

HOUSE OF ESCAPING FORMS

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FLEISHER/OLLMAN



Chris Johanson, *Chair*, 2013, found wood, paint, shellac, 36 x 15 ¼ x 20 ½ inches

House of Escaping Forms

Alex Baker

Highly regarded artists with individual careers, Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson began working collaboratively several years ago, exploring a particular take on the art meets life conundrum that has occupied artists since the early 20th century. As with many peak realizations, Jackson and Johanson's entry into this new stage of their lives came at a time of crisis and transition, when their commitments as artists eclipsed their ability to find meaning and joy in their work. They stopped making art in the manner in which they were accustomed and focused attention on living. Having moved to Portland, Oregon in 2005, they were afforded the space in which to create a garden. As Jackson recalls, she worked on the garden "like a painting" and Johanson "built raised beds...he made them like a sculpture. We went into the ground and came back up with meaning again...the garden is actually the place where our work came formally together." The garden also yielded food—what Jackson describes as a "making of the real." This concept of making the real grew to become a "couch and a quilt, but also, by our nature of working, that 'real' kept slipping back into abstraction and dreams, hence a cup so heavy that it turns into a sculpture; [or] a totally flat fork."¹ This slippage between the real and the abstract, the functional and the sculptural undergirds the work seen in *House of Escaping Forms*.

If the Portland garden was the conceptual genesis of their collaboration, Los Angeles was the place where it came to fruition in terms of a domestic interior aesthetic. Having moved to a small hill-top apartment in Los Angeles in 2010 from a rather spacious house in Portland, Jackson and Johanson were confronted not only by diminutive scale, but with the challenge of carrying furniture and other belongings up 200 unevenly sized stairs. A decision was made to make furniture on site, custom

¹ All quotations in this paragraph: Johanna Jackson, email to author, December 3, 2015.

designed for the modest size of their living quarters. Jackson and Johanson had always adhered to the belief in making due with the materials at hand—an ethical/political stance at the core of their artistic practice, both collaboratively and as individual artists. Johanson, for instance, has used found wood in the creation of paintings and installations since the late 1990s. The artists applied their skills and values to the domestic realm: Johanson fashioning furniture armatures from scavenged wood and Jackson designing and making cushions as well as curtains. Enticed by the idea of function meets art, Jackson also started making ceramics including plates, bowls, and other housewares.

House of Escaping Forms represents the artists' desires to forge a collaborative practice that transcends the art object and enters the realm of what Johanson has described as "life arts" whereby everything he and Jackson do is subsumed under the idea of art. As Johanson has explained:

Every medium is the right medium. Records, performance, writing, cooking, painting, sculpture, saying hi to someone, not accepting weird negative gifts. The way you live life is the art to me. Now is a good time to be a multimedia artist. I love it all. Me and Johanna are living in Los Angeles now, and I made all the furniture out of found wood. And she made all of the textiles for drapes, seat cushions, and lights.²

2 "Interview: Corrina Peipon in Conversation with Chris Johanson" in *Chris Johanson* (New York/London: Phaidon, 2013), p. 36.



Johanna Jackson: *Plant*, 2015, canvas, velvet, natural latex foam, 58 x 48 x 5 ½ inches; *Moon*, 2015, canvas, velvet, natural latex foam, 48 x 48 x 5 ½ inches



Installation view, "Living Room" in *House of Escaping Forms*

The exhibition, then, is a direct outgrowth of both an artistic pragmatism—to furnish a space in the most efficient way possible using familiar materials in line with respective artistic practices honed over many years—as well as a philosophical position to expand their conception of what it means to be an artist today.

The central elements of *House of Escaping Forms* are three installations of domestic interiors: a living room, bedroom, and dining room. The living room and bedroom are on elevated "stages" of varying heights made from found shipping pallets and plywood; the dining room rests on the gallery floor.³ The stepped elevations of each room indicate the different functions and specializations of respective domestic spaces. Walls and shelving are suggested by the skeletal structures of milled 2 x 4" lumber (there are no solid walls in the installation). The structures are painted in different shades of purple and blue; amid the monochrome

3 The shipping pallets and flooring material was procured from Revolutionary Recovery, a demolition debris recycling center. The center has an artist-in-residency program, RAIR, overseen by Billy Dufala, an artist represented by Fleisher/Ollman. On a clear November Sunday when we picked up the wood, Johanson also discovered a trove of never-before-used acrylic paints and brushes. These were used in putting the final touches on several paintings and drawings included in the exhibition.



