

Vin & ang

A DARING SECOND ACT
FOR NEIL KREMER
AND CORY JOHNSON

BY ERIC MINTON





Cory Johnson (left) and Neil Kremer

Forty-ish. That's when Neil Kremer took up photography, he says. Growing up in Rochester, New York, he was intrigued by photojournalism after seeing his uncle's collection of fine art photography. But it wasn't until 2011, when he was living in Los Angeles and his successful sales job with a sporting goods manufacturer tanked, that Kremer bought his first camera. "I saw a bunch of letters—M, S, P—on the dial, and I had no idea," he says. "I had to read the manual two or three times just to understand how to use the camera."

Kremer loaned his camera to his barstool buddy, Cory Johnson. A native of Keokuk, Iowa, Johnson had built a business in film production, but the circumstances surrounding his most recent film had left his company bankrupt. On the set of that movie, Johnson hung out with the stills photographer and saw her capture in one frame the entire scene they'd been spending all day filming. "That whole process just clicked with me," he says. After three days playing with Kremer's camera, Johnson purchased his own.



BARFLIES TO BUSINESS PARTNERS

Eleven years later, Kremer Johnson Photography, the duo's Los Angeles-based commercial photography business, has a who's who client list across a wide spectrum of industries: popular name brands Visa, Chevrolet, and Ford; entertainment giants CBS, DirectTV, and Hulu; food producers Hormel, Gnarly Head, and Bulletproof Coffee; pharmaceuticals Neurocrine Biosciences, Applied Therapeutics, and Proctor & Gamble; home products Braun, Kong Co., and Joybird; attractions Monterey Bay Aquarium, Terranea Resort, and Las Vegas; public entities the Almond Board of California, the Southern Nevada Water Authority, and the University of Southern California. Their work has won 30 major photography awards and been exhibited at the International Center of Photography.

Like many manifestations of midlife crises, theirs sound random. The genesis of their friendship is banal. "We had a friend in common and we were just always out at bars together, and that was it, and ..." Johnson pauses, then shrugs. "That's really it." They didn't launch a new business so much as amble into it. "We both found ourselves suddenly without companies at the same time," he says. "And a similar interest," Kremer adds. Johnson continues, "It was just a business born out of a lick of boredom and a lot of interest."

They applied the 10,000-hour rule to master photography, according to Johnson: "always shooting and learning and developing. Running around shooting overpasses on the freeway, piers, and random stuff like the typical photo student, but we were 40." They "nerded out on lights" as they prac-

ticed creating portraits, narrative images, and conceptual humor.

Kremer posted their images on social media, and *Inflight* magazine assigned the pair to re-create the album cover of the Eagles' "Hotel California." A week later, on a scissor lift 40 feet above Sunset Boulevard with the sun setting behind a pristine hotel, Johnson says, "We looked at each other and said, 'I guess this is a job. Do you want to try to make this our job?'"

STRATEGIC BUSINESS SENSE

To call their collaborative success random, however, ignores the years of business experience that guided them into their second-career craftsmanship. "Coming at it as a 40-year-old who understands business and understands how to follow the money is very different from a kid just getting out of college who has no idea how to run a business," Kremer says.

They reached out to photographers to learn about commercial photography, agencies, representation, and how to produce a photo shoot. "One thing we were told from the beginning, and it took us a while to believe it, is you have to specialize," Kremer says. "You have to have an elevator pitch. You have to be able to get that down to one sentence. You not only have to be able to say it, the work has to show it. At the end of the day, it really comes down to the work. We were able to put together work that is both current and fills the need of advertisers."

Even developing their signature style was more mercenary than artistic. "It was a very, very focused effort," Johnson says. "These 20-year-old kids out of college have the opportunity to photograph what they want and find their way creatively. We didn't have 20 years to do

that. We looked at the market, we looked at people we liked, we saw a niche that resonates with us creatively, and saw a spot we could fill."

