

Iconic STATUARY

THE WRITER AND ART DIRECTOR STEVEN HELLER, A FREQUENT COMMENTATOR ON ILLUSTRATION, CASTS AN INFORMED EYE OVER THE GLOBAL PHENOMENON OF TOYS MADE BY ARTISTS. UNDER HELLER'S SCRUTINY, THE TREND IS REVEALED TO BE NOT AS 'NEW' AS IT MIGHT APPEAR. THE DADAISTS – AS IS SO OFTEN THE CASE – GOT THERE FIRST.

Upon entering this past summer's landmark Dada exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I was struck dumb by a large glass case containing a dozen or so handmade dolls that resembled the weirdo-comic figurines sold at Kidrobot, the downtown New York and LA emporia of contemporary artists' vinyl and plastic toys. However, this rare collection of ogres, trolls, and robots were created over eighty years ago by artists such as Hannah Höch and partnership Sophie Taeuber and Raoul Hausmann, and designed to be included in Berlin Dada cabaret performances. And, like those American Southwest native Hopi Kachina dolls, to the untutored eye they looked like they might have been conceived yesterday.

The prodigious and financially lucrative trend in eccentric, alternative toy objects, which started over a decade ago in Japan and washed over the United States and Europe, seemed so genuinely novel (in a post-punk-new-wave-techno sort of way), that in some circles these toys have come to define a 21st Century pop-cultural zeitgeist. They have certainly become an expressive medium for many artists and illustrators bereft of traditional editorial and advertising outlets, and seem to be an offshoot of new wave animation and graphic novels.

But to realise that Dadaists – those old timers – had stolen this good idea back in 1919 (even before vinyl had been invented) underscores the notion that so much art of the late-20th and early-21st centuries is little more than retro reprise.

If this sounds harshly contemptuous of

contemporary endeavor, read on.

The Dadaists, as well as kindred Futurists (Fortunato Depero), Constructivists (El Lissitzky, Ladislav Sutnar), and Surrealists (Salvador Dalí), designed uniquely eccentric and often bizarrely futuristic playthings for limited consumption. Pushing the limits of art and design was their collective mission and since toys were not part of the artistic cannon, the medium provided an outlet for rebelliousness. The current wave of artist toys are made by poster artists, graphic designers and comic book makers such as Frank Kozik, Geoff McFetridge, Gary Baseman and Tim Biskup, among others. Their work often appears in alternative 'weirdo'-mags like Juxtapoz, and is an energized return to what might best be described as a 'consuming passion'. Unlike their modernist forebears, the new toy-crazed producers are less concerned with making one-offs than multiples – collectibles designed to feed their creative urges, and simultaneously, satisfy the desires of their acquisitive audience. Whereas the Modernists agitatedly broke artistic conventions, the new generation feverishly rejects the typical mass-market toy models that they grew up with, yet have injected new concepts, materials and, most importantly, new mass production techniques into this otherwise venerable practice.

The new toy designers are filling a vacuum among sophisticated toy-freaks who are no longer interested in mundane licensed comic and film character action figurines (even those done as movie tie-ins designed by film maker Tim Burton). They are serving the aesthetic needs of people like me who never bought action

figures, but enjoy the design and tactility of these enticingly odd products. Although the main difference between the new art toys and old licensed versions – Power Rangers, Transformers, GI Joe – is their psychotic post-Pokemon look, they nonetheless have similar marketing goals; both are produced to be sold in quantity, both want to attract followings. Yet marketing aside, these new art toys have something else going for them: attitude. The new plastic, soft and vinyl toys are more like iconic statuary. They are not actually meant to be played with, but rather displayed (or kept in their smartly designed packages). Object-ness is the key.

So how have artist toys evolved from the one-offs of the Modernists to the multiple characters of the post-Modernists? How do they keep from falling into the traps of mainstream toy land? And why is there a common aesthetic that pervades the field and is imbued in even the most outré of these toys? In the following interviews with the new Gippetos – two pioneers from the early 'new' toy movement, the founder of one of the leading toy emporia, and three contemporary toymakers – we are given an insight into their creative strategies.

Further reading:
www.vinylpulse.com
www.myplasticheart.com
www.arttoyz.com

All Dada images courtesy of National Gallery of Art in Washington (www.nga.gov)



ALTHOUGH THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NEW ART TOYS AND THE OLD LICENSED VERSIONS – POWER RANGERS, TRANSFORMERS, GI JOE – IS THEIR PSYCHOTIC POST-POKEMON LOOK, THEY NONETHELESS HAVE SIMILAR MARKETING GOALS; BOTH ARE PRODUCED TO BE SOLD IN QUANTITY, BOTH WANT TO ATTRACT FOLLOWINGS.