Painted windowsill in the "Living Room"

purple of the living room's stud work, a windowsill is painted in an abstract, landscape style as if to intimate what the viewer might see when gazing outside. Within the rooms are the furnishings and housewares representative of each space: couch, chair with ottoman, throw pillows, rug, blanket, table with place settings, bed, closet with sweater, etc. All of these objects are made by hand. Jackson's labor-intensive approach to textile art reaches its highpoint in the hooked rug centered on the floor in the living room installation. Aside from the time-consuming process of hooking individual pieces

of yarn, all of the yarn was dyed by hand using natural pigments like cochineal and indigo; the black yarn is dyed with commercial acid dye and, according to Jackson, "speaks to the inclusion of the human made in the natural world."⁴

Along the gallery walls are collaborative paintings and drawings that evoke both inward and outward gazes; large textile wall hangings represent the day and night sky of the outdoor world. The interior world of the domestic realm is suggested by several paintings, including an untitled work from 2015 representing a kind of tripped-out bathroom medicine cabinet. Without its mirrored cabinet door, the private world of weird potions and lotions interspersed with cakes and a hotdog are free for everyone to see. Resonating with the medicine cabinet painting,

⁴ Johanna Jackson, email to author, December 3, 2015.



Johanna Jackson, *A ship in the snow*, 2015, hand-knitted linen sweater, hanger made of ceramic and wood, 30 x 50 x 3 inches overall; Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson, *Clothing rack*, 2015, found wood, acrylic, 60 x 68 x 24 inches



Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylic, watercolor, and house paint on plywood, 23 1/2 x 18 inches

Jackson has arranged stoneware hand mirrors on a nearby pedestal. Hung in its own small gallery space, a painting entitled *How'd I Even Get Here, No. 1* (2015), made from scavenged wooden elements resembling a window from the outside looking in, consists of compartmentalized abstract compositions that seemingly map the rooms of a house and its contents. Colored rope emanating from portals draped across the front of the painting bring to mind curtain sashes. A word fragment at the bottom center of the painting—"Rai"—almost spells out the name of Johanson and Jackson's dog *Raisin*; a yellow linear element leads the eye from "Rai" to the letter "n" and a gooey glob of black paint in the upper right corner—perhaps an abstract representation of the artists' dog, a small Affenpinscher who travels with them everywhere and sometimes enters into their art as subject matter.

The notion of looking beyond the domestic out into the world is conveyed by small paintings on paper that are reminiscent of surrealist landscapes. These drawings teem with life and feature animals, bodies



Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson, *How'd I Even Get Here no. 1*, 2015, found wood, watercolor, house paint, rope, 25 1/2 x 36 x 3 inches



Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson, *How'd I Even Get Here no. 5*, 2015, acrylic, watercolor, house paint on paper, 14 x 17 inches; following spread: installation view of the "Bedroom," including Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson, *Sky shroud 2*, 2015, sheets, t-shirt, melted crayon, beads, dyed fabric, 89 x 228 inches

of water, plants, planets, the sun, seashells, and shapes and symbols all co-existing on grounds that fluctuate between abstraction and landscape painting. Receding yet further into the distance and directing the gaze ever more outward are textile paintings/wall hangings of the day and night sky that surround the domestic interior installations. These backdrops drift between intentionally raw craftsmanship (odd shapes, dangling threads) and exquisite attention to detail (strategically melted crayons and beadwork that reference the constellations of the night sky). The textiles are also allied with the artists' overall investment in re-using existing materials and the symbolic weight associated with them. In this instance, the artists have incorporated their own bedsheets transformed by paint, dyes, and patchwork fabric juxtaposition into an atmospheric counterpoint to their domestic installations; a blue t-shirt that serves as a transition fabric between the night and day sky was worn by Johanson's dying father (see following spread).



