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PETER MARINO!

"My first client was Andy Warhol and he introduced me to my next 10 clients."

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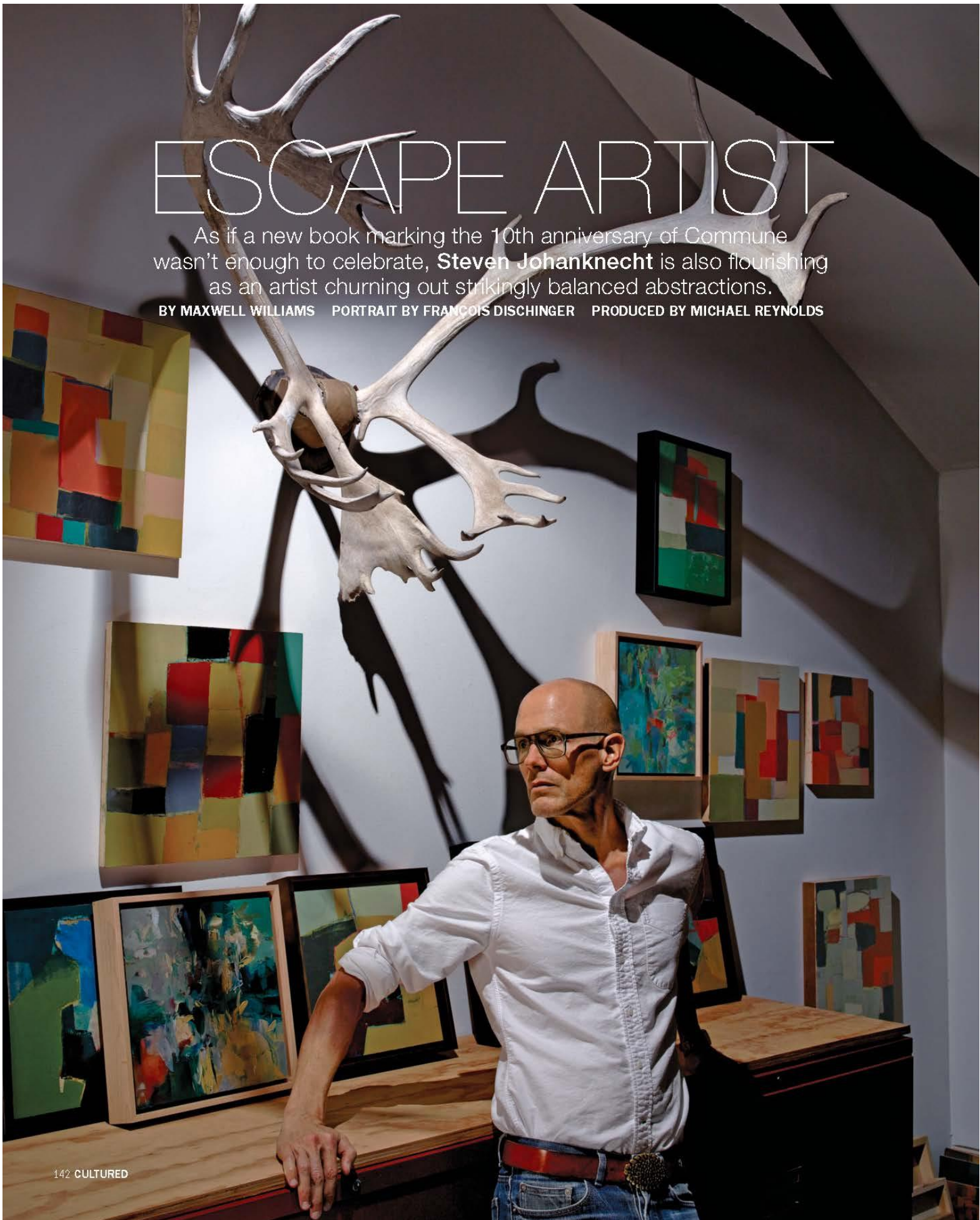
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Fall 2014

ESCAPE ARTIST

As if a new book marking the 10th anniversary of Commune wasn't enough to celebrate, **Steven Johanknecht** is also flourishing as an artist churning out strikingly balanced abstractions.

BY MAXWELL WILLIAMS PORTRAIT BY FRANÇOIS DISCHINGER PRODUCED BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS



When Steven Johanknecht goes Into

the studio behind his house on a quiet side street in Los Angeles' Silver Lake neighborhood, he doesn't have a deadline, he's not planning anything out and he's certainly not catering to anything but his artistic impulses. The founding partner of Commune, a design firm that has created the interiors of hotels, restaurants, retail spaces and homes, Johanknecht mainly paints to get away. "I work creatively for clients all the time," he says. "And that's always problem-solving and what their needs are, and sometimes I approach those projects the same way—it still has to have composition and tension and color—but the painting, it's for me, and I haven't had any agenda with it. I've just been doing it, and I just want to see what comes out."

It's a spontaneity that Johanknecht steadfastly stands by. In fact, he doesn't relate to painters that have things planned out before they go into the studio. "I just can't imagine it," he says. "I mean, I have somewhat of a plan, but there's something so charging for me in starting out in one direction and letting it go. My paintings basically paint themselves. I start out somewhere, and have to relinquish control and respond to it and go where it's going."

Impulse aside, painting is actually a bit of a

return to roots for Johanknecht, who studied painting as an undergrad at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute "years ago," he says droily. Recently, after Commune blossomed into the renowned firm it is today, Johanknecht rekindled his love for painting, and basically picked up right where he left off. That means mainly paintings of square blocks, "stacked," as Johanknecht puts it, into a geometric landscape of sorts. "I've always worked with abstraction," he says with a laugh. "I think I see the world abstractly."

Johanknecht works with two divergent series: the "thought" series—the aforementioned block paintings—and the "emotion" series, a more gestural group of paintings with buoyant brushstrokes. The two series share everything else but content—both are painted at a medium size on wood panels with similarly earthy tones, and with a very flat, distressed surface texture. "I feel like they feed each other," says Johanknecht. "I feel that they are necessary. The 'thought' series is like the Abstract Expressionists or like Mondrian. They're about dealing with composition and order all the time. They need to have some accidents or something that throws it off, and it could be in the color or the composition. It depends on the day whether I'll do some of these more 'emotional' ones."

The blocky rigidity of the "thought" paintings and textures of the "emotions" also share another interesting quality: there is a sense that the paintings are climbing off the panels, their dimensional aspects unable to be bridled by the wall-hung panels. "I look at architecture, and I look at sculpture a lot," Johanknecht admits, waving his hand to his mood board, which is covered in photographs of Modernist sculptures. "I'm obsessed with Noguchi and Brancusi. I think about sculpture and I think about landscape building, but I'm doing two-dimensional paintings."

For his part, Johanknecht's next step is to actually turn one of his paintings into a three-dimensional object. Christopher Farr, a company that does exquisite rugs hand-knotted in Afghanistan, has translated one of Johanknecht's paintings as part of its artist series, which includes rugs depicting works by Jorge Pardo, Sarah Morris and the estate of textile artist Anni Albers.

And then there may come a show, but Johanknecht is in no hurry. He's happy to keep things casual, and let everything fall into place. "There've been people that have been collecting them, mainly by word of mouth," he says. "Every year, I put a bunch out there, but I kept thinking, I guess I should organize myself or something, but for the longest time, it was just about doing."

At left, Steven Johanknecht surrounded by some of his recent paintings; below, an inspiration board in his studio in Silver Lake.

