

JOHN CHRISTIAN ANDERSON

# THE DISORDER OF EVERYDAY LIFE

By Andrew K. Thompson

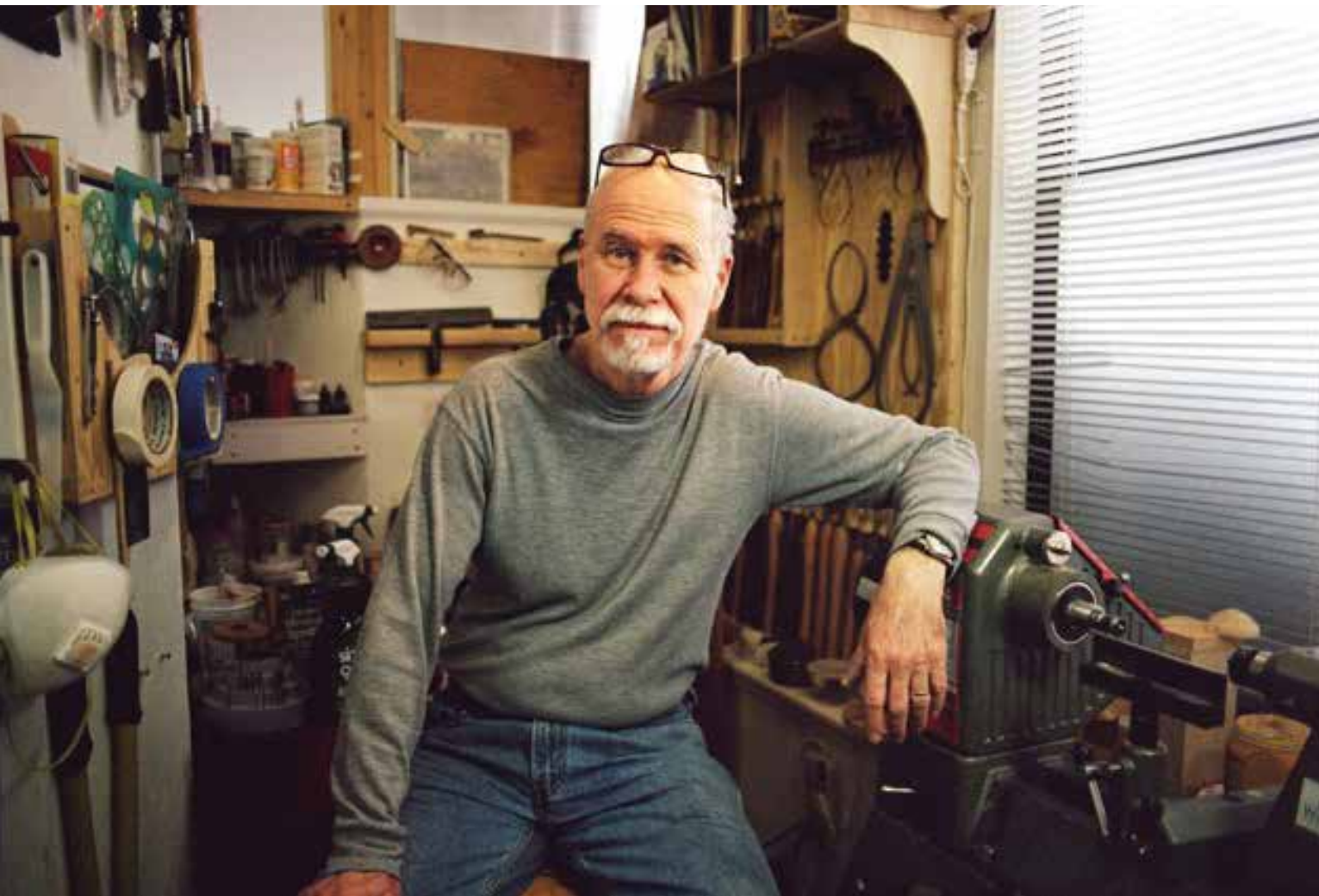
John Christian Anderson grew up in Los Angeles during the nineteen fifties. Los Angeles had surpassed Detroit with the fourth largest population in the nation and the Brooklyn Dodgers had just played their first games in L.A. Anderson enrolled in Los Angeles City College (LACC) taking courses in Anthropology, Meteorology and Film but it was Ceramics that took hold of him. The environment of the LACC Art Department allowed him to gain confidence as an artist and he was encouraged to further his artistic studies. By the late sixties Anderson had moved to the Bay Area to study at the San Francisco Art Institute and received a B.F.A. in sculpture in 1972. Nine years later he moved east to Massachusetts where he first studied furniture design at Boston University, later going on to receive his M.F.A. from the neighboring Tufts University in 1985. Since then he has been a faculty professor at Framingham State University less than an hour outside of Boston teaching sculpture and stop motion animation.

