

Kiel Johnson

Interview by Alysia Mazzella

Photos by Kiel Johnson and Theo Jemison



Raised in Olathe, Kansas, currently creating in Los Angeles, California, 35 year old Kiel Johnson artistry hasn't halted since day one. "When everyone else is out getting wild you have to be working on stuff. It is the only way." With a resume to match his exact words, Kiel Johnson is represented by a gallery on the West coast at Mark Moore, and also on the East at Davidson Contemporary. February 2010 kicked off his most recent project, a group art show in San Antonio entitled, "New Image Sculpture" at the McNay Museum. May/ August 2011 Johnson is to debut his very first museum show opening at the Taubman Museum in Roaoke, Virginia. With so much in the works, we talk details about Johnson's working with cardboard, inspiration, delivery, and future keywords. With warrior costumes, greenscreens, miniature mountains, and colored pencils; who wouldn't want to snoop around such an imagination.

21-7: Artistically, when and what medium did you first begin with?

Kiel Johnson: I guess I would have to say pencil and paper. I have been drawing since as far back as I can remember. Copying stuff out of Mad magazine like crazy when I was young. I think I learned at an early age that the best way to figure out how to make something or explain your idea to a buddy was to draw it out.

No matter your medium, your art is very detailed. What is it about small components that interests you?

Kiel Johnson: The small components are the details that make it all work, hold everything together, give "stuff" life. When you are trying to personify an object, the small components are what I pay attention to most. That is the stuff that gives objects their personality or attitude. Like a scar, dimple or wrinkle; One buckle and set of rivets wrapped around a box might say "I am a bad ass, don't even think about trying to open this." Another latch and strap set-up says "my contents are not in any way secure. You can easily break into wimpy system." The boxes can be the same.

How has your work evolved, as an artist, throughout the years?

Kiel Johnson: As I gain more and more time for myself to make work I have become much more focused. So has my work.

How were you introduced to cardboard and hot glue?

Kiel Johnson: I guess I have used paper in some form of another to make stuff since I was a little guy. My parents always had rolls of paper and cardboard around for us to mess with. We would make costumes with paper sacks or my dad would bring a refrigerator box home every so often that would turn into fort or spaceship. Those materials have always been part of my arsenal. It wasn't until '03, or so, that I started using paper to seriously make stuff. I wanted to build some large pieces and push the scale of things. The problem with big work is that it costs big dollars. I was building these wooden skeletal structures that I wanted to sheath in sheet metal or plywood. Cardboard became the poor man's sheathing. It was familiar, relatively strong, easy to manipulate and believe it or not felt like drawing. You could see results.

What inspires the ideas and direction of your projects?

Kiel Johnson: I like to think that a good idea can come from anywhere. It can come from an observation, a conversation, a dream, or a book you're reading. The best ones are most likely a mix of all those experiences. I also feel the best pieces are directly inspired by the previous piece and on and on. You just let it grow and hope each one will push you forward to the next one. If you just keep making stuff, things will happen.

21-7: More specifically, what inspired your exhibit Listen here, Busker!, recently displayed at the Maxwell Davidson gallery here in NYC.

Kiel Johnson: It started with the idea of a one man band. I enjoy the ingenuity in these self contained units. The self sufficiency of the guy who straps all these instruments onto his homemade backpack rig and sets off to preform is inspiring. Working as an artist has always felt like running a one man band of sorts. In the beginning anyway, you need to be the accountant, the packer, the framer, the shipper, the web designer, the email dude, the material delivery guy, concept guy and the shop tech. Oh, and you also have to make the work. I'm not complaining at all, it is just a bunch of hats to wear. I liked that image as a metaphor. From there, I just started building any instruments I could think of that a one man band might utilize. Then I decided I just needed to draw every instrument that existed. Like a catalog of the dream arsenal arranged into family reunion portraits. I guess I wanted to pay homage to these forms that have not changed in hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Each instrument is the shape it is, because we are the shape we are. They are designed around us. They are art pieces that are used to make more art.

21-7: This past July, you worked with Toshiba to create 8-bit Gary for a web series. How was that experience?

Kiel Johnson: The Toshiba Commercial was amazing...I really liked the concept of transforming this eager lab assistant into an 8-bit version of himself in a de-resolution machine! I'm always up for a chance to build another costume. The experience of having a post production house tweak out on object you build in the computer is a wild experience to see on the screen and has inspired many new ideas. The best part however, was working with The Doctor Twins. Matt and Jason Docter are the twin brother duo who directed the project. They are super creative, hard working dudes with a great overall vision. Hopefully we will be working on more projects together in the future. Stay tuned.



21-7: The titles of your projects are full of life, presenting interesting word dynamics. What do you base the titles off of?

Kiel Johnson: Titles are important. It is like having the last word in an argument. It is your last chance to inject a little bit more into the image or object. The viewer will always bring his or her own experiences with them. However, if you can alter their thoughts or direct the read they have with your work with a few simple words why not take that opportunity. Certain compositional elements are designed to cause your eye to flow around the page in a certain direction. Why not use words to help the viewer see? I struggle over titles though. Most pieces I make have multiple titles. Nicknames, full names, and working title. Sort of the way we do. You mom might call you one thing, your girlfriend has another name for you and your Boss calls you something else.

21-7: Do you have a team of assistants or do you create everything by yourself?

Kiel Johnson: I have had friends work with me on many projects in the past but for the last few projects it is all me. I would gladly except help though. Anyone who wants to come over and help me build parts and pieces is welcome. Lunch is on me.

21-7: You have been very successful in your art career. What advice would you give to the starving artist?

Kiel Johnson: First I would say, eat something. Then, get your ass to work. I feel that there is no end to the hustling that you have to do as an artist. My best advice would be to work hard. When everyone else is out getting wild you have to be working on stuff. It is the only way. Go out and have fun too, but you have to put the hours in. You have to make stuff. Can't just talk about it all the time. It is not about how much work you make, but I do believe the more pieces you make the better chance you have of making a few really good ones.

21-7: Could you give us some keywords on your upcoming projects?

Kiel Johnson: Warrior costumes, gigantic pile of handmade letters, green screen, children's belt fed machine guns, knife fights, miniature mountains, blood squibs, colored pencils, and everything I wear. It's getting wild over here for sure. I'm really looking forward to the next couple months.