1 (page 73)

MUNNY
Paul Budnitz and Tristan Eaton, 2005
7" tall vinyl figure in black. Available in 3 colors: white, black and glow. Kidrobot's first do-it-yourself-toy, each set includes four secret mystery accessories, a hello-my-name-is card, and one of

several surprise MUNNY coloring books. Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

2

Dada Dolls (The Spirit of Our Age)
Hannah Höch, 1916
Fabric, yarn, thread, board, and beads. Berlinische Galerie – Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur. © 2005 Hannah Höch/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

3

Mechanical Head (The Spirit of Our Age)
Raoul Hausmann, c. 1920
Hairdresser's wig-making dummy, crocodile wallet, ruler, pocket watch mechanism and case, bronze segment of old camera, typewriter cylinder, segment of measuring tape, collapsible cup, the number

'22', nails and bolt. Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, 1974. CNAC/MNAM/ Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. © 2005 Raoul Hausmann/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

5

King Deramo
Sophie Taeuber, 1918
Turned and painted wood, bell, brass ornament, brocade and metal joints. Kunstgewerbesammlung im Museum Bellerive, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich
Photo by Marlen Perez.

6

The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild
George Grosz and John Heartfield, 1988.
Reconstruction of 1920 original. Electro-Mechanical Tatlin Sculpture. Tailor's dummy, revolver, doorbell, knife, fork, letter 'C' and number '27' signs, plaster dentures, embroidered

insignia of the Black Eagle Order on horse blanket, Osram light bulb, Iron Cross, stand and other objects. Berlinische Galerie – Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur. Art © Estate of George Grosz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

© 2005 John Heartfield/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

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Muzribi (Bean Kachina)
Represents a prayer for increased beans. Appears in Powamu Bear Dance and Mixed Dances. Courtesy Museum of Anthropology University of Michigan. C. 1890-1940 (exact dates not available).

8

Hemis (Ripped Corn Kachina)
Appears in the Niman or Going Home ceremony. Indicates that the corn crop is assured. Courtesy Museum of Anthropology University of Michigan. C. 1890-1940 (exact dates not available).

9

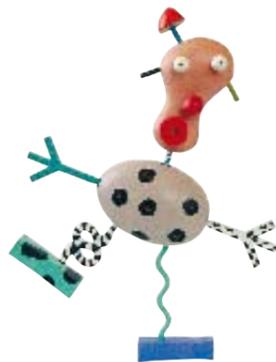
Ang-Akchira (Long Hair Kachina)
The bringer of gentle rains and flowers. Appears in Niman Home Dance. Courtesy Museum of Anthropology University of Michigan. C. 1890-1940 (exact dates not available).

10 - 12

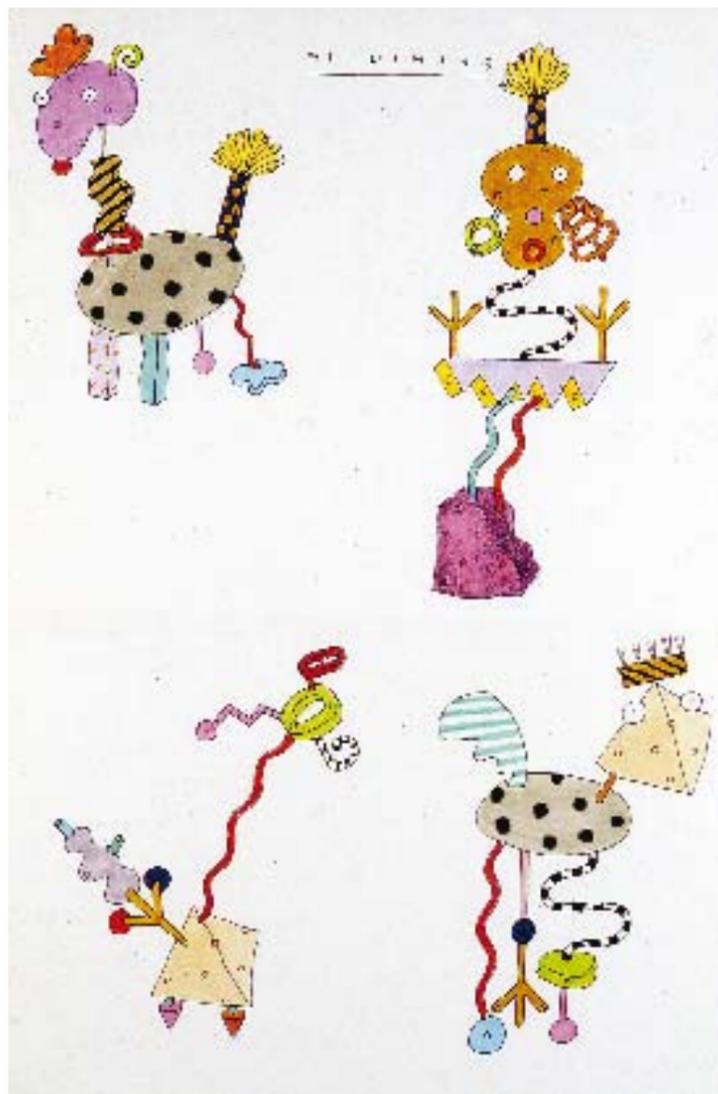
Marionette per "Balli Plastici"
Fortunato Depero, 1918 (reconstructed in 1981)
Courtesy Mart Museo di arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Roverto, Italy (www.mart.trento.it)

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Rinoceronti (Rhinos)
Fortunato Depero, 1923
Courtesy Mart.



