

Sign of the Times

The Unique Sign Art of Josh Goldstein

Interview by
Mitch Gerson

As some of you already know, I grew up just a couple of blocks from Coney Island in Brooklyn NY. The bright lights and visual, aural assault of the sounds & sights that only exist in Coney always mesmerized me.

I fondly remember walking on the boardwalk begging my father to buy me “just one more” cotton candy, or hot dog. The food vendors were numerous and their tantalizing signs hawking their

greasy and fatty wares were too hard to resist.

Face it, go to any carnival, can you look away from those bright and beautiful Funnel Cake signs? No?, I thought so.

Recently, I had the pleasure of coming across an art gallery in NYC that was featuring a collection of Coney Island-inspired works. The pieces that stood out to me most were the ones created by artist Josh Goldstein. Josh has been creating unique mosaic artwork pieces using photography, wood, and a PC to create his interesting and one of a kind collage. They range from one small 5” x 5” square to literally wall-sized pieces of over 9’ long x 3’ high!

Originally, he had featured Bodega sign art as his primary source

of inspiration. For those of you unfamiliar with the Bodegas, which are so common here in NYC, they are basically very small candy and grocery stores that seem to be on literally every street corner. He’s photographed thousands of them to date and was soon drawn to Coney as the latest inspiration for his work.

I reached out to Josh, and he was kind enough to let me visit him in his studio and ask him a few questions about his very beautiful and really unique art style.





MITCH GERSON: Tell us a bit about yourself. For example, do you have a formal background in the creative arts?

JOSH GOLDSTEIN: I have degrees in architecture from Washington University in St. Louis and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. On the nerd tip, I built a model of Manhattan out of folded paper when I was about 15—over 3,000 buildings. They had an article about me in the local paper titled “Obsessed Teen En-folds New York.” I was also a big ping-pong enthusiast. You get the picture.

I’ve read on your online bio that you decided to start photographing Bodegas in/around NYC. What inspired you to do that?

I had always liked to photograph old signs. I think it started on a road trip through the southwest on Route 66—lots of old hotel signs, extravagant chop suey parlors, bread billboards, and 24-hour donut shops. In New York I photographed signs from kosher bakeries, Halal live chicken emporiums, Jamaican meat patty joints, Chinese dumpling stalls—the usual NYC mix. But I really liked the classic bodega because they were ubiquitous and all fairly similar, but each one was unique—sort of like a snowflake, but with louder merengue music and more beer.





Did you know from the beginning that you would be photographing and mounting the images onto the wood panels?

No, at first I was just taking lots of bodega pictures without a real plan. I sort of wanted to compile them into a poster of “The Bodegas of Brooklyn”, sort of like you see for the pubs of Ireland.

How did you decide on the sizes for your initial art squares?

I have sort of lame answer for that one. I decided on 5”x5” so I could get 2 prints per 8 1/2x11 sheet of paper. Then I moved up to

8”x8”, again so I could stay within the limits of my Epson printer.

Describe the process for creating your squares. From the moment you take your photo, to the finished square.

I take digital photos of a LOT old signs. I find an image I like—crop it to highlight a particular aspect of the sign. Print and glue to plywood. Apply several layers of acrylic coating.

How did you come up with the mosaics that you eventually moved onto?

I wanted to make larger pieces, but I was too cheap and tech-averse to get a real printer. So I stuck with printing everything out on 8 1/2x11, but didn’t want to just glue all the squares onto a flat piece of wood and have all these little joint lines all over the place. So I decided to make the joints a strength, and really accentuate them by placing the squares at multiple levels. I like how the image changes as you view it from different angles. Also, I get to treat each square as its own individual piece, with its own feel.

Describe the process for creating your mosaics? Also, what inspired you to create them?

I find an image I like that I feel can be enlarged successfully. Size to dimensions of final piece—say 30”x62”. Saturate colors. Divide image up into various squares and rectangles of various sizes and then print each piece individually. Then I glue each piece to a wood square of the same size, collage each square with photos I have taken of NYC street textures, take-out menus, ethnic newspapers, and apply acrylic coating over the image. Mount all squares to a wood frame and pray the whole thing comes together.

As to the inspiration, a lot of it was just practicality—the limited printer; having a small workspace that forced me to work on small pieces one at a time and then assemble into a large work rather than working on a large piece from the beginning. Beyond that, the city’s depth of textures, cultures, and visual cacophony constantly inspire me.

In regard to your mosaics, how do you decide on how it will look and feel?

I really don’t. I mean, I decide generally how the overall image will look early on, but then I treat each square individually and have no idea how the whole thing will come together until I put the squares back together at the very end.

What sort of equipment and materials do you use?

Salvaged plywood, heavy-duty photo paper and inks, various acrylics, Super 77 spray glue, newspapers, take-out menus, lotto tickets, bodega receipts. As far as equipment, I try to keep it to the minimum: my computer, printer, digital camera, and most importantly my bike to get me around town.



I would love to do a piece like that, but it would probably have to be a commission. I

When there is no more open space to collage.

The best and easiest way to get an idea of my work is to go to my website—www.bodeg-aNYC.com. If you're in the New York area you can also go to Xpo Gallery in Brooklyn to see my 3-dimensional work. If you want to talk about commissioning piece email me at



josh@bodegaNYC.com.

The possibilities for other styles of signs are potentially limitless... so what's next for you?

I think I want to create a giant chopstick wrapper mosaic. **GR**

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