Anderson has created a consistent yet evolving body of work over the past four decades. The nineteen seventies consisted mostly of sprawled out mixed-media installations that included sand, old photographs and found objects. These subtle interventions of gallery space were individually unique while retaining a kinship with celebrated assemblage artist Joseph Cornell, with whom Anderson felt an immediate connection with upon first viewing. Anderson, who was raised Catholic, was very familiar with the tradition of tabernacles and cabinets of curiosity, both of which accumulate strange and sacred objects together for a specific purpose. The surreal pairing of imagery is coherent throughout his work.

The eighties and the nineties saw Anderson's sprawling installations condense into object-based sculptures while retaining their surreal curiosity. *Modern Debris* (1988) consisted of a carved wooden wagon situated beneath a hand-carved miniature boat, an airplane and propeller blades connected to a large metal spring while *Untitled's* (1991 – 1992) caged assemblage presented a simulated entrenching tool surrounded by five rows of tiny clay heads behind wire mesh. Anderson readily admits the influence that the Fluxus art movement had on him and through these pieces among others, his love of absurdity emerges front and center. This interlacing



Untitled  
wood on steel, 91 x 20 x 13 in., 2000



of both absurd and surreal elements continues through his work. The piece *Untitled* (2000) is carved wood shaped to mimic a two-handed crosscut saw blade with a row of thirty-one petit left hands as saw teeth while *Untitled* (2001 – 2002) is a somewhat larger pair of small hands carved out of wood with exaggerated stretched and drooping arms.

Among John Christian Anderson's love of the absurd, visual games is a distinct respect for his chosen materials. During our conversation he enthusiastically admitted how much he loves tools and working with his hands. Much like throwing clay for the first time in the LACC Art Department, Anderson is seduced by the act of manipulating material through touch. Material love and visual games is predominantly mixed with personal biography in the piece *My Father's Dilemma* (2010 – 2012) which is made

of four rows of twenty-five, variously sized wooden bottles measuring in total 96" x 52" x 4" inches (243.84 x 132.08 x 10.16 cm). Each wooden bottle began as tree debris that had fallen during the recent super storms along the North Eastern coast of the United States. Anderson had dutifully recovered the cast down tree branches from his local region and spun them on a lathe. When discussing the artwork, Anderson admitted that his father was an alcoholic who could get violent from time to time. Anderson, who left home by age seventeen, described a home that had empty bottles strewn everywhere from under the table to under the bed. He continued on about how the scattered tree limbs throughout his neighborhood reminded him of his father's empty bottles and expressed the cathartic nature of this specific artwork. For Anderson, the materials have a say in what an artwork will become but it is the

human heart, he firmly believes, that is most important.

Anderson's heart reveals itself fully in his short animation titled *A Dream* (2011) in which a dial telephone insistently rings in the rain with a cityscape background, only to disjointedly give way to images of a floating character, a babbling godhead, hospital hallways, and dancing skeletons, finally ending with a meteor crashing through a television screen. The video was created after working with students who were suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Anderson began making stop-motion animations after a surgery that prevented him from laboring. He began scanning old Polaroids, drawings and 8mm family films from his childhood and eventually developed his own personal voice. Anderson saw animation as a chance to break out of the traditional gallery model that

he had been participating in for the past thirty years and with *The Art Critic* (2013) he effectively lampoons both the gallery archetype and the art world in a single blow. The less than two-minute video begins with a still image of an anonymous mega-gallery filled to capacity with chin-stroking art enthusiasts that fades into a hilariously droll animated bust of a yellow-haired, blue-eyed, and pink-lipped Caucasian wearing a blue and gold sergeant pepper jacket with the ubiquitous black-rimmed art glasses. This bust, which is vaguely androgynous and ambiguously German, begins explaining their preference of art. "I like art that has no feeling, no point-of-view. Only emptiness." The bust continues, "I like art that forces a dialectical, non-ironic Kitsch. Entropy. Irreversibility. Non-elasticity. And a rise of formalism are all contained within the pornography of non-being, which neutralizes ones existential place in a formless world." The bust concludes with, "Oh boy, I think I need help." *The Art Critic*, in its way, neatly sums up Anderson's four-decade artistic journey. Its absurdist humor plays a heart-felt gag on the art world's glib addiction to pseudo-intellectual theory.

The art world has a misguided obsession with youth. Seeming to believe as if each hot new young artist somehow provides an elixir against old age or that only fresh-out-of-grad-school artists are the sole voices who can reflect the spirit of our age. Yet there are more voices that make up the chorus of our zeitgeist and often the more mature participants provide a richer reflection of the times. Over the past four decades, incorporating absurd humor, surreal juxtapositions and a sincere respect for material, John Christian Anderson has contributed to a broader consideration of the times we live in.

[www.johnchristiananderson.com](http://www.johnchristiananderson.com)

(facing page) **In the Studio**  
Photo by Oliver Lucian Anderson

(below top) **The Art Critic**  
flash-animation, 1min. 39sec., 2008

(below middle) **My Father's Dilemma**  
wood, 96 x 52 x 4 in., 2012

(below bottom) **Modern Debris**  
mixed media, 80 x 15 x 26 in., 1986

