

Chris Johanson and Johanna Jackson live their art. For them, art extends beyond the production of saleable objects to everything they do: riding bikes, growing food, doing yoga, being a positive part of their community and hanging out with their dog Raisin. A visitor to their moderate, colourful two-storey craftsman home in North Portland will immediately sense their commitment to sustainable living, repurposing found objects and generally living in a non-lame, life-loving environmentally-friendly way. Johanna, who has been working mostly with fabrics and dyes the last few years, made much of the textiles throughout the house. Chris builds furniture from found objects and often rebuilds discarded broken chairs. The overall effect is

CHRIS & JO

The way we live with it all

CONVERSATION BETWEEN CHRIS JOHANSON & JO JACKSON
INTRODUCTION BY SEAN KINNERLY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLIE ARMSTRONG

both elegant and humorous. Beautiful works of art are everywhere – stacked against the walls, on top of the refrigerator, on the mantle, in the bathrooms. The backyard has homemade planters and a large branch gazebo between the compost pile and the main garden; the front is lined with bushes that produce delicious blueberries and raspberries from May through September. Johanna Jackson grew up in Columbia, Maryland in the '70s and 80's, and Chris Johanson was raised at the same time in San Jose, California. Both moved to San Francisco in the '90s, where they met, established their careers and were highly influential in the Bay Area art scene. They got married in 2001 and moved to Portland soon thereafter. Today they continue to work and exhibit internationally while basing themselves primarily in Los Angeles and Portland.

Jo Jackson: Some of my earliest art experiences involved the universes created by other kids' parents in their houses. Do you think that the culture shock of it is aesthetic, or more? For example, when I was little I used to hang with a girl who's parents' house was decorated all in orange, brown and cream. They had perfectly executed crafts on display, in the same colour scheme, and little plastic tent signs that thanked one for not smoking. That decor came with a whole value system; introduced me to a value system actually. I liked it there. But other houses, oh some were horrible. I'd call

Chris: It was cold, strict and religious. I remember some things about the interiors. It was the '70s on the west coast, so there were tables made from stumps and burrs. Red wood and driftwood was everywhere. Fences, walls, it was all ferns and redwood; the groovy people had hot tubs and cooked food in woks.

Jo: I remember the houses so specifically, but for you they were a cultural blur.

Chris: Yes, except for my very up-on-things aunt and uncle who are involved in industrial design.



my mum and pretend to be sick, begging her in code to come get me.

Chris Johanson: All of the houses where I grew up were more or less identical. It was a really uniform visual situation. Not that the people were. It was a very large sect built by the same developers. Then there was the Winchester mystery house right next to a movie complex called the Century Theaters that were these geodesic domes. The contrast in architectural style was amazing.

Jo: But the insides of those houses must have been so different. Like the house of those little twins that hit you with the bat. What was their house like?

They lived in this new architectural thing that was a tri-level condo. It had this west coast minimalist thing going on. They were the first people to ever give me quiche. I was like, 'what is this?'.

I believe autobiography almost always makes its way into ones art. I went to Indian Guides when I was a child with my father. I was introduced to all kinds of crafts. It's a shame they don't teach as many arts in schools any more. We would go out into nature and hang out in the giant sequoia trees. That experience really connected art type stuff and nature for me, I would say looking back on it now.

What from that time, as a child, have you kept in your creative philosophical life?