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14 & 17
Zolo 4
Byron Glaser and Sandra Higashi, 2000
Photo by Don Chiappinelli
© Zolo Inc.

15
Wild Thing
Development drawing by Byron Glaser and Sandra Higashi, 1986
Photo by Don Chiappinelli
© Zolo Inc.

16
Zolo 3
Byron Glaser and Sandra Higashi, 1998
Photo by Don Chiappinelli
© Zolo Inc.

18
Zolo 1
Byron Glaser and Sandra Higashi, 1986
Photo by Don Chiappinelli
© Zolo Inc.

19
Zolo Rocker
Byron Glaser and Sandra Higashi, 2001
Photo by Don Chiappinelli
© Zolo Inc.

20
Ozlo and Scoot from the Zippy Zolo Series
Byron Glaser and Sandra Higashi, 2001
Photo by Don Chiappinelli
© Zolo Inc.

21
Zolotopia
Byron Glaser and Sandra Higashi, 2006
Photo by Don Chiappinelli
© Zolo Inc.



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BYRON GLASER, WITH SANDRA HIGASHI, INVENTED ZOLO, THE POST-MODERN MR. POTATO HEAD, AND THE FIRST OF THE NEW WAVE OF ARTIST/DESIGNER TOYS.

Steven Heller: What inspired you and Sandra Higashi to create Zolo?

Byron Glaser: We were working on the interior graphics for the F.A.O. Schwarz flagship store on 5th Avenue in New York City and had started to look at the toys that were being offered; and we both thought that there were some really big holes in the market.

Did you love toys as child and adult?

They have always played a part in our lives. Sandra was very good to her toys and still has some of them. I was much harder on mine.

How did Zolo reflect this passion?

With Zolo we wanted to make a toy that inspired creativity and engaged whoever was playing with it. We wanted a toy that we would like to have. That was an element that was often missing for us in a lot of the toys that we were seeing around us. We wanted it to be loads of fun but to also inspire a message, that all kinds of shapes, colours and patterns can work together and that the results can be extraordinary. At first Zolo was only hand-carved out of wood. We thought as we were creating it that it should also reflect nature, which we are both in awe of. But it was not indestructible, as are so many toys made today, so it was another good lesson for everyone playing with it to learn.

Was the model you used Mr. Potato Head?

Of course we both had the whole family of potato heads, but Mr. Potato Head is always a Mr., always a potato, always a head. I really don't think we had him in mind when we were creating Zolo. It was more about freeform and organic structure. Because many of the sculptures that you could make had animal-like characteristics, eyes became a part of it, but they were secondary elements. No offence to the Potato family, but that was the kind of one note play pattern that we wanted to avoid.

Was there a style you were after? It looks very postmodern (like Memphis)?

I think that is what appealed to the MoMA, New York, where Zolo was first sold exclusively through its trade sales division. Actually, it rejects a rigid genre distinction. No one knew where Zolo should belong on the shelf. Was it for boys or girls? Should it go in 'construction' or

fit better in 'arts and crafts'? A few years ago, the toy industry recognized Zolo as creating a new category – we called it 'playsculpture.' Before, Zolo toys were positioned for either boys or girls. Now there are lots of toys that are for both. One of our favourite response cards came from a woman in her nineties who suffered from arthritis, she played with it everyday because it made her feel creative and was good for her hands. Like Postmodernism, Zolo rejects the boundaries between high and low forms of art. It is also about playfulness. I think there was a lot going on in the culture at that time that is reflected in Zolo. Maybe it's the patterns that feel like Memphis, but people have said it reminds them of Miro too. Part of the appeal of Zolo is that it often reminds people of something. I think it more closely resembles the inside of Sandra's wardrobe.

Was Zolo originally meant for commercial application?

We weren't really thinking about that. We were thinking it was fun and we wanted it, so we thought other people would want it too. Of course children would like it. We had no idea how the toy industry was structured at that time. The only way we were going to see it [sold] at F.A.O. Schwarz, was if we were going to make it ourselves. While we were [on sale] at the MoMA we made up a third of their trade sales. We were not really prepared to handle those kinds of numbers, so we had to learn quickly. Not that it has ever become easy for us.

Where is the product these days?

