

THE CITY AND THE LENS

In the gallery world, Kiel Johnson is known mostly for his large-scale drawings of fantastical cityscapes with tangles of unending highways and power lines. These detailed drawings are given new life in the third dimension with the introduction of cardboard. Johnson's cardboard sculptures are an extension of his works on paper and canvas, each having the same intricate details that his drawings do—only in real, tactile life. Congested cities, multilensed cameras on vintage-looking straps, and retro-electronics are lifted from his drawings and breathed into life with built-up strips of cardboard. Johnson's whimsical and chaotic world exists from paper to sculpture, giving viewers more to chew on in the third dimension with cardboard.

To Johnson, jumping to cardboard and three-dimensional pieces was a no-brainer. After having fun as a kid making forts out of refrigerator boxes, he began experimenting with it during art school. As a poor college student, he would collect the chipboard on the backs of drawing pads when other students were finished with the paper in drawing class and take them back to his studio to experiment with. Here, he began to create his own visual language and world that extends beyond the page into his sculpture.

Working in both drawing and cardboard sculpture creates a dialogue between both types of works and helps to define Johnson's artistic oeuvre to the viewer by inviting them into an all-encompassing world. Rather than getting lost in a drawing, Johnson's variations



www.kieljohnson.com

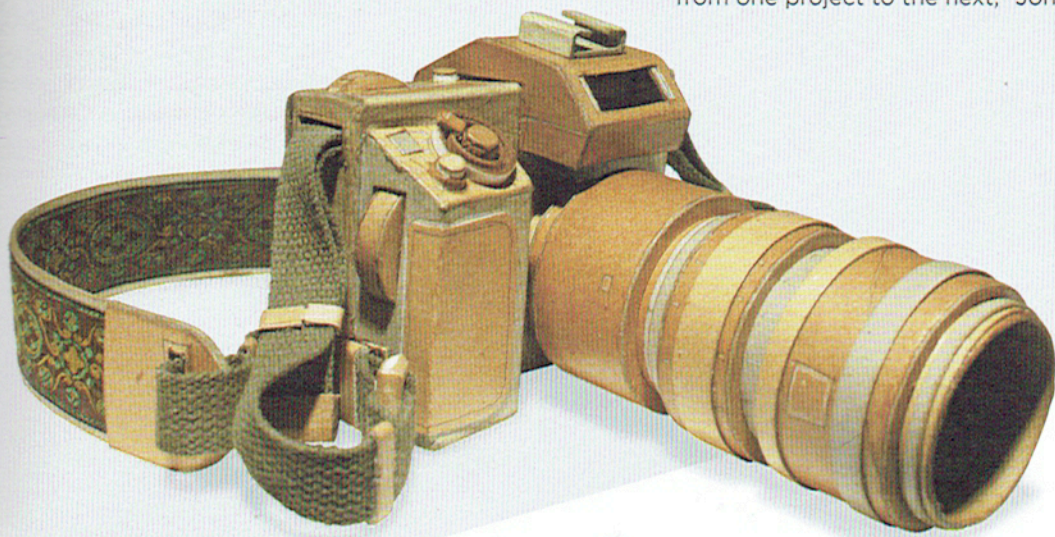
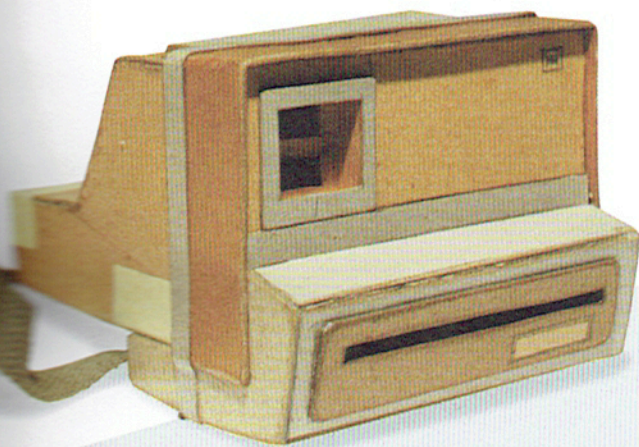
KIEL JOHNSON

