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## Art Talk AM: Chris Johanson

Cyrus Smith

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### Recommended Citation

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CYRUS W. SMITH OF ART TALK AM IN CONVERSATION WITH

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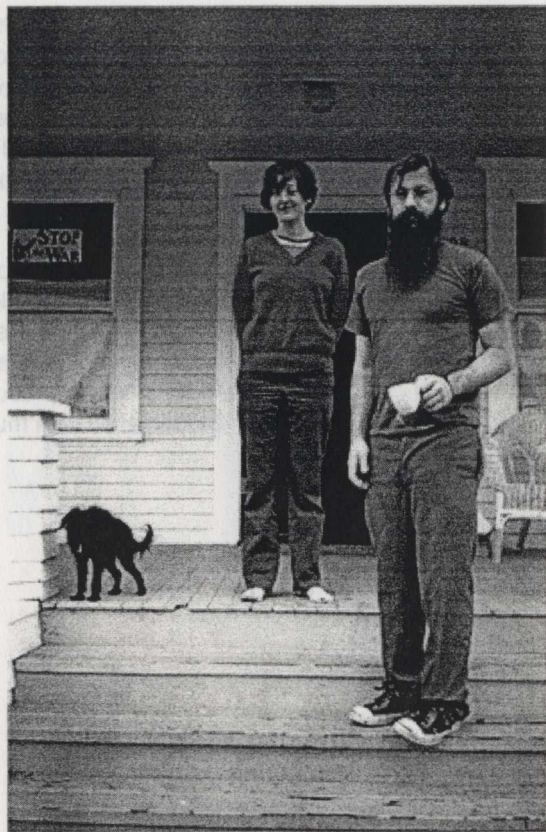
DECEMBER 29, 2008

CHRIS JOHANSON

# CHRIS JOHANSON

DECEMBER 23, 2008

Chris Johanson is a painter, installation artist, and producer living and working in Portland, Oregon. Before moving to Portland, Chris lived in the Mission District of San Francisco where he gained attention with his straightforward depictions of city life and cosmic energy. Among his many achievements in art are inclusion in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, the 2002 SF MOMA SECA Art Award, along with numerous solo exhibitions, most recently at Jack Hanley in San Francisco, and Deitch Projects in New York. Chris is also currently operating a music label called "Awesome Vistas," which produces limited-edition vinyl in collaboration with musicians and artists.



**CYRUS SMITH**

Alright, hello and welcome to Art Talk AM on the Radio, you've been listening to Sic Alps. But that's not who we have in today, we actually have Chris Johanson in today.

**CHRIS  
JOHANSON**

Hi, good morning.

**CS** Alright, great. So, we've been listening to Sic Alps because Chris has become a record producer recently. I thought that would be a good place to start since you brought in quite a bit of music today. Tell me a little bit about your label Awesome Vistas and how you got into it.

**CJ** Oh okay. Well, I've been a lover of music since I was a little kid. I started going to see bands when I was really young. My parents kind of encouraged music in my house, although I didn't play music for quite a while. I would go see lots of bands. They took me to go see, you know,

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**IMAGE** /// Chris Johanson and Jo Jackson in front of their home in Portland, Oregon. Originally printed for the cover of *ANP Quarterly*, Issue 3.

Captain and Tennille, Jackson 5 and stuff like that, musicals. And anyway, I started to go see punk bands in the early eighties, and it wasn't till I moved to San Francisco and had been living there quite some time, that I actually started putting out records. I wasn't putting them out...

- CS** But you were making music with bands, and recording albums?
- CJ** Right, with other people. And I got really involved with doing the graphics, I just really loved it. Oh, but you know, about the SECA award from San Francisco, it wasn't actually a design award.
- CS** Oh really, sorry.
- CJ** It's more like, what they would call up and coming artists. They usually give it to between two to four, maybe sometimes five people, and they give them a show and then they do a catalog. It's really nice, but it's usually more associated with like painting, and sometimes photography. I just thought I would articulate that.