We have recently started to sell Zolo 5, the fifth-generation of the handmade wooden sets. Of course they all work together so people who have all five sets can really go to town. This set has metal studs, feathers, silver leaf and fuzzy balls! We are also in production of a new plastic set that has mixed materials as well, it's more affordable and is a game. We also have a line of anatomically incorrect Bonz, with movable joints that you can build with, that we license to Curious Pictures in New York.

Are you involved in the new generation of vinyl toys?
We love the category and the medium. We always try to keep Zolo interactive and not necessarily iconic, which a lot of the vinyl tends to be. Maybe someday that will feel appropriate for Zolo, I would love for that to happen.

www.zolo.com



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PAUL BUDNITZ IS AN ENTREPRENEUR. HE IS THE FOUNDER OF KIDROBOT, CREATIVE DIRECTOR AND CREATOR OF MUNNY, AS FEATURED ON THE VAROOM COVER, A TABULA RASA TOY WHICH IS CONTRIBUTED TO BY VARIOUS ARTISTS AND DESIGNERS.

Steve Heller: What is the most important trait in selecting an artist to create a toy?

Paul Budnitz: The design itself. Kidrobot is not about working with well-known or famous artists (although we do). We are about the very best design. So if someone sends us an amazing design we'll make it. Personally, I look for designs that are flat, feel new and are unique. I have a sign over my office that says 'nostalgia is death' and this is basically our creative philosophy. We choose to look forward, not backwards.

How much of Kidrobot's toy design is art versus commerce? Do the two co-exist easily?

It is all art and it is all commerce. As far as I'm concerned there is no conflict whatsoever, and this is not a distinction that I tend to make. Shakespeare wrote his plays for money; if he didn't perform, he didn't eat. Any fine artist who tells you he doesn't care about money is probably lying to you. There is a famous story about Picasso and Brecht: Brecht wanted to make a lot of money so he could pass it down to his children, so he collected Picasso. Picasso wanted a lot of money so he could pass it down to his children, and he also collected Picasso.

As more and more artists' toys hit the market what makes your biggest 'invention' MUNNY so unique?

MUNNY is just really great design. The body shape, the accessories, and I think the spirit of this toy is what makes it special. I don't think this is something that can be copied or imitated.

Now that these toys, and Kidrobot in particular, have found a hungry market, what's to stop them from becoming the next Mattel?

You mean what stops Kidrobot from becoming a giant conglomerate that makes essentially lifeless, joyless toys that crush children's creative spirit? I stop that from happening because I can't imagine why I'd be interested in doing it. Our customers and fans also stop us from doing it, because if we did they'd abandon us, and I'd be out there encouraging them.

www.kidrobot.com

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Gorilloz - Basic Set
Jamie Hewlett and Damon Albarn, 2006
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

23
Smorkin Mongers Series 1
Frank Kozik, 2006
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

24
Kidrobot 10 - The Good, The Bad and The Ugly
Huck Gee, 2006
Limited edition of 800
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

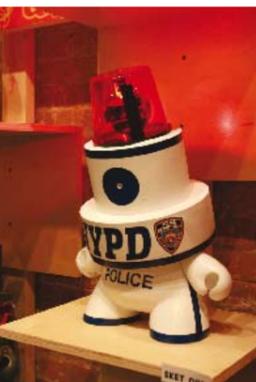
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Photos taken from The Paint Ball: A Larger-Than-Life Custom Toy Show to benefit Save The Children Federation that was held at Kidrobot Pirate Store in New York, 2006
© Kidrobot, Inc.

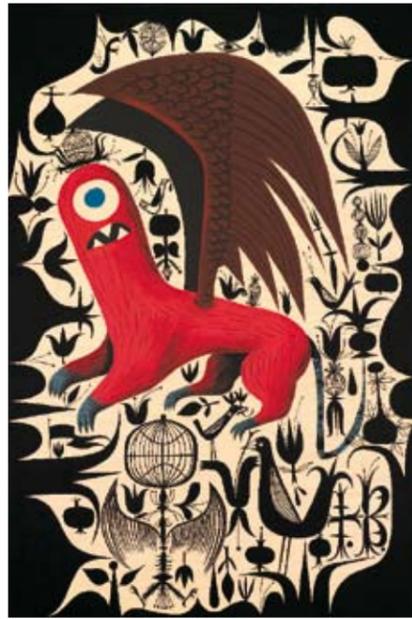
26
MUNNY
Paul Budnitz and Tristan Eaton, 2005
7" tall vinyl figures in black and white. Kidrobot's first do-it-yourself-toy, each set

includes 4 secret mystery accessories, a hello-my-name-is card, and one of several surprise MUNNY coloring books.
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