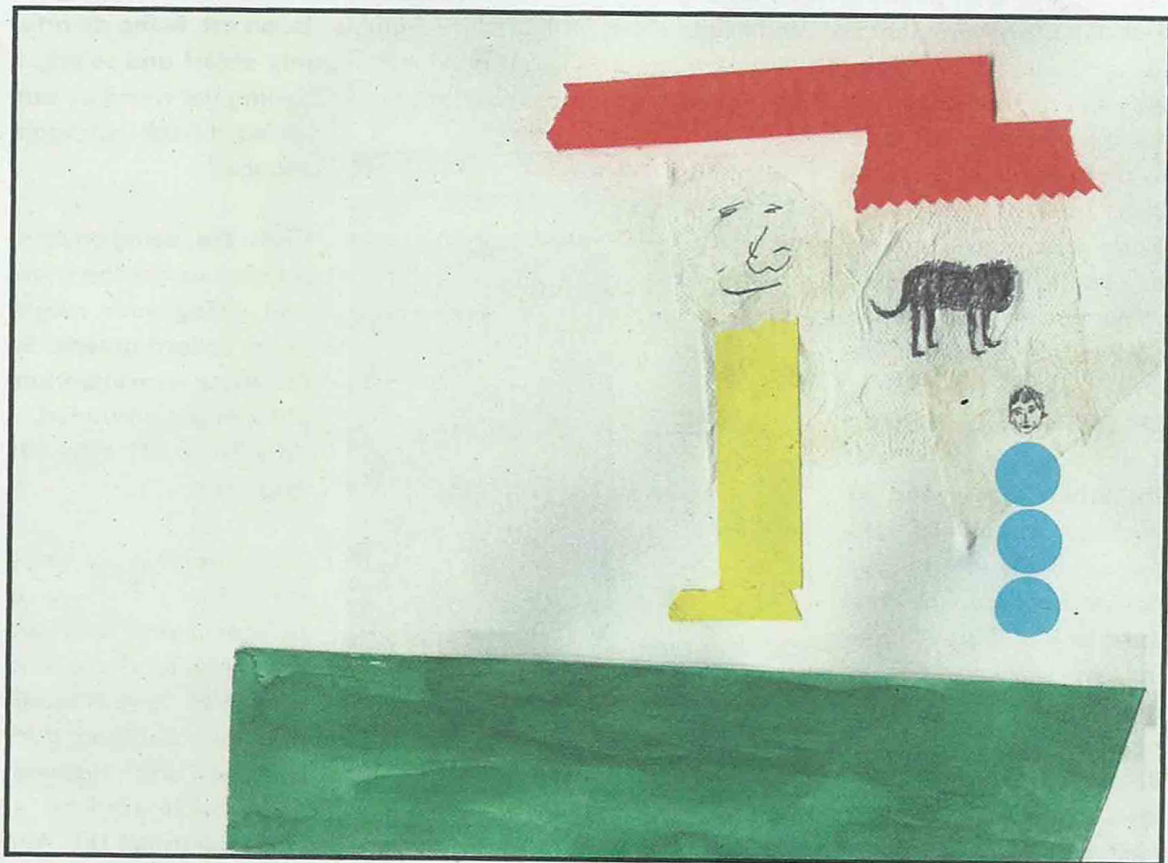
Jo: My and aunt and uncle lived in Philadelphia when I was little, and they had a really deep style – kind of a mix up of a fern bar, arts and crafts, new wave, Memphis, and natural wholesomeness. Sort of a jaded new wave re-imagining of the info gathered in the '60s. They were close enough that I see them regularly, but also distant enough so that I could see their style as a whole. Their thing has really informed my thing. I know that a lot of people complain about everything being retro, but personally I love a wild collection of different pasts tied up together and worn to a

Chris: Why did that time feel so intense and witchcrafty to the kids.

Jo: I wonder what kind of creeps the kids get now.

Chris: So we live in two places now, but before we lived in some gnarly spots. The flat in Western Edition in San Francisco was so cold, entirely painted with black enamel oil paint, no refrigerator.

I really loved that place... so weird to move to cold Portland after that.



party. I think it's so right. We are so made up of histories and histories.

Chris: Absolutely we are a collection of everything we have been exposed to. My parent's friends had a macramé crafts store. I never really got into building with those materials. But their craft/make-your-own-space scene got in my mind I am sure. They had a macramé Christmas tree every year.

Jo: Macramé! A lot of crafts, especially traditionally female ones, get a nightmarish aura around them. Knitting too. All of that creative energy, twisted, knotted, twisted, knotted. Art isn't all the nice stuff.

Jo: That place was the most... modest... place that I've ever lived in. It was on the ground floor, the walls painted glossy black. There was this tom cat named Little Man fighting other cats to the death every night. One of the roommates had really violent athlete's foot that was threatening his life. I had a big room though, a single bed and crocheted blankets from the thrift store. When we fell in love you moved in and brought us a down comforter with a golden duvet cover and matching sheets and pillows! They were so beautiful in that context... so different from everything else. Our golden bed.

Chris: 100 dollars each for rent in SF in 2002. Stoked. But actually there were kids getting

killed down at the corner and that was so heavy. But those landlords were still trying to cash in on that internet money, even in the sketchy parts of town.

Jo: It's a little town and every inch is money. So it was time to go.

Chris: I feel like we left San Francisco because we wanted to buy a house and there was no way of doing it there. Also we were able to leave our previous selves behind. A lot of baggage left my mind and I became way more internal. Doing carpentry on the house was my first step in knowing that I wanted to make the living space the art. Curating our own space with things that have a spiritual value to us. It's funny how long it took to realize that – I feel like I lost track of how I was using my creative energy, and let the exhibitions become the art and that is not really interesting if the other part of your life is not feeling that enriched.

Jo: When we moved to Portland we moved into the rain. We chose our house because, on the third day of house-hunting, we were upstairs in the bedroom and for a minute the sun came out. Before we lived in Portland I had a very strict white walls policy. And when we moved in to our new house all of the walls were cappuccino or caramel or tundra, we painted it white, but then we painted the kitchen electric blue and it was like the colour spread out from there. We painted the library coral pink, and then the living room bright yellow. The hallway is black and this summer we will paint the stairwell green. Oh and we are in the middle of painting the house's exterior. Four colours: lavender in the front, sea green in the back, pink on the side that abuts Kathy's hot red house, and ice blue on the other side by the vandalizing renters.

