

Cardboard Box Stories

In this era of K-Marts, WalMarts and other super-mega-Marts, what could be more trivial than the cardboard boxes in which products are stored before they are sold? Sometimes, *after* these boxes are unpacked – and *before* they land in the garbage – frugal people use them to carry their belongings when they move from one dwelling to another. But happily, some of these boxes landed at my studio, where I decided to dedicate them to a new, more noble mission: reincarnation as a work of art!

This mission evolved gradually, over time, because like millions of others, when I shopped, I barely noticed the empty shells of cardboard that had been unpacked, crushed, tied together and trashed. But one day, while cruising the supermarket floor, I began to hear the voices of these discarded boxes, whispering messages, occasionally even shouting at me, but in a language I couldn't understand – a strange language, at once painfully familiar and yet incomprehensible. It was much like a digital code emanating from an alien civilization, far away in a distant time zone, impossible to decipher, because the part of my brain that could decode it was on a thousand-year vacation – probably in a parallel universe where *Cardboard* is spoken.

Granted, the humble cardboard box was invented a mere century ago, and the corrugated version of it appeared even more recently than that. And as big as a mega-store may be, it is not a pyramid, nor is a cardboard box the sarcophagus of King Tut. That may provide a reasonable excuse for human beings to ignore messages from such an obviously lowly source. In fact, these days, the civilized world is obsessed with more fashionable codes, from King Tut's to Da Vinci's. But for me, the cardboard voices are strangely attractive, and the messages they convey are compelling.

How well I remember walking down the aisle of my beloved supermarket on a rainy November morning in 1989, when I heard the usual chorus of whispers from the crushed cardboard boxes. But that day, something *unusual* happened: instead of an incomprehensible, coded, cryptic, corrugated cacophony, I began to hear some sounds that resembled words, and started to see foggy images – as if I were receiving audio and video signals from distant places, telling stories no one may have ever heard before – as if a dormant part of my brain was suddenly awakening, or adapting itself to a new reality. And then the words became strikingly poetic stories, and the images became crisper and clearer illustrations of these stories. And most important, what took shape was neither dryly scientific nor ultra-intellectual, but truly appealing to the broadest possible range of humanity.

As I decoded and deciphered these delightful new stories, I felt as if I were a kind of ambassador to the world of corrugated cardboard boxes – a world in which I was now embedded – a world I called “Corporaria Land” – a place which had become a new reality for me.

Much later, I realized that these messages – these stories – could be translated through a host of other media – oil, watercolors, drawings, installations, videos, photographs, sculptures – you name it.

As I said, this realization came later. But in the beginning, with religious zeal, like the prophet of a new, miraculous, sprung-from-cardboard vision, I dedicated myself to creating the images that emerged from that vision, and the stories those images told.

I don't know why this happened to me. Perhaps a part of my brain suddenly woke up. Or maybe it returned from a vacation in a parallel universe. And one even bigger question remains: Who, or what, *made* all of this happen to me?

Gregory Perkel,
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