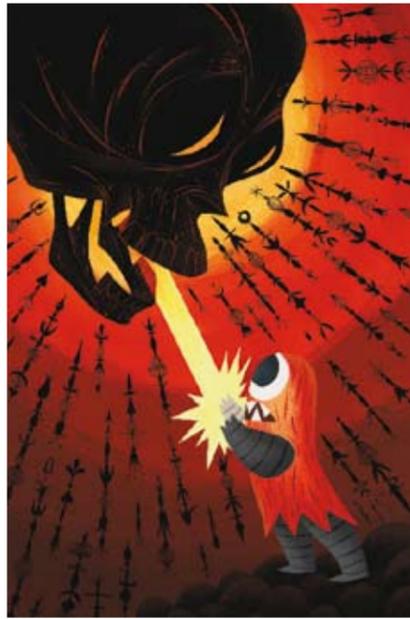
27
MUNNY coloring books included in each MUNNY set.

28
Metal D 8-Inch Dunny
Mad Barbarians, 2006
Limited edition of 1000
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

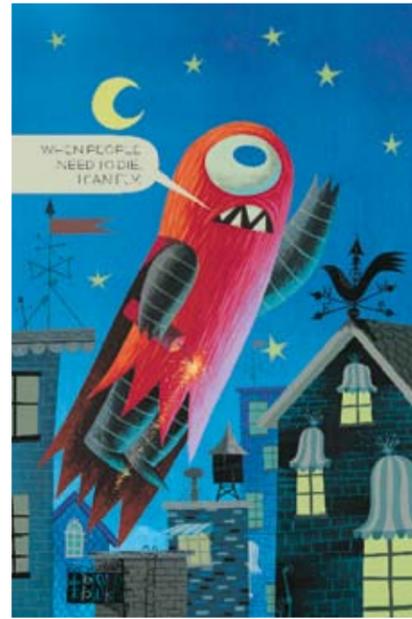




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29 **Helper-Dragon**
Tim Biskup, 2005
Gel vinyl acrylic on wooden panel.

30 **Helper: Power #3**
Tim Biskup, 2004
Acrylic on wooden panel.

31 **Helper: Power #1**
Tim Biskup, 2005
Acrylic on wooden panel.

32 **Alphabeast: Calli**
Tim Biskup, 2004
9" tall soft vinyl figure.
Barcelona exclusive edition of 200. Produced by Flopdoodle Figure Company.

33 **Alphabeast: Calli**
Tim Biskup, 2006
9" tall soft vinyl figure.
Silver and white edition
Produced by Flopdoodle Figure Company.

34 **Controller Clump**
Tim Biskup, 2005
Acrylic on wooden panel.

TIM BISKUP IS A CARTOONIST, LETTERING ARTIST, SCULPTOR AND CREATOR OF GAMA-GO CLOTHING AND GIFT ITEMS. HE IS FOUNDER OF THE BISPOP GALLERY, IN OLD TOWN PASADENA, CALIFORNIA, WHERE HE EXHIBITS AND SELLS ORIGINAL PAINTINGS, HAND-PAINTED OBJECTS, CLOTHING, TOYS, BOOKS, CARDS AND EXCLUSIVE ITEMS.

Steven Heller: Why did you start doing toys?
Tim Biskup: I've been into toys my whole life. All of my work is inspired by toys. About eight years ago I started to collect Japanese monster toys. The colours, shapes and general feeling of them made a huge impact on me, and really changed my art. I dreamed about making my own, but it never seemed possible. The learning curve, the set-up expense, marketing – all of that just seemed too much to deal with. Then I was approached by Sony Creative to design a set of PVC figures. I was totally blown away that I was actually going to get something made. After that it was a snowball effect. I got offers from five or six other companies that wanted to make my toys before the Sony toys ever got made. I just went nuts.

Who were your other influences?
As a kid I loved building toys, like Lego, Lincoln Logs and Tinker Toys. I'm interested in making toys that bridge the gap between the collectable objects that sit on your desk, and toys that inspire people to pick them up and play with them. Kaiju toys were really the big thing for me around the time that I started making my own, but there are tons of earlier influences that I've started to tap into.

Did you really think you'd find a market?
By the time I started making toys there was already enough of a market that I knew I could sell through some small editions. I am always a little freaked out when I do something that doesn't fit into the market that I know. I'm working on some projects that are a big step away from the format and price range that most toy collectors are used to. I'm a little nervous about it.

Could you imagine that the market would be as large as it has become with Kidrobot and other alternative toy stores?

Not at all. I'm stunned that it has gone as crazy as it has.

What is the most significant theme of your toys?
It's tough to find a single theme because I feel like I have two distinctly different themes that exist in various combinations in my toys. The first is modular design. I want the toys to be inviting and interactive. The other theme is an attempt to find balance. I try to combine ugliness and beauty, cuteness and malevolence, happiness and sadness.