At first glance, their portfolio seems dominated by quirky subject matter in Looney Tunes-quality lighting. That includes their own portrait on their website's About page, featuring Kremer and Johnson in heroic poses wearing California pastels, confidently gazing into the distance against the backdrop of an aged brick warehouse. The more you browse their portfolio, the more variety you'll find in subject matter and palettes. The common thread is narrative quality. Like a single-panel cartoon without a caption, each image tells a story in one frame. "Character, expression, and color story are three things we always try to carry through all our images, no matter what the tone of them are," Johnson says. "And that is something creative ad agencies recognize and value."

Exemplary is their "Angelinos" gallery. Kremer set out to create dynamic outdoor portraits using one octabox and the sun as a rim light, so he drove around Los Angeles looking for interesting people to photograph. After he posted his images, Root Insurance asked for 10 such portraits—stills and video—with a 10-day deadline for a national ad campaign. This was one month into the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. Kremer and Johnson hit the streets and approached the few pedestrians who were out and about, offering to make their portraits for a user's fee. The 49 one-click-of-the-shutter, in-the-moment portraits at 49 different uncrowded locations tell 49 individual one-frame stories, each image displaying remarkable depths of personality and expression.



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PERSONAL PROJECTS WITH PURPOSE

Many professional photographers undertake personal projects to expand their skills or enjoy artistic freedom they don't get in their commercial work. Kremer and Johnson see personal projects as reinvesting in their business. “We do make personal work that we want to see, but it's not cheap to make personal work,” Kremer says. “So, half the equation is what will be accepted in the advertising community.” Personal projects also add more intrinsic value to their portfolio than work they've done for clients. “Creatives see the personal work, and it resonates on a deeper level than other commercial projects do,” Johnson says. “That's 100 percent us; it's nobody else's color or wardrobe. That's our heart on the page, and that's why they call us.”

This strategy applies to their participation in competitions, too. “It feels weird to chase awards; it seems so disingenuous, and it's all subjective,” Johnson says. “It's also validating when you get them. But it's not like we set out with *We're going to win this thing this year.*” “With that said,” adds Kremer, “we spend a lot of money to enter all of those.” That gets their work in front of high-level advertising executives. “For us, it's 100 percent marketing,” Johnson says.

One of their personal projects, “*Craigslist Encounters*,” was exhibited at the International Center of Photography in New York. Having photographed many beautiful people in manufactured settings for commercial clients, Kremer wanted to photograph typical people in their real environments. He placed a “characters wanted” ad on Craigslist offering \$20 for subjects to pose. They photographed the first responses, put the images on social media, and within

months received hundreds more responses. Many subjects offered their own concepts and produced the settings themselves. “It was such an easy thing to do,” Kremer says. After nine months they had photographed almost 100 people. Of those, only three accepted the \$20. The rest just wanted their portraits taken in Kremer Johnson's unique way.

Both men contribute ideas for personal projects. Some are spur-of-the-moment concepts when working together, some come from a long list of ideas they keep, Johnson says. “We'll occasionally sit down and say, *Hey, dude, here's five ideas I wrote, what do you think?*” Some are rejected or accepted outright. Often the response is, Yes, but what if we added this or changed that? “That's typically when we do our best work,” Johnson says as Kremer nods.

From their previous content-creation careers, both appreciate how collaboration can attain outcomes beyond individual expectations. “There has to be a yin and yang; there has to be give and take and compromise because anyone who thinks they're right all the time is wrong,” says Kremer. They are like-minded businessmen. But artistically? “There's a fair share of bickering that happens,” Johnson says, “which also gets us to where we need to be. We're each very outspoken about our feelings, and the other one doesn't take it personally and is able to meld that into something positive and move forward. That is something I think is core for us as businesspeople and as artists.”

“The truth is, if we agreed on everything, our work would be terrible,” Kremer adds as Johnson nods. •

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