



by **Steven Biller**

Artist for the People

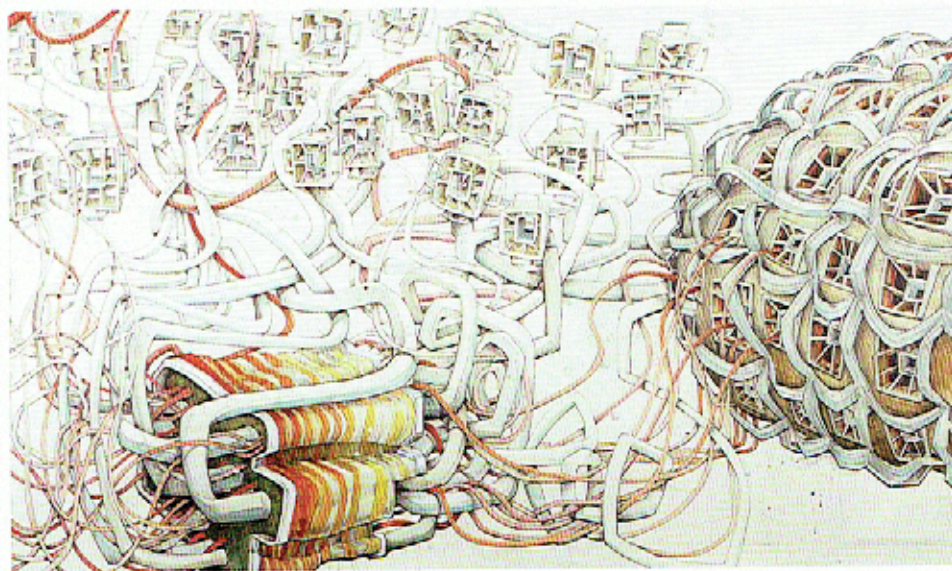


In the back corner of his studio—a second-floor warehouse space on the eastern edge of Los Angeles—artist Kiel Johnson tries to make sense of the electrical system on the vintage Airstream trailer he's restoring. Once the juice flows, he'll be a step closer to finishing his Mobile Mission Lab, a studio on wheels for his dream project: "Five years, 50 states, one trailer—making art with America, infecting the country with creativity," he says. "I'll take a little of

what's here in the studio to the outdoors. Who knows what I will see out there. It will change my work."

Meanwhile, with boundless energy, a quick smile and all the DIY spirit he can muster, Johnson, f'98, shifts back and forth between the Airstream and the front of his studio, where he has lined up his new series of large-scale drawings for a final look before a truck comes to transport them to Mark Moore Gallery in Culver City, one of L.A.'s most popular

**Celebrated
California sculptor
Kiel Johnson's relentless
quest for observation and
interpretation hits the
open road**



Johnson

contemporary art districts, for “Wallday-allday,” his third exhibition with the dealer in five years.

The drawings reflect his relentless drive and meticulous frenzy. Minimal in color, each action-packed graphite and water-color picture delivers exacting, almost cartoonish structures and systems inspired by his surroundings—in this case, the circuitous electrical wiring of the Airstream and the dizzying flight paths of the bees he keeps in his custom-built hive.

“I like to ride that line between the mechanical and the natural,” says Johnson, who also references the face of an electric razor and the honeycomb pattern he noticed on a floor mat in his studio. “I like observing the hive activity, watching the bees buzz around and paying attention to their flight path.” He marvels at the bees’ sophisticated society. At first they appear erratic, but eventually the repetition and rhythm of their activity make sense. “There’s the flight school and all of the flight patterns, and there are the workers carrying body parts out from the hive. It’s amazing to watch them.”

In the drawings, the hexagonal structures become the nucleus of activity, as busy as L.A. during rush hour. The action moves in thoughtfully engineered directions and seems to never end.

This work veers dramatically from the sculpture that earned Johnson critical acclaim—a life-sized printing press,

cameras and musical instruments all constructed in precision detail with cardboard, chipboard, plastic tubing and foam. In fact, these drawings might be the most abstract work Johnson has ever made.

Johnson, 39, attributes his handiness to the Olathe environment where he grew up. “I’ve been telling people since I was 8 that I was going to be a cartoonist or do claymation,” he says, recalling the childhood bedroom he customized by cutting up the carpet, building a bed, and painting a porthole on the wall. “I had an awesome family that supported me in what I wanted to do.” His father, Keith, b’72, founded the Johnson’s County Gazette newspaper, and his mother, Ann Moody Johnson, ’82, was a crafter.

Johnson earned his bachelor’s degree in sculpture and drawing at KU and his master’s in drawing and painting at California State University, Long Beach.