**CS** I guess I read incorrectly...

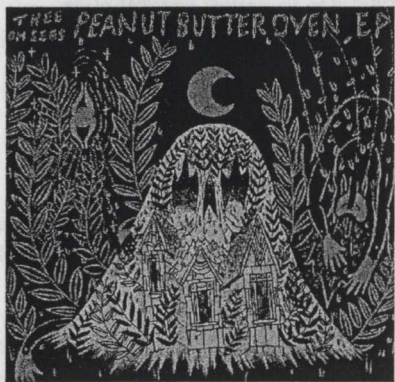
**CJ** And I just say that because still to this day, although I have done graphics for skateboard companies, records and stuff, and I've done maybe a couple of logos, I don't really consider myself to have the faintest idea about the fundamentals of design, besides the hierarchy of elements, which is like, the rudimentary thing. But besides that, I don't know anything about what attracts the eye to make somebody want to buy something.

**CS** On the other hand though, you brought in all these records today, and while maybe they aren't "designed," they do seem to be art objects.

**CJ** Oh yeah.

**CS** All the covers are commissioned from artists, and I read that some of them are hand silk screened right?

**CJ** My intention is that they'll probably all be hand silk screened by Neil Burke, who



has a company called Monoroid. He puts out records periodically himself, but he does silk screening for lot's of bands, as well as doing print editions. He's just a really interesting person, and he does really great work, so I really wanted to make it a collaboration with him, and to put the emphasis on silk-screening. And I like the idea that they're all in small editions, like five hundred and below. I was in the music world a long time, now I'm more in the art world, the visual art world, and doing shows around the world, that kind of business. And I really loved the intersection between the visual art world and the music world, it's what I've always wanted to do, intersect these people, so that's kind of why I'm doing this now. I really like that dialog.

**CS** I love that you call it a collaboration, and it seems like this is your community too. It's what you've been in and around all of your

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**IMAGES** /// The Enablers, *Awesome Vista #1*. Album out on Awesome Vistas, 2007. Cover art by Chris Johanson and Jo Jackson. Bottom: The Oh Sees, *Peanut Butter Oven*. Album out on Awesome Vistas, 2008. Cover art by the band.

life, and to be able to make a platform for it seems really exciting, right?

**CJ** Yeah, oh absolutely. It's like when I was a little kid I just loved the artwork. So much intention, so much energy put into the details of the object that the music is on. It's just a good tradition of good art, and sharing energy, you know.

**CS** There's something about that style of music too, that so much of it happens live, and there's a sense of urgency to it. With rock and roll, or punk rock, or any of that stuff. It has a vitality to it. I'm thinking of, just that idea of being live. Turning it up a little bit, right?

**CJ** Yeah, definitely. The immediacy. I love when people are compelled to do something. There's no money, really. Well, sometimes there's money, but when people are playing music I don't think it's really about money, it's a serious poetry that you just have to get out. Just like painting. Their actions, I think, are driven from the soul. They have to get this energy

out. I've just always been excited by that. And so a lot of the records I've put out for example, these people are like, over 40 years old and they're still touring. They're real lifers.

**CS** Defies logic a little bit right?

**CJ** Yeah, maybe, it's like you gotta really love it to go on tour that many years. It's interesting.

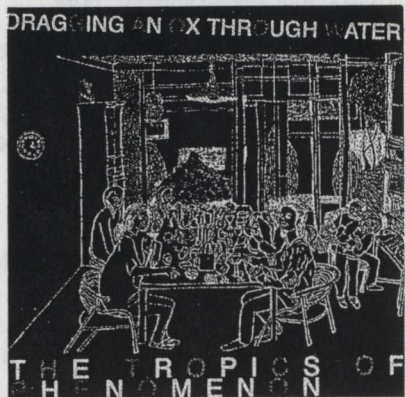
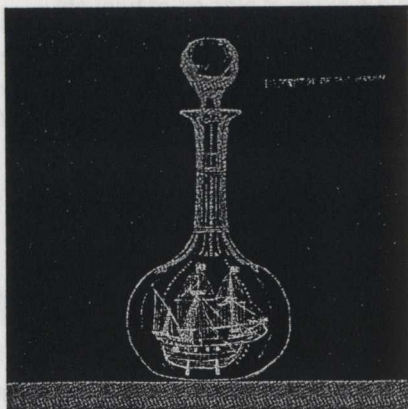
**CS** So you were going to talk about the label name?

**CJ** Yeah. I was coming up for different names for the label, and then Jo said, "I think Awesome Vistas is a really great name for your label," and I said, "I agree totally."

**CS** *(laughs)*

**CJ** And then she said basically, "Just so you know, I came up with that title pretending that I was you. Pretending, what would Chris' mind come up with for a title?" I thought that was so beautiful.





