

KIEL JOHNSON

The Johnny Appleseed of Art

"I FEEL THAT NO GOOD IDEA REALLY COMES WITHOUT WORKING ON A BAD IDEA."

Words: Rosalind Fournier & Paige Zeigler

Don't even try to put artist Kiel Johnson into a cardboard box. He just won't fit.

Originally from Kansas City, Johnson today sounds more like a California surfer, without a trace of the stereotypical Midwestern practicality. Moving from one unlikely idea to another, he has managed to shed the inhibitions that hold so many people back.

"I feel that no good idea really comes without working on a bad idea," he explains. "Don't censor yourself too much. There was a time when I thought, 'That's not good enough,' or 'I don't think I should spend time on that,' or 'No, that's stupid.' But then I just started thinking, 'That's great. Let's do it. That will lead to something else, which will lead to something else...'"

Conversations with Johnson move at flight-of-idea speed; like in his work, one topic always leads to something else, as he meanders effortlessly through discussions about his prolific catalog of art. A craftsman seemingly adept with any material across every medium, Johnson is hard to define and can't be painted into one corner.

"If I just had a gun put to my head and [they] said, 'What do you do?' I would always just say that I draw, because I feel like my medium is probably the pencil," Johnson revealed in an interview during his showing at the Mark Moore Gallery in Culver City, California. "In order to build the things that I draw, I have become very interested in materials that are paper-related – from wood, to the thinnest of papers, chipboard, and cardboard... largely because I'm able to do things with them that enable my sculptures to look like my drawings."

His art ranges from making the seemingly mundane something beautiful – a drawing of all of his friends' favorite chairs; portraits of the lives of bees; sketches of every yoga pose he could find – to constructing 3-D miniature

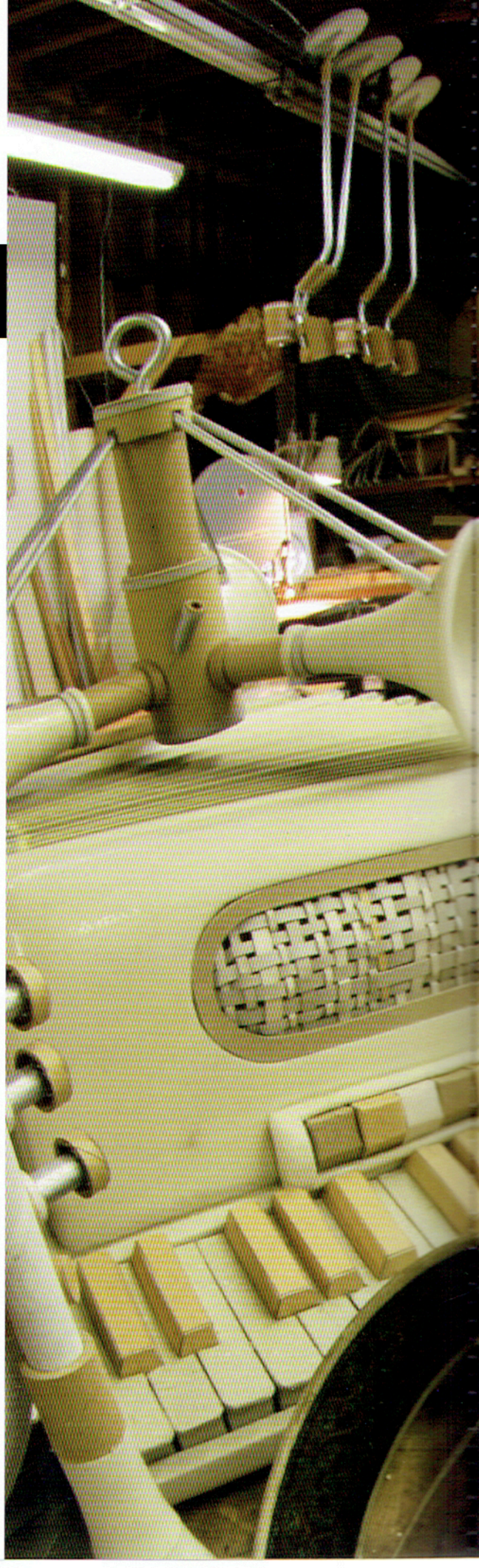
cityscapes, such as the one of Wichita, Kansas he was recently commissioned to build, replete with some 200 buildings, a river, highways, tiny cars, and more.

He's also taken the mini city concept into high-profile, group-source settings such as TEDActive 2012, where attendees were invited to participate in his "Everyone's An Architect" installation and contribute models of any cityscape feature to build a crowdsourced metropolis.

At Adobe MAX 2013, an event created to connect the most creative minds in the world, Johnson installed a crowdsourced project of a different kind. "At Adobe there are all kinds of type designers and typographers," he explains, "so I knew the attendees would be very much in tune with fonts and lettering and what makes a beautiful R or a beautiful S, or how to make an S look angry, or sad, or whatever. So I had this workshop where I taught everybody how to make a 3-D version of letters." Later they took the letters and wrote out captivating quotes from the likes of Maya Angelou, Picasso, and Gandhi.

Johnson designs his workshops to inspire creativity. He builds "salad bars" stocked with craft materials to make it as easy as possible for participants to join in the fun. "If you sit people down in front of cardboard, markers, a hot glue gun, a couple of sharp blades, most people love that. They'll make something, you know? People will just make stuff. We're just makers." He continues, "I really enjoy workshops where I can just show up for three days and be a high-energy super teacher... and then just disappear."

When he disappears, he's most likely to be found working solo in his Los Angeles studio listening to music, watching Netflix, and "making drawings, making weird stuff out of materials that I can find." He completed a 100-foot drawing, woven through the rollers of a hand-built wooden printing press, that is "essentially... everything I own,"



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depicting his clothes, his car, even his art tools. In a speech at TEDxChristchurch, Johnson explained how he considers that drawing the perfect expression for the age of social media in which “all of us are just pushing all of our personal information out into the world constantly... oversharing and oversharing.”

Piece by piece, the art world has taken notice: Johnson's work has been featured in gallery showings from coast to coast, including at the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke, Virginia, and the Irvine Art Center in Irvine, California, among other venues. His creations are also held by such prestigious private collectors as Creative Artists Agency

and the Steve Martin Collection.

Meanwhile, Johnson also takes on occasional commercial endeavors, having created a costume used in a Toshiba advertisement, props for the History Channel, and “all kinds of weird stuff for Budweiser.”

“You know, stuff like that where you get paid for something weird for a commercial, that's creative life, too,” he says. “A lot of times it's not seen as creative or as ‘free’ because you're working for the man or something, but I pretty much only take projects where they search me out.”

In between, Johnson continues to cultivate his life as a traveling artist - so much so that he purchased his own 1975 Airstream

Travel Trailer. “It's the same age as me... we're both 40,” he notes. Over the past few years, he's completely disassembled it and is now rebuilding it into a customized mobile mission lab.

“The idea is... I'll be able to take a little bit of my studio with me and stay on the road longer,” he explains. He has an audacious five-year goal of traveling every spring and summer until he's worked with communities in each of the 50 states. “It's just another thing I'm going to embark on: making art with other people, seeing other neighborhoods, or cities, or states. Kind of treating it like Johnny Appleseed of big cities and turning people on to making stuff.”

“GET BUSY. DON’T CENSOR YOURSELF TOO MUCH.”



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