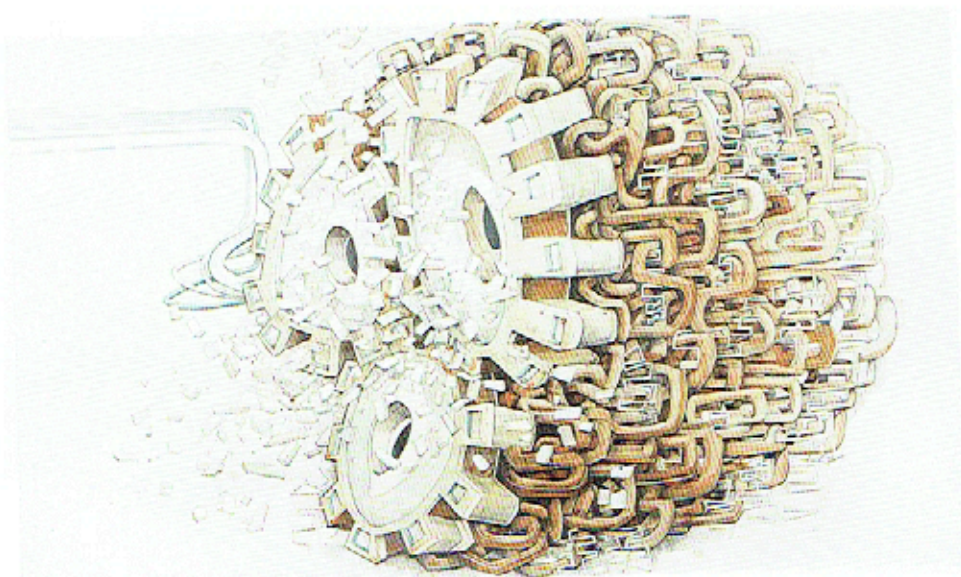
“I feel fortunate to do what I do,” he says. “I have sacrificed relationships, cash and nice living spaces. This takes intense focus, like being a professional athlete. You have to practice and work out. I have to get wound up. It’s endurance. Sometimes I have to tell myself, ‘I can do this!’ I draw and draw until I feel there’s nothing left in me, and

then I push it more. [All of the drawings] are getting worked. After a while, a couple won’t make the team and they have to go home.”

Hyperbole Studios, the name he gave his studio, is his man cave with all the basic comforts: kitchenette, soft leather couch, good tunes. He rents the corner space across from the Airstream to an artist who works with felt. “I love the hum and energy in my studio,” he says. “I like that people come by and work on stuff. After a few days alone in here, you kind of go crazy.”

Remnants of his curriculum vitae dot the studio. There’s a T-square ruler with a T-shirt wrapped around it that he has had since he studied at KU (where he represented the fourth generation of his family). There’s also a clamp marked “KU Sculpture.” Johnson says he might have taken it from a classroom.





Opposite page, far left: "Liquid Lunch," 2014, graphite and watercolor on paper mounted to panel, 42 x 58 inches

Left: "Colonize," 2014, graphite and watercolor on paper mounted to panel, 42 x 58 inches

Below: "Publish or Perish," 2009, pine ply, aluminum, inkjet on paper, 96 x 42 x 92 inches





Since college, Johnson has received the prestigious Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant and other awards, exhibited widely in California museums and art centers, and completed commercial work for Disney Channel, History Channel and other familiar brands.

Private and corporate collectors—Steve Martin, Todd Oldham, Creative Artist Agency and Sprint World Headquarters among them—own Johnson's work, and dealer Catlin Moore, director of Mark Moore Gallery, was eager to install "Walldayallday," a title the artist took from his own social media hash tag. Whenever Johnson posted #walldayallday, his family, friends and followers knew he was in his element.

"Kiel is an attractive personality for us," Moore says. "The ideas never stop with him. With Kiel, one door opens 50 others. He takes inspiration from his surroundings and manages to relate everything to his personal world. He's very optimistic and that shines through the way he runs his studio practice."

With the new drawings, Moore says, Johnson has "an opportunity to surprise people, to show his roots. He's most known for his 3D work, but the core of his work is his drawing. This will be exciting for his audience. People get caught up in the whimsical nature of it—and the intense detail."

Johnson concedes that the sculptural

work in cardboard was no longer a challenge. "I got to a place where I could build anything, so I feel like it was a chapter," he says. "I've made the last year and a half about drawing every day. Two-dimensional is where I want to be right now.

"These drawings are seismograms. I have a lot of coffee on one day, then use the eraser, use the pencil. There are a lot of what-ifs. No good idea is going to come unless you're working on a bad idea. You just have to start working."

He repeats that point often to students in the advanced drawing class he teaches at Cal State Long Beach. "I like turning people on to creativity," he says. "It's like a disease. I teach them to take experiences—the drive to school, the pattern on a boyfriend's shirt—and make it into a drawing, a diary entry for the day. Visual is a language, too. I get them to develop a visual vocabulary and to conjure up images from their experience."

