



real life tetris

USING UNWANTED FURNITURE, DISCARDED WHITEGOODS AND OTHER MUNDANE HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS, SWEDISH ARTIST MICHAEL JOHANSSON CREATES MASSIVE SCULPTURES THAT ARE REMINISCENT OF A CERTAIN GAMING CLASSIC.

Writer Conor Creighton *Artwork* Michael Johansson

MICHAEL JOHANSSON OFTEN GETS CALLED A HOARDER, AND IT IRKS HIM. LOOKING AT HIS WORK IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY THIS TAG MIGHT APPLY, BUT LUMPING HIM IN WITH THE GRANDPA SHEDS CRAMMED WITH JAUNDICED NEWSPAPERS IS A MISTAKE. JOHANSSON ADMITS HE CAN'T RESIST THE PULL OF CERTAIN OBJECTS: SUITCASES, DESKS, CABINETS, BOXES, TELEVISIONS, FILING CABINETS AND EVEN KITCHEN SINKS CATCH HIS EYE AT LOCAL MARKETS, BUT THERE'S A PURPOSE AND POINT BEHIND THE THINGS HE PICKS UP.

The Swedish artist produces two main types of work: large forms made from pieces found at flea markets and second-hand stores, which are then assembled according to shape, colour, or the constraints of a space; and kits that resemble life-sized air-fix models with familiar but improbable pieces: a hairdryer, a shovel or a paddleboat with an outboard engine. The 37-year-old artist has just moved to Berlin. He drove his Peugeot van across the tundra and over the North Sea from Sweden, and it's here, in his small studio scattered with objects, that we meet.

Since 2010, Johansson's Tetris-inspired sculptures have been exhibited and installed in streets and galleries from Malmö to Tokyo. There's a pleasing preciseness – an OCD sort of ordered chaos – to the massive constructions, made from so many immediately identifiable parts. The boxy shapes and smooth lines are reminiscent of library walls, or the work of a brickie who has tried his hand at removals. It's an accessible kind of art too. People recognise parts: the cupboards, tables or vintage telephones. It breaks the ice and draws them in. "People who aren't normally interested in art can still find a closeness to the objects," Johansson agrees. But being familiar has its downside too. On more than one occasion he's held an exhibition only to see guests using an artwork as a table – for their wine glasses. Another time he found someone sitting down on a piece. That never happened to Marcel Duchamp. Outside the gallery his work

appears in some unexpected places. "I like to use the public space as a test site," Johansson says. "I'm interested in how you relate to work when you don't really expect it. Something that breaks the daily pattern." A container yard in Zeebrugge, Belgium; between two buildings in the Dutch city of Rotterdam; and along a quiet alleyway in Yokohama, Japan, are just some of Johansson's chosen locations. In each case, he sources the objects from nearby stores, and uses a combination of cranes, scaffolding, scissor lifts and dedicated assistants to get every piece precisely into place.

His habit of breaking the daily pattern has prompted strong public reactions, not always positive. He's had people write letters to the editor in protest of his work. They say it's a waste of taxpayers' money. They call it a pile of old junk. And unfortunately they aren't being ironic.

Unlike his studio in Sweden, Johansson's new home is quite empty. In the same way that a mechanic often drives a bomb, or a tailor's kids run round in threadbare clothes, the artist of bric-a-brac and collectables keeps his studio simple. "It's a bit like a living organism; it changes all the time depending on what kind of work I am doing, and where in the process I am," he says. "But I try to keep things neat. I have a large shelf that holds my inventory divided by colour, and I keep a lot of old things in labelled boxes. You never know what might come in handy."

Johansson describes his work as having a "humoristic intention". In person he has one too. He's modest. Artists by their nature can be as self-involved as dictators. You could press record, walk out of the room and come back to find they'd spilled their guts without any prompting. But that's not the impression you get here. Johansson doesn't talk himself up. He's unassuming. A little like the objects he's drawn to.

Take a look inside Johansson's studio at smithjournal.com.au

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