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Naked City : Article

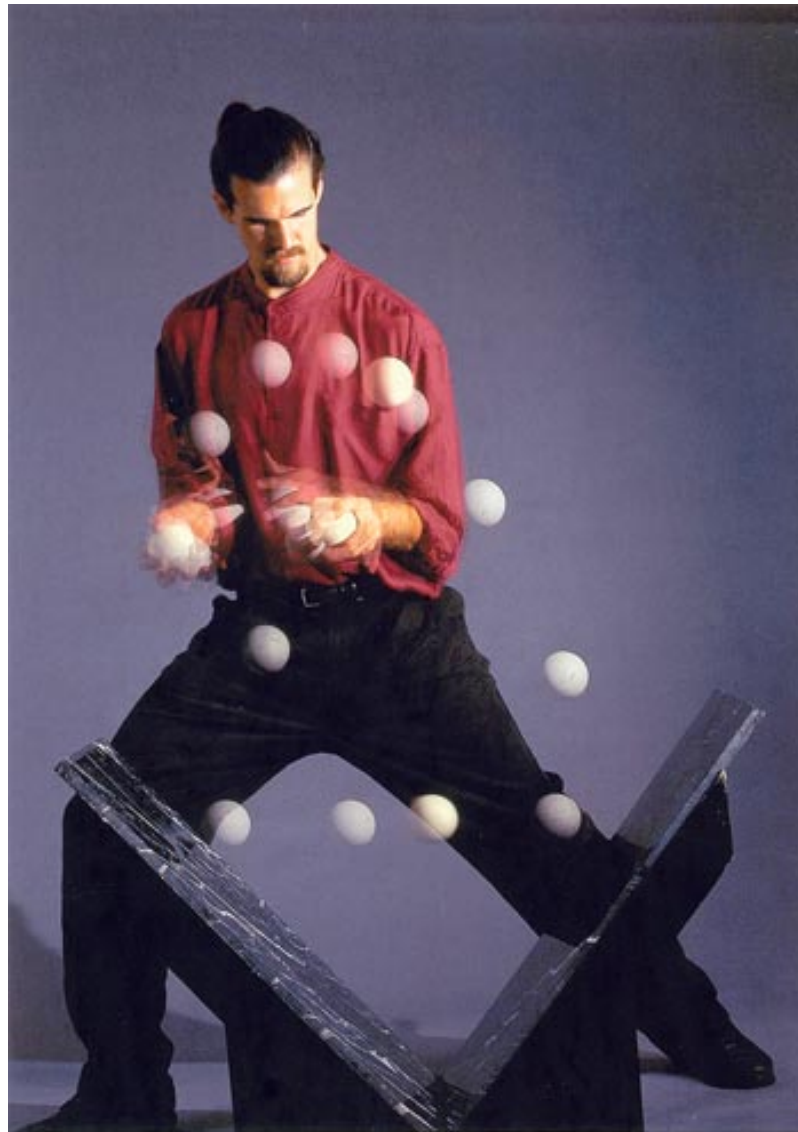
Juggling a Career

Greg Kennedy is no clown.

by Shaun Brady

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The Germantown neighborhood where I live isn't much for spectacle. Dollar store, fast food joint, dollar store, recently closed dollar store with a sign in the window announcing a soon-to-open different dollar store. You get the drift. Imagine my surprise upon finding a new sign hanging above a small storefront on Greene Street reading "Greg Kennedy: Innovative Juggler."



That's ballsy: Greg Kennedy says he uses his engineering training more now than when he was an engineer.

Mere blocks from all the greasy fried chicken and made-in-Korea plastic doodads, the circus had not only come to town, it had moved in and set up shop.

But Kennedy isn't exactly a circus performer, and bristles at the assumption that "juggler" equals "kids' birthday parties or clowns." He skips the tents and performs on cruise ships and in theaters, trading the colorful outfits and greasepaint for black duds and goatee and shunning the pipe organ in favor of hard rock.