**CS** She stepped inside of you for a second.

**CJ** Yeah, so that became the label name. Initially I was just going to put out this Enablers record, just for fun with this gallery in Vienna called Georg Kargl, this really great special gallery, and I just said, "Hey, let's do this edition together. I think you'd really like this band," and they said "Yeah." And then it just developed into a label. And so this first album was a collaboration between us and The Enablers. And basically the album is one song that is about San Francisco. And there's a part in the song where the transvestite says, "This is my town, this is my town!" And it's so interesting, because to me, San Francisco is that kind of a town...how do I articulate this...people move to New York to make it, and people move to San Francisco to find it. And I really feel like you find it there. And it oftentimes involves a lot of mental illness, sometimes.

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**IMAGES** // Top: Sic Alps, *Description of the Harbor*. Album out on Awesome Vistas, 2007. Cover art by Chris Johanson and Jo Jackson. Bottom: Dragging an Ox Through Water, *The Tropics of Phenomenon*. Album out on Awesome Vistas. Cover art by Dana Dart-Mclean.

(laughter)

**CJ** And that song really articulates that.

**CS** San Francisco is a place that you're associated with, too. Did you go to San Francisco to find it?

**CJ** I did go there to find it. Because I had gone there a lot as a teenager to go see music, you know. I feel like I kind of grew up there. I started in San Jose, California, and although it's only less than an hour away, it's like a world of difference between the two places.

**CS** More of a suburban environment, right?

**CJ** Yeah. Still pretty weird, but I think San Francisco is an amazing place.

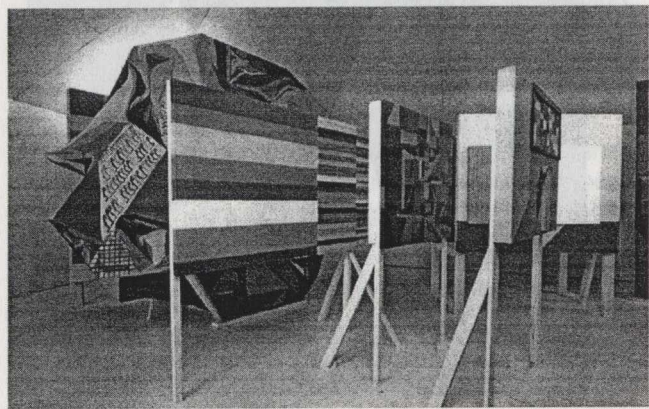
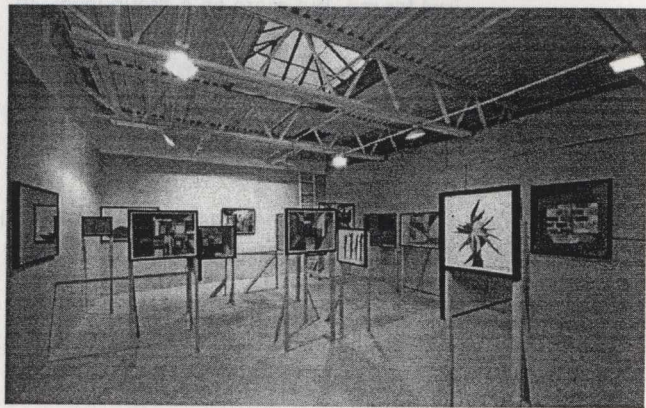
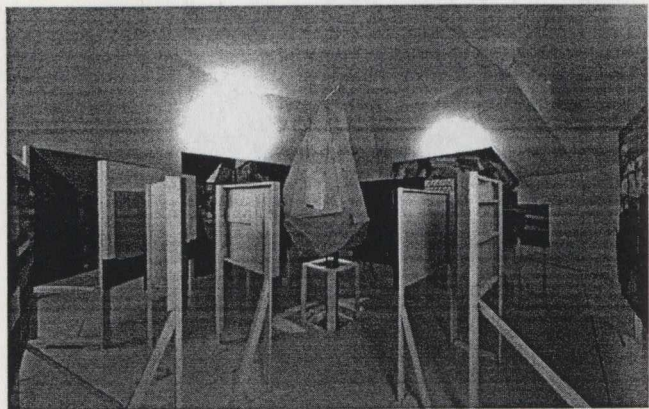
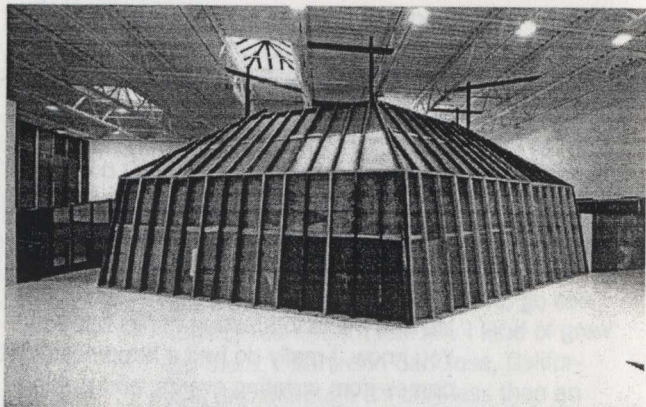
**CS** So here's something totally different. We were talking about the label name, Awesome Vistas, and it was actually something I was wanting to ask you about today, this notion of "awesomeness." We talked about energy in the vital sort of way, but

