

# The Philadelphia Inquirer



Kambel Smith makes final adjustments on his sculpture of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, which will be featured at his art show at the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia.

## ARTISTIC SUPERHERO

He turns trash into treasured sculptures — and now is drawing acclaim worldwide.

By Stephanie Farr  
STAFF WRITER

**F**or years, Lonnie Smith would gather the artwork made by his son, Kambel, and set up small shows at senior centers, libraries, and YMCAs across the Philadelphia region.

Lonnie knew his son had a gift, but he couldn't get anybody else to see it. "No one would come," he said. "Zero."

It crushed Kambel every time. And so, it crushed Lonnie, too.

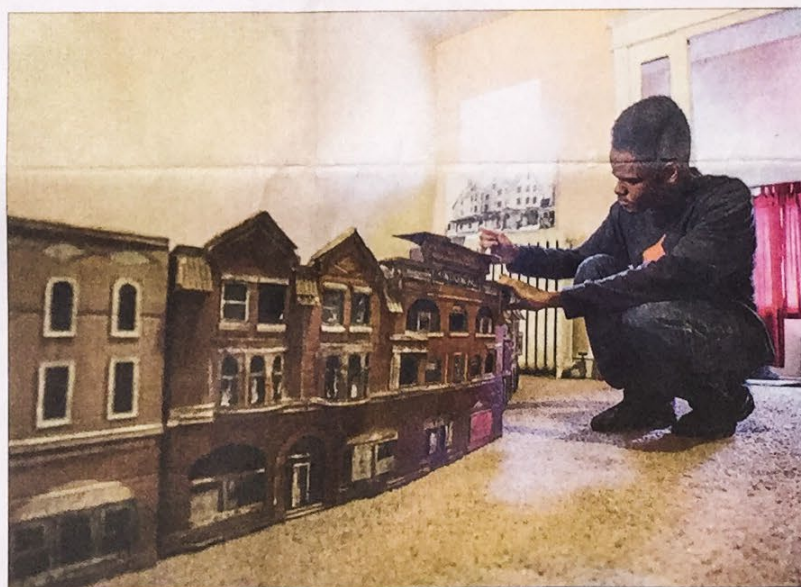
To soften the blow, Lonnie would sit with his sons, Kambel, now 32, and Kantai, 24, both of whom have autism. Together, they would create stories about how people with autism — whom they called Autisarians — have superhuman abilities, not disabilities.

Lonnie would tell his sons that sometimes, it's just hard for non-Autisarians to see that.

But this year, they finally did.

Since January, when Kambel Smith's intricate, large-scale building sculptures were first exhibited at the Outsider Art Fair in New York City — earning the attention of art critics from the New York Times and New York magazine — his work has been

See **KAMBEL** on C2



Kambel, who has autism, has sold his cardboard sculptures to public and private collectors.

Staff photographs by  
Jessica Griffin



# Kambel

Continued from C1

showcased everywhere from the Marlborough gallery in London to the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center in Georgia.

Several of Kambel's pieces, which he builds freehand, have also been purchased by the American Folk Art Museum, the West Collection, and private collectors, who have paid up to \$25,000 for his work.

A collector in Dallas bought Kambel's sculpture of Lincoln Financial Field, which the Inquirer featured in May, for an undisclosed amount.

This week, for the first time since his meteoric rise, Kambel Smith will exhibit his work locally, at the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery in Center City.

Alex Baker, director of the gallery, said he was "blown away" when he first saw Kambel's work at the Outsider Art Fair this year.

"Here's a guy from Philadelphia — and I consider myself turned on to the local art scene — and I'd never heard of him before," Baker said.

If not for a chance encounter with a neighbor who saw Kambel building sculptures on his front yard in Germantown — as detailed in a January profile of Kambel in *The Inquirer* — no one may have ever seen his work.

That neighbor, Barbara Gettes, shared photos of Kambel's pieces on Facebook and helped connect him with curator Chris Byrne, who is based in Dallas and New York.

It was Byrne who presented Kambel's work at the Outsider Art Fair and has helped him navigate the art world. Kambel is now represented by the Marlborough, where he has an exhibi-



Kantai (left), Kambel (center), and Lonnie Smith at their home in Germantown. Left, Kambel's sculpture of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

## ON EXHIBIT

### ► Kambel Smith: Philadelphia

Opening reception 6-8 p.m. Thursday at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, 1216 Arch St., free. The show runs through Jan. 25, 2020. 215-545-7562, fleisher-ollmangallery.com.

Philadelphia building sculptures: The Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Ben Franklin Bridge; Independence Hall; and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Given the immense size of the

works — the Art Museum sculpture alone is 16 feet wide and 10 feet deep — the gallery could only accommodate four pieces.

"They are quite monolithic," Baker said. "He is not afraid of scale."

Several of the pieces incorporate Kambel's love of painting, too, like the small portraits of the Founding Fathers hidden inside of his Independence Hall sculpture. Kambel started as a painter, but when his father ran out of money for canvases, Kambel began building sculptures out of cardboard he found in the trash.

"He's not an architect, that's the beauty of these models," Baker said. "I love his attention to detail, but at the same time it's not just an exact replica of the building. There's a lot of humanity in these sculptures."

That's because there's a lot of humanity in Kambel, too. Despite the newfound attention his work has received this year, he hasn't changed much.

"I think that as far as he goes, he's still humble.... He just wants the simple things he's always wanted," Lonnie Smith said of his son.

One of those things is to help other Autisarians, many of whom have reached out to Kambel this year. With that in mind, the Smith family has created the Autisarian, a nonprofit where they hope to work with other "autistic superheroes" to find their gifts, Lonnie Smith said.

"He's a soldier in a war to change the autism narrative, and it's working," Lonnie Smith said of Kambel. "What he's done is shown people that being different is not a problem. That being different is almost the new normal."

✉ sfarr@inquirer.com  
☎ 215-854-4225 📱 FarFarrAway

Kambel fine-tuning his Phila. Museum of Art sculpture. He also has a show in New York at the Marlborough.