OPPOSITE
Pile of Instruments
2010

THIS PAGE
Polaroid Camera (top)
2009
Camera with Green Strap
(bottom)
2009

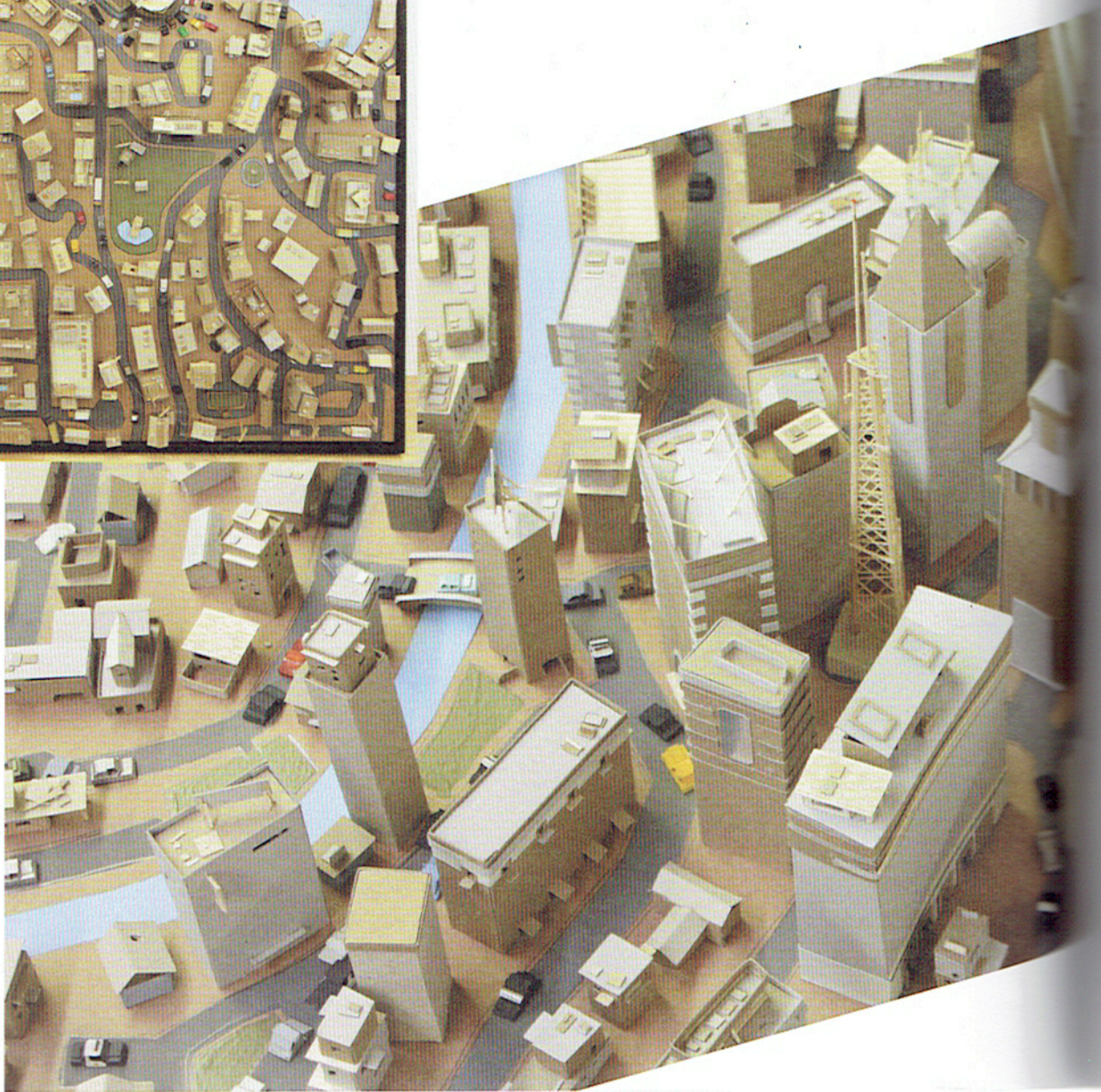
reveal a snippet of his artistic mind, letting the viewer understand his creative process more than just one medium would. With cardboard, he has allowed us to stand in the shoes of the artist, by comparing and contrasting his pieces from page to sculpture. "Cardboard allows me to build things in a way that seems to relate very well to my drawings," he says. "I can also work fast and almost think of it as 3D drawing. I simply substitute the eraser for the carpet knife."

ALTHOUGH HIS DRAWINGS AND SCULPTURES read well together, their style does tend to be different. Johnson's drawings have a tendency to be overly exaggerated, inspired by real life. In his drawings, skyscrapers jam next to each other while satellites hover dangerously low to the ground, over winding highways that swirl in loop-de-loops. His sculptures, fragments of these drawn worlds, are more photorealistic, but convey the same fantastical quality by being uber-intricate, yet made from cardboard instead of their usual fine materials and mediums. His collection of vintage cameras looks hauntingly real, down to every (cardboard) gear and crank. Held next to a real camera, the similarity is uncanny; they are built to the same scale and even have detailed lenses. But Johnson breaks the illusion and the fantasy by leaving his sculptures with the bland uniform palette of cardboard. Rather than being read as a camera, the pieces are read as something else, bringing the viewer out of their comfort zone by rendering something so familiar in an almost generic palette. "I work organically, moving from one project to the next," Johnson explains.

