

Bones' Beat: Chris Johanson's *Totalities* at Deitch Projects

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This week [Bones](#), intrepid art-world raconteur, storms the [Deitch Projects](#) fortress and finds...something he really likes!



Chris Johanson's Manhattan breakout came in 2002, with a hit solo show at Deitch Projects called *Now is Now* and a fondly and frequently cited stairwell installation for that spring's [Whitney Biennial](#). This was also the year that Glen Helfand put a name—'[The Mission School](#)'—on the tight-knit San Francisco scene that counted Johanson, Barry McGee, and Margaret Kilgallen among its number, and a catchall notion of this school traveled around the world in a flash. The word 'hippy' is depressingly pejorative these days, but it's a workable means of describing this scene, especially in the historical continuum of San Francisco: these artists were and are pacifistic, nature-loving, gently ethereal in outlook, anti-authoritarian, unmaterialistic, and committed to larger ideals of ecology. 'Peace' was a mantra at their lips in years when it had little currency in the popular lexicon. Recent history has been very kind to these acolytes of the '60s, and they continue to exert a profound, quite lovely influence on

the world of contemporary art, from the smallest budding regional scenes to the global pro circuit of kunsthallen and museums. Young kids in art school are reliably into them, still, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Totalities, Johanson's newest, renders Deitch's Wooster Street warehouse unrecognizable. This is an expected perk of exhibitions here—the space's proportions are awkwardly cube-like, so hammer-happy construction crews play a particularly prominent role in the Deitch family—but Johanson's is a bigger transformation, where improvised architecture softly but unambiguously guides with a spooky, transcendental magnetism, plotting a path for the viewer and simultaneously offering a lesson in looking: the difference between seeing things as static objects, chess pieces in a physical and cultural landscape, and the other 'seeing things', the realm of apparitions and forcefields.



Upon entering there's a dividing wall painted in a kaleidoscope of fleshtones that creates a tall, stark, mysterious atrium. A hole, then a ramp, leads to a domed enclosure with a man-sized, crystal-shaped wooden form rotating slowly at its nucleus. Another hole, and a corner turned, and the space opens up. A ramp, patchworked in the grim, scratchy carpeting unique to the modern office, leads to a single large painting. Onward a little further are three paintings placed ten feet in front of a loose arrangement of salvaged wooden chairs. Another path, and then a flight of stairs, lead up to a loft of small framed works. There are almost 50 paintings in this show, and most hang (though that's not exactly the word) on dense matrices of two-by-four scaffolding, beams, and struts. Paintings pop up and obscure their

neighbors, forcing the viewer to duck and shimmy for a clear shot at any one single work. Lateral views are sometimes the only angles available, and in many cases the best view offered is that of the painting's behind.



Unbound by the unassailable laws of installation, which have ever spoken of low visual noise, direct light sources, and plenty of room to stand back, the viewer is forced to refocus. It is Op Art, insofar as it unbalances one's perception (think Bridget Riley), though it's not hard-won through mathematics and effects. Johanson generates Op's wobble through guidance, an arm on the shoulder. Touching and minute details pile up because the viewer is gently positioned to see them and keep seeing them.

Sometimes the eye freaks out: a geometrical wooden assemblage painting, ostensibly evocative of Peter Halley's monumentally uninspiring Neo-Geo from the '80s, has a grid of pegboard, the cheap stuff one finds tools hanging from in garages, as its central motif. There's nothing tricky about it, no secret, but it refuses to sit still. After two visits and twenty minutes in front of this painting it still challenged and confounded my eye. It's something simple and unfashionable but incredibly rare: pure, unsynthesized psychedelia.



The exit door, hidden in the huge wall that also holds the entrance, has a pleasing weight and action to it. Spring-loaded but smooth, it's another ersatz bit of design that works much better than you think it should. Satisfying egress is the last gift of this exhibition, and it sends you to the street with optimism and faith that beautiful navigation of the world is possible. I am not Chris Johanson and I have

problems that are too terrifying and too pressing to allow me a life devoted to the cosmic interconnectedness of all things, these Totalities of his title, but his exhibition has allowed me to remember that many of life's biggest cues and clues are visible to the naked eye.-*Bones*

Totalities will be up at Deitch Projects 18 Wooster Street space until October 25th. The entrance is not particularly well marked, but it's on the East side of the street and there are often small gangs of young people loitering on the construction work outside.

In tribute to the Frieze Art Fair in London next week, Bones will be on break. The column will return to focus on New York, along with the rest of the art world, on October 24th.