Are they for kids or adults or what?
Ideally they're for both kids and adults. Most of the art that I like – from Loony Tunes to Jean Tinguely – appeals to both groups. There is a big divide in most people's minds about enjoying something in a very playful, childlike way, and enjoying it in an observant, intellectual way. I do whatever I can to remind myself of what I liked as a kid and try to incorporate that into my work. There is something very satisfying about diving into one of those big pools of plastic balls. They should have those for adults... Hey, I should make one of those for adults!

Have you limited yourself to a certain niche of characters or are you branching out?
I hope I never limit myself like that. I try really hard to keep myself fresh and not rely on a character to carry an idea. I do use a few characters over and over, but only when I feel that it works in the context of the piece. I also try to make a point of letting characters change over time and from one piece to another. I don't want to be too much of a storyteller. I'm always branching out. There are so many characters in my art that I feel like I can keep going forever. The little freaky bug in the corner of some painting could easily be a little figure next week.

Who is your favorite toy maker?
A Japanese company called M-Ichigo (or M-1).

www.timbiskup.com

35 **Helper**
Tim Biskup, 2004
8" tall soft vinyl finger puppet
Produced by Critterbox.

36 **Stack Pack**
Tim Biskup, 2003
PVC capsule toy set
Produced by Sony Creative.



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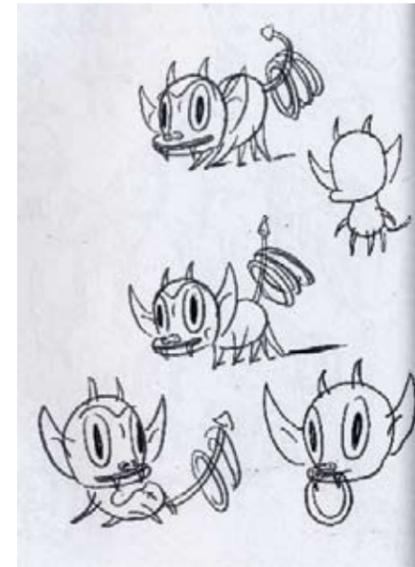
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GARY BASEMAN IS AN ARTIST, TV AND MOVIE PRODUCER, TOY DESIGNER AND PROLIFIC CARTOONIST. HE IS THE CREATOR OF TEACHER'S PET, THE CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED ANIMATED TELEVISION SERIES AND FEATURE-LENGTH ANIMATED FILM.

Steven Heller: Why did you start designing toys?
Gary Baseman: I have always had an interest since I [began collecting] vintage toys, along with anything that I felt were little works of art. I truly see these toys as limited edition sculptures for the masses.

You show in retail stores and galleries, isn't there a conflict?

My goal really is to blur the lines between fine art and toy culture. I am honoured that the Laguna Art Museum [in California] is exhibiting the toys and paintings together in a two-man show, Perversion: The Art of Gary Baseman and Tim Biskup, (that ran throughout the summer of 2006). I love how someone can enjoy the art in the museum, then step over to the store and buy their own little work of art.

How did you actually come to make toys, was it a fluke?

I was travelling in Japan for a collaborative three-man show with Mark Ryden and Tim Biskup. In Tokyo, I was invited by Sony Creative to produce a set of five vinyl figures which turned into my original Dunce series. I originally used a dunce icon in my paintings as metaphor of man being a fool for love. I turned the series into Obedient School Dropouts, with characters like Re-Tardy, whose offence is that he is always late.

Where there any previous influences, say David Kirk or some of the earlier wood toy makers?

I loved David Kirk's original wood toys. They are beautiful and I own a few. But a true work of art that inspired me in vinyl was KAWS' original black companion. It is a skull head on a Mickey Mouse body that I first saw in SoHo in the New Museum window. I also love the feel of composition. How they look and how they feel. One of my goals is to find a way to recreate the process for my own sculptures. I have many old mannequin heads and hands, along with old wood-jointed toys such as Felix the Cat and Pete the Pup.

You must have been seeped in Japanese aesthetics, right?

Yes, the Japanese sensibility plays a role too, especially the Kaiju toys produced in the 50s and 60s. I am also inspired by Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, who know how to blur the lines between fine art and toy culture very well.

How did you imagine selling your toys in the beginning?

I did not imagine anything. Then again, I imagine everything. I have always wanted to take over the universe by creating special things.

Are they for kids or adults or yourself?

For myself! I don't delineate who they are for. I guess you would say adults. My art is for adults. But kids can take a simpler theme away with them because my work mixes popular culture and surrealism and looks like cartoons. The Fire Water Bunnies are the only exception, because they were created for children. They were originally created for a Taiwanese folklore water festival. Dumb Luck, the rabbit was based on a gallery show at the Mendenhall Gallery in Los Angeles in 1999. Toby, my plush [soft] toy was created for my For the Love of Toby gallery show (at Billy Shire Fine Arts) that included 80 works of art. Toby was created to be your best friend, your mirror, your shadow, somebody who knows all your dirty little secrets, but loves you unconditionally. I wanted him 'plush' so you would take him to bed.