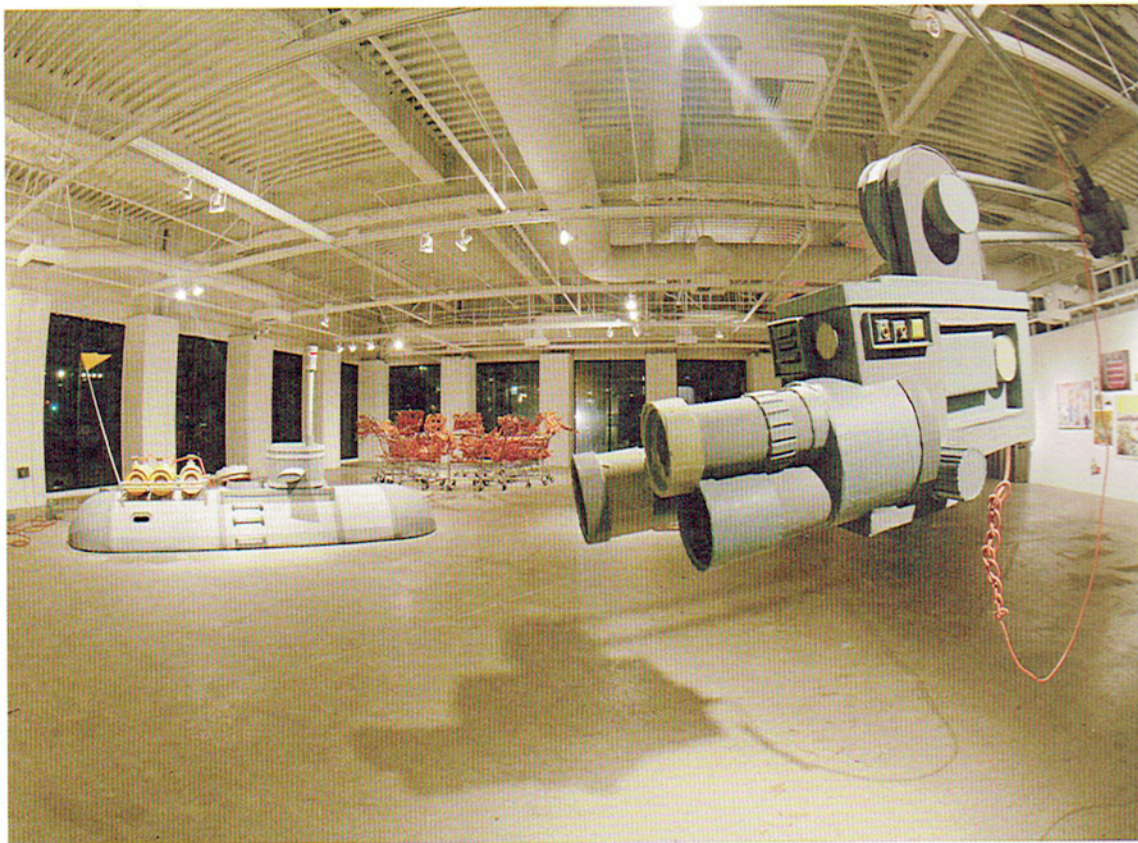


"I believe a good idea only comes to you while working on a bad idea. I try not to censor myself too much and just keep making. I can honestly tell you that I can build you anything you want out of this stuff."

His overcrowded city drawings are translated into massive city grids with soaring skyscrapers of all sizes and cardboard hues. The cardboard metropolises, also in the classic light brown, evoke the chaos of living vertically, but also have an undertone of uniformity. Made from material found on the city street, the monochromatic nature of the sculptures captures the feeling of anonymity that living in a dense urban area can provoke—being one of the cogs in the intensely complicated machine that makes up a metropolis.



Video Camera
2010
Gallery view



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JOHNSON CONSTANTLY PUSHES himself and the limits of cardboard; with every project, he tries to make the material thinner, stronger, or with more compound curves. He's branched out and tried every cardboard out there: discarded boxes, collected tubes, leftover chipboard, and even purchased professional grade cardboard, using each to convey different hues, textures, and properties in his work. Feeling as though he has mastered the material, Johnson as of late is taking the next step with cardboard. Instead of using the material as the end-all, he is exploring translating his cardboard sculptures into a new medium to extend his world to the next level. Using cardboard as his basis, he has been casting the pieces in plastic and metal, creating new dialogue among the different materials.

OPPOSITE

Aerial City

2012

Complete (far left)

and Detail