Housewares made from ceramic, stoneware, glass, and metal play a significant role in contributing to the domestic sensibility of *House of Escaping Forms* and occupy the gray area between use objects and aesthetic objects. Made by Jackson's hand, the majority of ceramics in the exhibition speak the language of function both through their morphology (plates, bowls, vessels, vases, candy dishes) and through their context/arrangement (a table setting, for example, or plates and glasses arranged on shelves adjacent to a table). All of these stoneware and ceramic objects are either glazed in abstract colors (blues and earthtones predominate), or incorporate drawing (a plate features Jackson's trademark Kilroy character, nose hanging over a wall). Some works obliquely evoke biographical narratives: one plate is monogrammed with the initials of Jackson and Johanson's dog, Raisin Mocassin Myotis. Brightly colored, cast

Johanna Jackson (clockwise from right):
Kilroy Bowl, 2015, glazed stoneware and underglaze pencil, 2 x 6 1/2 (diameter) inches;
Love 4, 2015, glazed stoneware, mirror, 6 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 3/4 inches;
White Set, 2014, glazed stoneware, vase: 7 1/4 x 3 1/2 x 5 1/4 inches, small bowl: 2 1/2 x 4 x 5 1/2 inches, leaf bowl with pennies: 1 1/2 x 3 x 7 inches



Chris Johanson, *Glass vessel (amber)*, 2015, cast glass, 6 3/4 x 4 (diameter) inches

glass drinking vessels and shiny metallic, silver-plated flatware made by Johanson compliment the more subdued palette of Jackson's ceramics.

Not all of the ceramic objects are presented as functional items; several appear to be sculptures or decorative objects. One such object is Jackson's glazed stoneware *Penny* (2015) that is presented separately from the utilitarian context of the dining room installation and sits rather forlornly on the floor in a different gallery space. A wonkily crafted rendition of a 1972 penny (the year Jackson was born) in large scale, it seems plate-like, but its topographic, bas-relief surface signals its status as an aesthetic rather than functional object. In carefully viewing individual works featured in *House of Escaping Forms* one will notice a penny theme interwoven throughout: one cent symbols appear on several of the paintings and a small number of painted actual pennies sit in a small candy dish on a pedestal (see lower-left illustration on page 12). Jackson and Johanson seem to be implying that given their class status as struggling artists, the penny—the denomination with the least value—is



Johanna Jackson, *Penny*, 2015, glazed stoneware, $\frac{3}{4} \times 8 \frac{3}{4}$ (diameter) inches



Johanna Jackson, *Untitled*, 2015, glazed porcelain, $\frac{1}{2} \times 7 \frac{1}{2}$ (diameter) inches; following spread: installation view of the "Dining Room"

the currency that best represents them. Jackson elaborates on her interest in the penny: "The cent sign is a pun on *sense* and is a symbol that along with also being a precise value representation is now considered of such low value that it is no longer on the [computer] keyboard."⁵

Jackson and Johanson have always had a keen ability to present the contradictions of contemporary existence in their art where despair, hopefulness, love, hate, humor, seriousness, beauty and ugliness exist simultaneously. In Jackson and Johanson's recent individual and collaborative work, some of this volatility has been toned down, but our collective fucked-up-ness continues to be addressed albeit more subtly. For instance, a porcelain plate made by Jackson and installed on a jerry-rigged, plywood shelf anchored to a gallery wall (once again presented more like a contemplative aesthetic object rather than a utilitarian one) showcases a drawing of a nuclear mushroom cloud encapsulated behind glaze. Despite the comforts and security of domestic life presented in the exhibition, the artists imply that there always exists a certain ominous fear at the hands

5 Johanna Jackson, email to author, December 3, 2015.



of powers out of our control. Our demise might come from too much or too little money—the reoccurring motif of the penny symbol might be an indication of this—or from all-out war as the image on the plate suggests.

This is why Jackson and Johanson's collaborative work proves so compelling: it does not retreat into a world of bourgeois domesticity where the world's problems are left at the doorstep. One art work in *House of Escaping Forms* summarizes this idea particularly elegantly. This untitled hybrid work from 2014–15, part painting and part sculpture, prominently features a bas-relief ceramic rendition of an apartment building at center, with two figures sitting at a patio table adjacent to the structure. The figures are stand-ins for Jackson and Johanson. The female is knitting while the male is playing the guitar and sings a song whose words are inscribed in a thought bubble:

In my castle
my fucked up imperfect castle
how does it stand
with the problems and
imperfections of our
times or my mind

How so, indeed.



Johanna Jackson and Chris Johanson, *Untitled*, 2014–15, ceramic, acrylic and gouache on panel, 18 ¼ x 24 x 2 ¼ inches

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