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'Ground Us' digs deep in Huntington Beach

Review: The installation exhibit by three artists examines our relationships with the natural environment.

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SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

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SURVIVAL GEAR:
Kiel Johnson's installation "Survival Mode" features pen-and-ink drawings and a "Survival Vest" that is suspended from the gallery's ceiling.

COURTESY OF THE HUNTINGTON BEACH

That brings me to Kiel Johnson's installation "Survival Mode," 2008. Two monumental drawings that he affixed straight onto gallery walls – thus they are destined for eventual destruction – mirror the chaos and growing sense of helplessness that seems to have become a by-product of urban existence. Serious but also witty, the installation embodies our collective post-9/11 angst as well as anything I've seen lately. Rendered in pen and ink, the drawings allude to his residences, first near Long Beach Harbor and then in the hills of Los Angeles. An elliptical composition in which small houses typical of either area surround a central Dante-like inferno of highways represents Long Beach. Crammed full of anything motorized, the image is reminiscent of giant, clogged intestines – an apt reference for anyone who has ever driven in that area.

By contrast, the L.A. segment is the picture of calm. Houses are statelier and the highways are empty – a relative oasis. But, that has not prevented Johnson from also constructing an information/radio system that consists of multidimensionally rendered antennas connected to intimidating looking black boxes – radios of several sizes, all created from cardboard. Only their slightly skewed shapes reveal that they are not "real." Naturally, one thinks of disasters and our still woefully slapdash communication systems.

However, Johnson has prepared himself by building a "Survival Vest" that, resembling a photographer's vest, looks as if made of leather but has also been crafted from cardboard. It comes accessorized with headphones and a microphone and is suspended from the ceiling by a winched arrangement. Spooky but cool, nonetheless.