"I started out as a technical juggler, and then I branched off to less-explored areas when I'd gotten a little bit bored of the standard stuff," says Kennedy. "In my comedy show, I juggle a bowling ball, a hatchet and a chainsaw. A lot of people think that's really hard. But I can juggle three of anything I can throw and catch. Juggling high numbers is much more difficult from a purely technical point of view. I still include clubs and balls in my show, but it's more fun for me to explore things that no one else has done before."

Kennedy justifies the "innovative" tag by pointing out that many of his pieces are wholly self-created, drawn from his former life as an engineer. His act is equal parts Isaac Newton and Cirque du Soleil. A full show consists of multiple three- to four-minute pieces and is hardly limited to keeping multiple objects in the air. In fact, some of Kennedy's pieces involve multiple balls rolling over a surface, pitting his skills against not only the juggler's traditional archnemesis, gravity, but against the trajectories and momentum of the balls themselves.

One such piece features balls rolled along the inside of a circular track, which Kennedy must catch at the moment their centripetal force expires and they come tumbling

earthward. In another, he rolls up to eight balls in different patterns on the inner surface of a large bowl.

Watching traditional juggling is akin to watching a NASCAR race: There are moments of aesthetic interest but mostly time is spent waiting for a crash. But Kennedy's pieces have a kinetic beauty, a thrill in the precarious balance of objects in motion. The juggler himself is almost relegated to the background, like a puppeteer. Kennedy's main show is nonverbal, and many pieces leave him in the shadows while he works with Day-Glo balls, lights or torches.

Kennedy claims to use his engineering training more now than when he worked in the field. "Like any good engineer, most of the stuff I do, I use my mathematical concepts to put together, but a lot of it's done by feel. So [math is] a good place to start, but then you just have to do the work."

The bowl piece won Kennedy the gold medal at the 1996 International Jugglers Association championship, the event that prompted his move from amateur to professional. At the time, his money-making efforts were limited to setting out the hat on South Street and occasional weekend gigs in Atlantic City. Immediately upon winning the championship, he was offered a contract in Japan that paid more than his day job. He took a six-month leave of absence that has now lasted more than 10 years.

He still refers to the bowl as his "signature piece, the one I'm known for in the community." Yes, there is a juggling community, with not one but two international organizations (the IJA and the upstart World Juggling Federation—hate to see a schism like that, damn near killed the Catholic church), magazines (Kennedy has appeared on the cover of *Juggler's World*)

and competitions.

While Kennedy didn't move into his space until December, he isn't new to the neighborhood; he lives in a house around the corner where his wife, Shana, teaches aerial and trapeze classes. Kennedy knocked out a floor to provide a 17-foot practice space where his wife could climb and he could juggle, but the scope of his act has since outgrown that room.

The basement is littered with Kennedy's failures, wood and glass structures that looked good on paper but didn't survive the performance test. He flips through a three-ring binder full of schematics for routines in development, with lots of arrows and path-lines and figures in the margins. Kennedy describes himself as having "an obsessive-compulsive personality." That appears to be an understatement.

For his latest piece, Kennedy stands in the middle of a large, transparent cone, rolling multiple balls in weaving trajectories along the inner surface. He needs to be hyperaware of his entire surroundings, at "the highest end of clarity," reaching out and adjusting the paths in all three dimensions. The cone is miked and emits rhythmic pounding sounds similar to a Japanese taiko drum, which has led to a little friction with the yoga class next door.

The inspiration to take things apart, see how they work, and build fun from them has been with Kennedy from an early age, and he now takes inspiration from his own children, a 3-year-old son and an 18-month-old daughter. "I'd drive my parents crazy. I'd take the whole stereo apart and put it back together, sometimes not so well. But it was a lot of fun. That's what kids are supposed to do, play and learn. I continued that into my career."

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