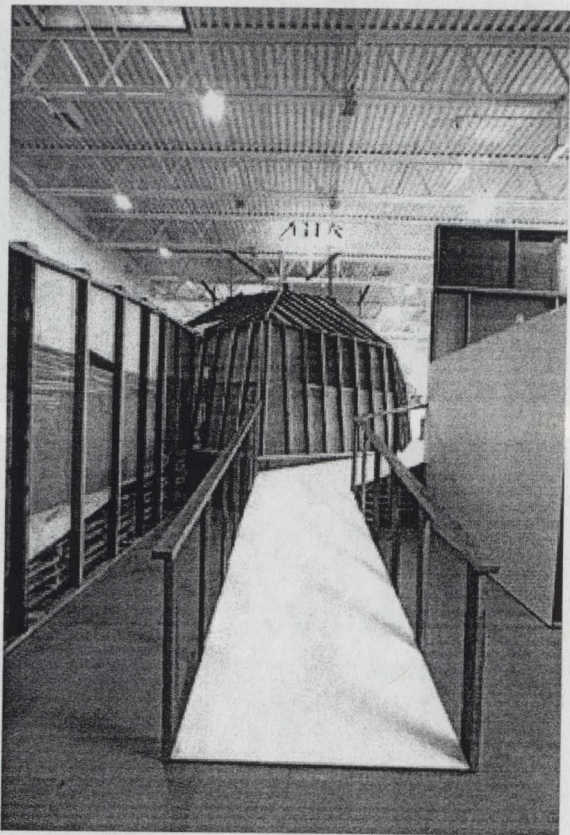
then also thinking about energy in the cosmic sort of way... It seems like you surround yourself with this kind of "awesomeness" and energy in an interesting way, that's maybe manifesting as this label, or any of the other things that you do.

**CJ** Personally, I'm just trying to have a really good time in life. It's like my time here right now. I just want to have a really good life and make interesting things happen. You know, I really do find a happiness that comes from curating events, and putting out records. Making things happen not just for me, but more on a group level. To tell you the truth, I don't even like to have a show in a gallery if there's no chance that it's going to be a good party.

**CS** (laughs)

**CJ** I don't think it's really as fun, because, you know, you just want to get as many people involved with the dynamic as possible so that it just grows exponentially. So, when I was just in New York, having a show at Deitch Projects I did these collaborations





that were part of it, with Jo Jackson, Christopher Garrett. Me and Kal Spelletich, this incredible artist that I collaborated with...

**CS** He wired up that light sculpture that was inside of the room you built at Apex<sup>3</sup> right?

**CJ** Right. He's a mechanical, sculptural wizard, amongst many other things, and so to me, that's a collaborative situation, because I don't want to know how to do that either. Electricity trips me out. And then in New York he made this mechanical machine for this "gray area" sculpture, this kind of bunk abstract gray sculpture that was in the middle of my installation. And then we had all this music happen. We made a theater in there. And I had dumpster dived all these chairs, and then made them functional again, cause they were all broken, and then made this little theater as part of the gallery, and then we had two nights of events where there was

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**IMAGES** /// Preceding pages: Chris Johanson, *Totalities*. Dietch Projects, 2008. Installation views. **NOTE** /// 1. The Apex exhibition series at the Portland Art Museum, January-May 2007.

poetry readings, and mellower music, and it was just so much fun. I just like to have more energy. Cause people are cool. I'm just into people.