Johnson spreads "the gospel of Kiel" as often as he can, including as a TEDActive speaker and facilitator in 2011 and '12. When he learned the theme, "City 2.0," he responded with an 8x8-foot cityscape constructed completely with cardboard.

He showed one incarnation of the city at TEDActive in nearby Palm Springs and created others in

Until his current exhibition of drawings, Johnson was best known for his meticulously detailed cardboard and chipboard 3D pieces, including cityscapes (above and opening spread), cameras and musical instruments.

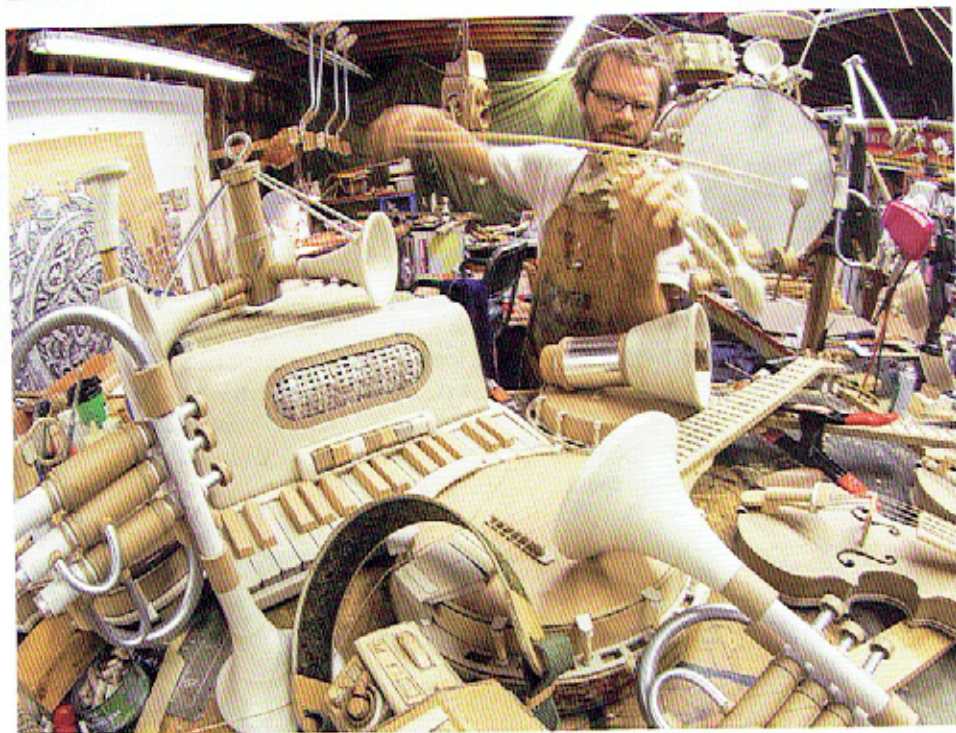
Sandwich, Mass.; Venice, Italy; Dubai, United Arab Emirates; and Christchurch, New Zealand.

"Christchurch had a series of earthquakes, and there were collapsed buildings and houses around the downtown area," says Johnson, who invited the community to help construct the pieces. "It was magical to bring this project. We built the downtown city center. It was cathartic for many of them. People were crying."

Johnson was in Christchurch when he

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—Catlin Moore,
director, Mark Moore Gallery



developed the idea for his dream project: "Five years, 50 states, one trailer." He had access to a Toyota vehicle, with solar power and other amenities, that's unavailable in the United States. He toured New Zealand and saw a glacier and a rain forest.

When he returned to L.A., he found his Airstream online. "I drove it from Maine in four days," he says, proud that he has since installed shocks, brakes, plumbing, insulation and floors. He's finishing the electrical system before he begins to add the studio and basic comforts. "I like

camping, being self-sufficient. I look forward to seeing America and becoming a man of the city in different neighborhoods."

With his drawings for "Walldayallday" complete, Johnson is focused on the Airstream. He reports his progress through social media:

"Juice is flowin'. #landyacht" —

—Biller is a freelance art writer in Palm Springs and Los Angeles. This is his first article for Kansas Alumni.

Interact with Kiel Johnson

Artist homepage

Links to media coverage, videos and galleries:
www.kieljohnson.com

Vimeo

HyperboleTV shows in the studio, at TEDActive and more:
vimeo.com/channels/hyperboletv

Instagram

A steady flow of images from Hyperbole Studios:
instagram.com/kieljohnson

Twitter

Updates on Johnson's events and exhibitions:
twitter.com/kieljohnson

Facebook

The artist's latest thoughts, pictures, news and shared posts:
facebook.com/KielErikJohnson

Mark Moore Gallery

The Los Angeles gallery that represents Johnson's artwork:
markmooregallery.com

Davidson Contemporary

The New York gallery that represents Johnson's artwork:
davidsoncontemporary.com

—S.B.