Have you limited yourself to a certain niche of characters?

Limit? What does that mean? The goal is always to fuck around and take risks and grow. Try new material. New characters. Anything to try to discover little human truths. Anything to keep my mind off of my miserable life.

Who is your favourite toy maker?

My favourite has been working with Conor Libby at Critterbox because of his attention to detail. But I will be working with a lot of other cool toy makers, too. Medicom has produced amazing work. I have done Hump QEE with Raymond at Toy2R, which I love – the new Gold Egg is amazing.

www.garybaseman.com



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M.O.D. Dunny in red
Gary Baseman
Edition of 3000
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

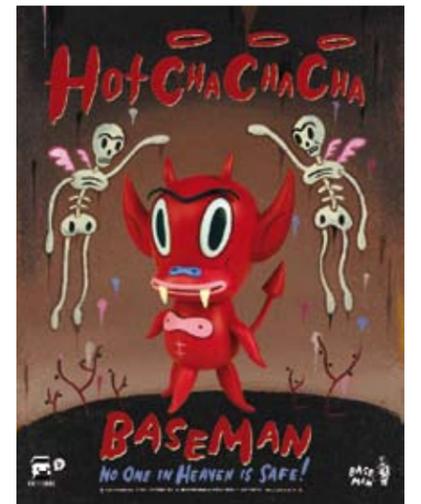
38
L.A. Series Dunny
Gary Baseman
Gold edition
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.



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39
L.A. Series Dunny
Gary Baseman
Silver edition
Produced by Kidrobot, Inc.

40
Dumb Luck – Original Pink
Gary Baseman
Edition of 500
Produced by Critterbox.



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41
Gefilte and Pupik for the Neo-Kaiju project
Gary Baseman
Originally produced for Strange Co. and Super 7.

42
Dunces
Gary Baseman
Originally produced for Sony Creative, Japan



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45
Hotchachacha
Gary Baseman
Painting created for the Garden of Uearthly Delights exhibition at Jonathan Levine Gallery, New York.
Acrylic on canvas.

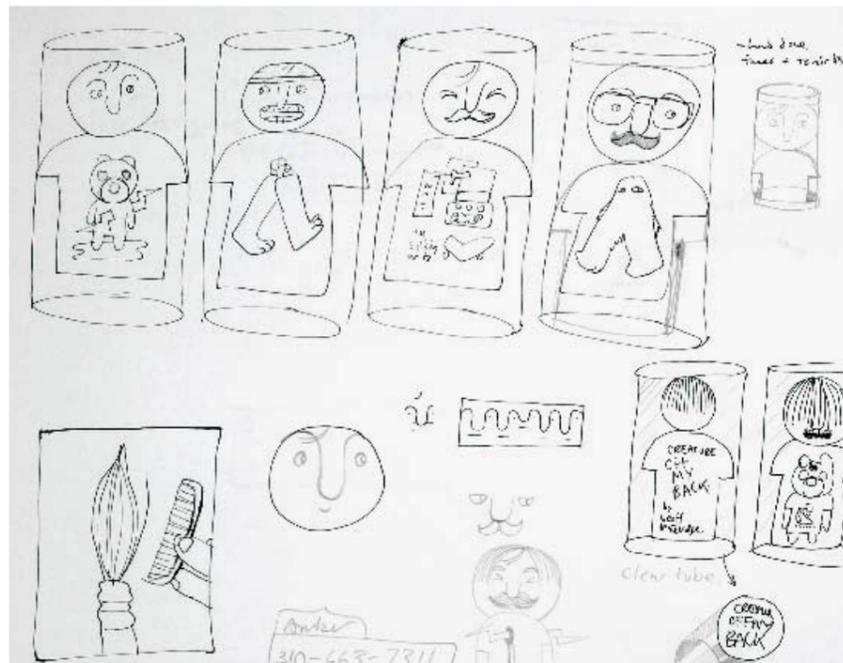
46
Hotchachacha
Gary Baseman
Edition of 500
produced by Critterbox.

47
Hotchachacha Box
Gary Baseman
produced by Critterbox.

48
Hotchachacha Ad
Gary Baseman



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GEOFF MCFETRIDGE IS A GRAPHIC DESIGNER, ANIMATOR, FILMMAKER AND "ALL-AROUND VISUAL AUTEUR." MCFETRIDGE CREATED THE OPENING TITLE SEQUENCES FOR THE MOVIES ADAPTATION AND THE VIRGIN SUICIDES. HE IS FOUNDER OF CHAMPION GRAPHICS.

Steve Heller: What prompted you to make artist toys?
Geoff McFetridge: I resisted for a while, since I was not very involved in the toy world. I was given toys over time but never collected them. It is such an interesting culture though. I decided that as an outsider, maybe I could do something interesting and different.

