

T PRESENTS

An Artist Couple Who Live Among the Furniture They Create Together

Though they maintain separate practices, Chris Johanson and Johanna Jackson regularly collaborate on hand-hewn pieces that are subtly autobiographical.



The artists Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson in Portland, Ore., with a Johanson-built side table, a chair they co-designed and a porcelain vase by Jackson. Credit: Mason Trinca.

By Eviana Hartman
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MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

For the artists Chris Johanson and Johanna Jackson, the border between art and design is as blurred as that between work and life. The couple, based in Portland, Ore., and Los Angeles, have been married for 18 years and have worked under the same roof, more or less, since first striking up a friendship in a San Francisco bookstore in the '90s. And though the bulk of their oeuvres are distinct — Johanson is considered a linchpin of the Mission School, the post-punk movement that borrowed from both graffiti and folk art, for his colorful semi-figurative paintings, while Jackson is known for exploring the poetic and surrealist potential of handmade household objects, as with a U-shaped porcelain candelabra or a sculpture that incorporates sweaters she hand-knit — the couple have also been quietly collaborating for a decade on collage-like salvaged-wood furniture and functional structures, which populate their own home and studios. This fall, some of these pieces will make their way into his-and-hers solo shows in New York (Johanson's opens in October at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Jackson's in November at Tennis Elbow at The Journal Gallery), each offering an immersive view of the artists' range and overlap during this recent housebound era.



Upholstered cushions crafted by Jackson arranged with found-wood furniture made by Johanson. Credit Mason Trinca

The duo's exploration of furniture began in 2010, when they moved into a Los Angeles apartment in a building that had "like 300 oddly shaped stairs," as Johanson recalls over Zoom from the couple's living room, "and we didn't feel like lugging furniture up there." Instead, Johanson, 53, who had

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fabricated a chair out of discarded seating elements for a Deitch Projects show a couple of years earlier, began collecting odd pieces of wood and broken furniture segments that he found around the city, while Jackson, 49, enrolled in an industrial sewing class at L.A. Trade Tech, a community college, to learn pattern making and sewing. Together, they created an entire home's worth of functional art objects — and gained a new perspective on their individual practices. “Before that, we were making things that weren't meant to be touched and that were getting sent away,” Johanson explains. “To make objects meant to hold our bodies felt like flipping some kind of scarcity switch.”

The pieces, all one-of-a-kind, are as sculptural as they are functional, with a levity and poetry of detail that sets them apart from the category of collectible design. Johanson's blocky wood structures leave imperfections and construction techniques exposed as they play with asymmetry and negative space, like Brutalist forms viewed through a kaleidoscope; and Jackson's cushions, which are covered in colorful abstract forms, lend an inviting tactility. Not long after they began experimenting, Altman Siegel Gallery asked the couple to make seating and tables for a fair booth. Someone from the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles saw the display and promptly requested a set of sofas for a visitors' lounge area; eight years later, they're still in use. The couple have also created group-show installations and collector commissions (Jeffrey Deitch has living room chairs and benches of theirs) and were even enlisted to build out the Warby Parker store in L.A.'s Silver Lake neighborhood, a project that Johanson is perfectly happy to discuss. “There is no ‘cool’ and ‘lame,’” he says. “They were great. We like to work. It's fun.” The duo have fully outfitted subsequent spaces they've lived in since that first experiment, too, and are now at work restoring and furnishing a getaway cabin, chock-full of irregular built-ins, in the Santa Monica Mountains.

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Jackson paints a citrus pattern onto the cutout section of a vessel, which comes with a corresponding slice. Mason Trinca



A chair, the fruit of the couple's recent collaboration, with vessels by Jackson, plus fruit-shaped miniature sculptures and a functional stopper. The side table was made by Johanson. Mason Trinca

Their collaborative efforts make good use of their relationship skills: Each object takes shape one detail and one compromise at a time. Jackson sources high-end textiles and nontoxic latex foam to balance out the raw fundamentals of each structure (“the ugliest pieces of wood I can find,” Johanson says with a laugh). “Sometimes I’ll want the table legs to be tapered, or he will want the cushion to be a flatter form,” Jackson explains. “But we stay pretty in tandem for the whole process.” The rest of the time, Johanson paints in the Portland house’s basement while Jackson develops her own pieces in the garage, or at her studio at her father’s house 10 blocks away. “We do need some separation because of big and small energies and moon and sun energies, negotiating all of that,” she says. “But we like to be together.”

At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Johanson’s dry-brushed gestural abstractions will be paired with found-wood frames and staged in and around a small, houselike structure. Also on view will be a Johanson-built chair with upholstery by Jackson. “There’s a meditative quality to Chris and Johanna’s furniture,” says gallery director Josephine Nash. “When incorporated into an exhibition, the tables and chairs lend themselves to solitary reflection and invite the viewer to coexist peacefully with the work” — in this case, work Johanson produced during the social isolation of the pandemic. “Everything is autobiographical to me,” he says. “Instead of having the pieces be separate things, the way that the space is used, it’s all completely life experience.”

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“I think about that all the time!” Jackson chimes in (even in pixelated form, the twosome come across as a particularly adorable match). Her Tennis Elbow show features hand-hewn oversize porcelain vessels with curious nesting properties — fruit sculptures serve as bottle stoppers, or are tucked away inside — and painted tile work embedded in a Johanson-built table. “I’m thinking a lot about parts and wholes, and about making the same thing at the end of this human civilization as people were making in the beginning,” she says. “There were many years that I tried to make things that were stuck to the wall, but I feel like making things that ask to be touched and that touch you back. It’s hard for me to believe that’s less valuable.”

“I like to think about how our biomes are shared; we’re all enmeshed in some ways,” Johanson adds. “So art versus design, I don’t really think about it in those terms. It’s just the art of life. The niceness of intention of the way you decide to cook or go shopping or put things together. It’s all a continuum.”