Chris: Yes. Absolutely burning sage with coloured paint. We had to because the grey of Portland is really powerful and you have to

respect it and dance with it. Colour is the spice of sight.

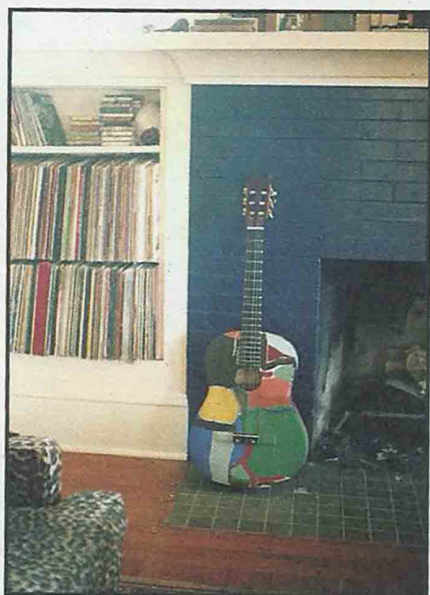
Going to Miller paint because they do profit sharing with all the workers is great... I remember driving up to move there and noticing the trees and the vibe of the Pacific Northwest in a new way. I remember getting scared. Remember we planted some stuff right away as an offering or gesture of understanding to nature? Why Plants, why getting mellow?

Jo: I needed to use my Human Art Energy and found out that I can use it on absolutely anything. I could clean the house as an art, or grow all of our vegetables as an art. Being an artist is not making a discrete object and selling it to a sophisticate, it is letting the world in, and letting it back out again changed.

Chris: Yes, being an artist is going across the street and giving your neighbours collard greens. So the house is an important place to get grounded. Why Portland? Why Los Angeles?

Jo: Portland is so magical... The dirt there is so brown and wet, and the sky is so dense and grey. Also there is magical light in Portland; dark skies and bright ground. The food in Portland —

the ingredients— are the best in the U.S. And there is a lack of ambition in Portland, a joy in normal life, that I really relate to. However, like many cities, Portland is dominated by a single industry. In NYC: fashion. In LA: movies. In Portland it's advertising and that sucks some of the reality out of daily life somehow. LA doesn't have amazing vegetables leaping out of every yard, but it does have Myer Lemons, sunshine and an air of general hilarity. It has so many people. People from all over and genes just flying around in futuristic variations. The landscape is made up of feral houseplants and the earth has a elastic quality – like its about to fling the humanity crust right off of itself. The car thing here is so gross, but like most gross things it's also funny. I ride my bike instead. In the teeth of my fear!