Do you have an audience in mind, or are they extensions of your expressive needs?
Most of the design is pretty autobiographical. I try to have the designs be part of visual discussion, so that they speak on a level that the viewer understands, a little conversation. So often things are about design, and in the case of Creature Off My Back, T-shirts and toys.

How often do you develop a new toy or series of toys?
Not often.

Are they for children or all of us?
My daughter liked it for about a day. They are also a choking hazard. I would have liked them when I was a kid, I think.

In your universe, fundamentally, what makes something a toy?
Smallish, pointless and dimensional.

www.championdontstop.com

49 Creature Off My Back – Chuck
Geoff McFetridge, 2005
Little man figurine: 10cm tall
Chuck figurine inside: 5.7cm tall. Produced by King of Mountain, Japan

50 Development drawing
Geoff McFetridge

51 Creature Off My Back – Bear, Coin and Solitary
Geoff McFetridge, 2005
Little man figurines: 10cm tall.
Bear: 6cm tall. Coin: 6.3cm tall. Solitary: 7.2cm tall
Produced by King of Mountain, Japan

52 – 53 Creature Off My Back – Coin and Solitary
Geoff McFetridge, 2005
Little man figurines: 10cm tall.
Coin: 6.3cm tall. Produced by King of Mountain, Japan



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DAVID KIRK MAKES TOYS AND ART FOR CHILDREN. HE IS THE CREATOR OF THE SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN'S BOOK SERIES MISS SPIDER'S TEA PARTY. IN THE LATE-1980S HE SOLD HIS HANDMADE WOODEN TOYS OUT OF A STOREFRONT IN NEW YORK'S EAST VILLAGE.

Steven Heller: In the 80s you made and sold exquisite wooden toys – faces as banks, with mouths that opened up to accept the money, and stacking toys, including a skeleton made of rings. How do you feel about the new toymakers' vinyl and plastic work?

David Kirk: The little plastic figures seem a slightly different area from what I used to do. For one thing, they appear to be part of a movement. There are lots of folks doing similar little beasties made just for today's collector. It's a little bit like those gilt edge plates with pictures of dead movie stars that grandma hangs next to the cupboard with her best china, only this stuff is for guys in their teens and twenties.

They are a little too grotesque to sit next to the china. How do you feel about the art brut or grotesque aesthetic?
I did my share of deliberately ugly toys, but I usually like to concentrate more on what I think is beautiful, or just fun. The current grotesque stuff is probably beautiful and fun for the artists who make it, and the collectors who buy it, so I'm all for it.

54 Box top drawing
David Kirk, 1987.

55 Octopus Pull Toy
Handmade by David Kirk, 1988
Strikes chimes with head spinning in the opposite direction. ©Callaway & Kirk Company LLC.

Your toys were so exquisitely crafted. Do you think your stuff is passé?

For one thing, wouldn't that sort of toy making have to have been big at some point in order for it to become passé? Maybe I don't get out enough, but I've never seen anybody at any point making toys with a combination of art and mechanics similar to my method. I don't think I was part of a time, or even ahead of my time. I was just a fluke with an odd skill set.

Why did you start making toys?
Because of my love of the toy robots I collected since I was two. They broke a lot, and I had to take them apart to repair them, so I got to understand all sorts of simple mechanical systems. In high school, when I got seriously interested in art, I was fascinated by creepy things, like pain, squalor and death, as well as beautiful things like flowers and pretty girls. I got to be good at painting all those subjects, so when I made my toys, it was natural for me to make both cute animals and ugly monsters, both sexy dancing girls and spooky waltzing skeletons.

Who did you design toys for?
They weren't designed for adults or kids – they were designed for me. ♦♦

www.rif.org/art/illustrators/kirk.msp

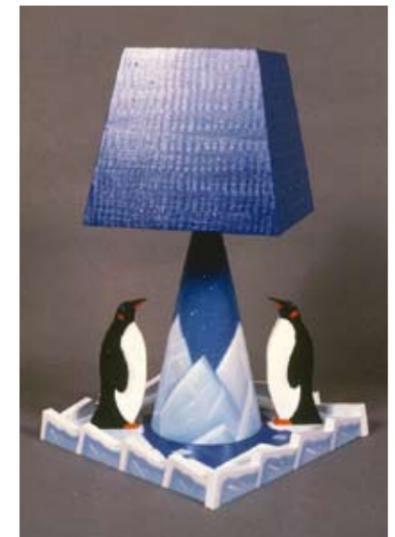
56 Penguin Lamp
Handmade by David Kirk, 1984.
©Callaway & Kirk Company LLC.

57 Battling Clowns in a Tank
Handmade by David Kirk, 1983
©Callaway & Kirk Company LLC.

58 Hopping Bug Pull Toy
Handmade by David Kirk, 1988
©Callaway & Kirk Company LLC.



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