wooden objects. An exhibition floor plan like a maze. A certain playfulness. These things are the same. But something's changed. It smells professional.

Perhaps it was the white washed walls, the line of people that accompanied one throughout the exhibit that ended like a cul-de-sac. But for me, it was the work. Panels created from found wood, painted and piecemealed together in a random jigsaw pattern like something you would expect from Johanson. Maybe it's not the work that's changed, but the effect it has? Maybe it's expected now. That's why it's not the same. But first, a description of the work is necessary.

Coming into the sticky gallery, there's a "bar" on the right with only a finger of wine in each plastic cup— I decide to pass up the free booze and swing left, directly into the Johanson exhibit. At first I'm confronted by the wing dam-like wooden constructions that make up his series



Chris Johanson. *Person Walking Over a Bridge #2*. 2010. Acrylic on found wood. 23" x 63" x 2". Image courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery | Chicago.

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but somehow calming. Comfortable. Simple.

Behind these are the larger paneled series called *Backward Abstract Painting* that provides a quick visual shift to the collaged hyper-colors that are characteristic of Johanson and so many other contemporary painters right now.

Backward Abstract Painting is just that when it's the form that dictates the composition. The effect is a nice piece but it is most definitely not the highlight of the grouping.



Chris Johanson. *Suburban Night Painting #4*. 2010. Acrylic on found wood. 15 3/4" x 23" x 2 1/4". Image courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery | Chicago.

Peeking from behind in all four directions are seascapes, languid blues resound from layer upon layer of application, creating a distance that doesn't appear in the paintings themselves but rather is apparent in the installation of the works as a whole. Johanson has a keen sense of spatiality in his installation work and this one is no different. The works seem to be more screens than actual visual fields with inherent depth. Each screen is a different perspective on reality yet this is only apparent in the relative placement of the works.

A bright yellow sun hails over each wedge of cerulean sea, the visual equivalent of a beautiful day cliché. These pieces are stand alone gorgeous and I'm sure will adorn a company lobby wall well, but it's the relation of each iteration to the space that I find most important and most pleasing. A calm but dark house, a frantic screen and an idyllic backdrop—seems like California to me and it makes me want to dream. Johanson dreamed his way out of suburbia into the art world and that's exactly where this cul-de-sac ended up.

-Joel Kuennen

Posted by Joel Kuennen on 9/13



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