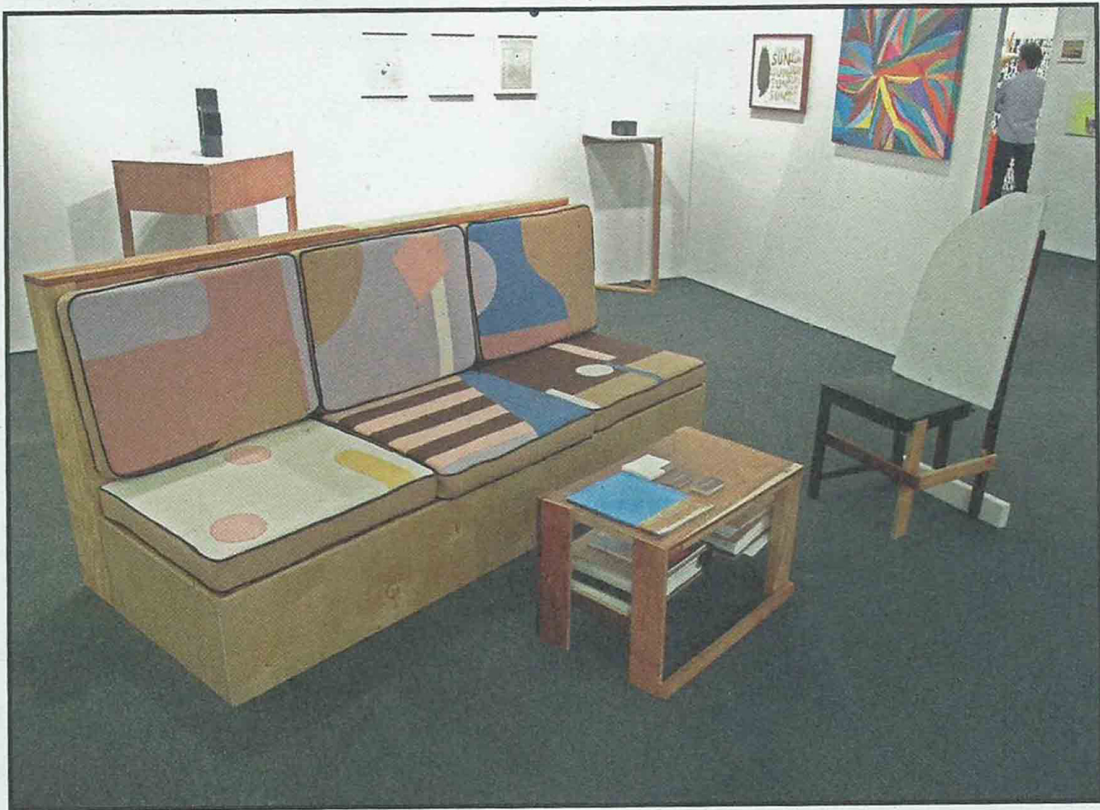


Chris: I know, even riding bikes to the studio is fifteen miles a day and the 125 odd steps from the street to the door of the termite infested shack that we live in is such a workout. So even though to live here is to be poisoned, at least the high activity level is making our blood and liver filter things better... hopefully. I love Portland and it's where I would want to be if some negative science fiction reality creeps into the landscape. When will the US drones start saying hello to us anyway? I just don't want to live in any one place. I love that you can pick fruit from so many houses here.

live. It was so amazing to switch creative outlets and get into being where we were with more fluidity. The blueberry bushes, raspberries, persimmons, grapes, collards, tomatoes, lettuce, chestnuts and everything else are some of my favorite pieces of art that I have ever been involved in.

Portland got you interested in natural materials, like dyes. What have you taken with you from that time on your journey?

Jo: In Portland I learned to knit. Learning a skill, like reading, that sort of needs to be



Jo: What's the difference between living with stuff that we've made and living with stuff that we've found and living with new things?

Chris: I am glad to have slowed down mentally to be able to focus on living life in a peaceful way. I really think that the Fear Culture of the US was entering our minds too fully.

I remember when you started planting all the food in Portland, you made the front and back yard part of the house into a sculpture. We got Toby Hardman to make the gazebo, and I made those planters with wood that I'd found and a hand saw. It felt so good to take the creativity out of the market of the art world. Seems like an easy thing to do; slow down,

done one way and correctly, really changed my practice of everything. I don't have a history of studying materials, and have spent my creative life inventing ways around my lack of formal knowledge. Knitting brought me down, in a good way. And now my brain wants to do all sorts of things correctly. I've been taking industrial sewing and pattern-making at L.A. trade tech community college, so I can make more of my life for myself, and then dye it yellow with onion skins.

Yesterday we were walking Raisin and you saw two cords that extended from the top of a three storey building to the ground. They were covered with morning glory vines and were waving in the wind. Between them was a fat metal

pipe. You called it great art. I love the strange perspective of this – since nobody made it, how can it be art? Or does its real 'authorlessness' contribute to what's really important in art?

Chris: Well, I see it as authored, because someone put those strings there to bring the vines up to pass all of the windows.

Jo: Oh I didn't realize that! I thought that it was another example of LA's feral fecundity!

Chris: But I love authorless art, or seeing art in everything. Like a marble floor that has faces in

zburg's Journey into the Whirlwind. Maybe not though... Anyway it was a memoir of a Soviet dissident in a prison camp. It was really hard, and horrible. But there was brightness too. The woman in her hut used to steal gauze from the infirmary, dye it yellow with onion skins and hang them as curtains. They were starving and freezing, dying from being overworked but they were still...

Chris: She was refusing to leave her life and her rituals and give in to the ugliness of where she was. Inner life is an important thing to be concerned with because that is where it is all really



it, or the face on the moon or things that look like animals. Art is everywhere. Life is art or life is life. Like seeing things like that species of bird that make intricate playgrounds to attract other birds. The magical designs and systems they create. It's inspirational on so many levels... I know that I personally put energy into making our space in such a way as to create a serene, empowering, positive energy. How lucky to even end up with a house.

Jo: I know. This interview is so challenging. I feel like all we can say is, 'Our things! Our likes! Some memories!'. I'm getting so tired of myself, (but not of you). What really matters? I read a book once, I think it was Eugenia Gin-

happening. That is why the place in which we are is so considered. My grandmothers piano that I inherited is so important because music is such a part of my family and her energy is in it. On top of that are the shells your departed grandparents collected from their travels around the world. A little statue of a monkey from your mother. A painting of a man playing piano above on the wall. A water color by Christopher Garrett of space. The photograph by Will Rogan of the sidewalk going into a bush. Everything has its poetry, and the way all these things all connect has its own poetry, and the way we live with it all is the way we live.

apartamento - Chris Johanson & Jo Jackson