- CS** I'm going to leave that at that, and ask about the dumpster diving. I find it funny thinking about you dumpster diving around New York City. It makes a lot of sense in San Francisco, if anyone's been to San Francisco, there's a lot of stuff just around, and right out on the street. How's the dumpster diving in New York?
- CJ** Oh it's great.
- CS** Yeah?
- CJ** Yeah, cause there's more waste in that city than any city in America. I've dumpster dived in Los Angeles, and every time it's always very difficult, maybe just because it's so wide. The dumpsters are hard to find there. But in Europe it's like impossible. It's so hard to find good wood, because they're very conscious of their materials over there, in the city's that I've

done shows anyway. Except Basel, I found lot's of good wood there. But in New York, great dumpsters. Cause man, there was like thousands of square feet of wood in the installation, but it's all recycled wood, and it's all so beautiful. Just very special wood. It was a really good experience. Especially the chairs, they're so fun to make. It's so nice to see something and then give it, like a second life, that was just going to be burned, or put in a land fill.

- CS** It's interesting also to think of your work as an elaborate form of recycling. We keep skirting around political issues I guess, but that seems like pretty heavy political content, to use all waste materials like that, and make something magical out of it.
- CJ** Cause you can't be alive without being political. To be alive is to be political. The thing I like about the recycled material, is that it has a history. And the wood has a life of its own, has like a spiritual kind of... You think about trees you know, you think about living things. But I don't really talk about recycling. Recycling is good or

whatever, but it's not so, maybe blatant. I have no doubt though that it gets in people's sub-conscious, goes into people's inner dialogs about materials, and life. At least that's what it does to me when I see things with recycled materials.

**CS** Awesome. Well, I do want to get to some of your music, because you did bring a big pile of records here, what do you want to listen to next?

**CJ** How about, let's listen to this really nice local person named Brian Mumford, who is a one person band that goes by Dragging an Ox Through Water.

**CS** And another one of these screen printed covers by Dana Dart McLean, right?

**CJ** And Dana Dart McLean did the album cover for this one. And she is such an incredible artist. She's one of my favorite visual artists in town, and so, this is like, a very special collaboration. And I wanted to say that we're doing these editions, they're all very small editions, but then we're also

doing these editions, on archival paper, an edition of 20 of each record that are an element of the album cover but without the text. So then it's not about the music, but it's just about the visual artist, to let that artwork stand on its own. And I think that's really fun.

*(break for music)*

**CS** So, Chris, I notice you have a book out recently too, that I got a chance to see. "Please Listen, I Have Something To Tell You About What Is." And, it's amazing, it's really full. Lot's of full color examples of your work. It's great to see it all in one place. I don't know if that was exciting for you.

**CJ** Yeah, it really was. I mean it's pretty psychological really, to go back. You know, there's like a year of information that goes along with every piece. So you know, when you go back and you look at your work, a lot of it you like, and a lot of it you don't like. There are some real misses in there, and looking back on it I'm not totally ex-

cited about the work, but I wanted to put it in there just to show, like, yeah, I made some pretty bad art. And I made some art that I really liked too!

**CS** (laughs)

**CJ** Cause you can't really show a progression, if it's just all of the things that you're excited about. You know what I mean? I don't think you're really giving a full picture of who you are, and who you were. So my next book I'm going to do that too.

**CS** The hits and the misses.

**CJ** Yeah, the stuff that you feel comfortable with, and the stuff that you feel uncomfortable with.

**CS** I was going to end with something that I thought was really interesting, that I found relating to a library project that you did with Jo. *The Spiritual Library*. It was a write up in a magazine, and they had asked you to put a biography in, and instead you made a suggestion, right? And I thought it

was a really excellent suggestion. Instead of a bio it suggested that you "Remember to go for a walk, eat more organic foods, and end wars." Which I thought was a nice thing to say, I thought I'd bring that back up.

**CJ** That's funny cause I was just about to say that too. To tell the U.S. to get out of the Middle East. If you're listening to this...

(laughter)

**CJ** ...please get out of the Middle East. I don't support it personally.

**CS** Let's hope they're listening.

**CJ** I'm sure they are.

## ART TALK AM /// ON THE RADIO

CYRUS W. SMITH IN CONVERSATION  
WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS  
KPSU RADIO 2008-2009

Book 7 of 10

This interview took place December 29th, 2008, live on KPSU, independent of the PSU MFA Monday night Lecture Series.

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and by the 1971 NYA Monday night lecture series.

The information was from October 1971. SCOR. See on KODU. (revised)

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