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Posted on Sun, Nov. 4, 2007

Oh, you brute-iful dolls

Artists are tinkering with toys, creating designer breeds of ugly-cute collectibles. Some of the playthings look more like slaythings.

By Alan Jaffe For The Inquirer

Lurking in the corners of a Pine Street toy-shop window, in the shadow of Elmo, Raggedy Ann and Dr. Seuss characters, is a new species of playthings. They are fanged, horned, winged or one-eyed monsters, with monikers like Jeero, Clinko and Wedgehead.

Their creators call them Uglydolls, and they're part of a larger movement of scary-cute collectibles called designer toys. Some people call them art.

The toys come in plastic, vinyl or plush - the soft medium used for the Uglydolls - and they are the spawn of comics, graphic novels, graffiti, anime, hip-hop, pop art, folk art, fine art, and other influences of the street and studio.

The designer toy movement began 10 years ago, at comic-book conventions in Hong Kong and Japan, when participants started dismembering GI Joe and Barbie dolls and grafting on new heads and appendages, with accessories that transformed the toys into metro-denizens and hybrid life forms. They inhabited an underground network of shops and Web sites, where they were free to evolve, or devolve, into races of postnuclear, sometimes threatening, highly emotional humanoids.

There are the Skull Kuns, who resemble cereal-box mascots; the square-headed To-Fu family; the half-child, half-robot Rolitobby; the adorable but bloody Gloomy Bear; and Dumb Luck, a peg-legged bunny who carries a rabbit's foot. They are designed by artists and design houses with sci-fi names and urban tags: Bounty Hunter, Devilrobots, Da Joint, Covert and Suspect Toys.

One of the best-known creators and distributors is Kidrobot, which has stores in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Manhattan. Kidrobot is the parent of the Dunny and Munny, bunny- and bearlike shapes that can take on multiple personalities, depending on who does the painting and shaping.

That's the interactive nature of designer toys. Certain forms are produced as blank vinyl canvases, and artists or collectors are invited to provide their own faces and accoutrements, be they candy canes or sledgehammers. The results are exhibited online and in shops, or sold at new-release parties.

At a recent event at the Kidrobot shop in SoHo, a block-long line of teenagers and older collectors filed past a brawny bouncer to buy a signed, limited-edition character by street artist Sket One. The new figures tend to quickly sell out for the initial price of \$40 to \$50; the next day on eBay, they may bring \$200 to \$300.

In Philadelphia, the designer-toy vortex is Jinxed, a store at 620 S. Fourth, just off South Street. The proprietor, who identifies himself as Mike Supermodel, said the objects he sells aren't meant for kids.

"They don't do anything. They sit there," Supermodel said. "Many figures we get state very clearly on the package, 'This is not a toy. This is a collector figure. This is a work of art.'"

Supermodel chooses merchandise based on the artist: "We try to stick to designers we like. It's really a matter of aesthetics."

His preferences include Frank Kozik, a onetime record-label owner who was better known for his silkscreen posters. Kozik's toys emerged from recurring themes in his prints. The figures nearly always have a 5 o'clock shadow and a dangling cigarette, whether they take the form of animals, fruits or hand grenades.

Coming soon to Jinxed will be a limited-edition vinyl figure based on Jim Phillips' skateboard icon. The 8-by-10-inch



JOHN COSTELLO / Inquirer Staff Photographer

"Little Uglys" Wedgehead, Sailor Babo and Tray. The soft monsters, in various colors and sizes, are the work of artists David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim.

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Screaming Hand, a blue palm with a gruesome mouth, will sell for \$200.

The artists want to create small sculptures that people can set on a desk, Supermodel said, but they also want "to go way beyond anything anyone's seen from a toy before."

The violent nature of designer toys has historic roots, from Ignatz tossing bricks at Crazy Kat, to Wile E. Coyote's Acme anvils, to GI Joe and his arsenal of accessories. The new toys' blood and guts are just a little more overt.

Currently on sale on the shelves at Jinxed is a toy called Mushy Mayonnaise, a plush, yetilike figure by Langhorne artist Steff Bomb, 24. Another of her stuffed creatures is an amputee rabbit who wields a battle-ax, "because he's out for revenge."

Bomb says her toys are a form of catharsis. "I make things cute because I'm terrified of that stuff in real life. I'm terrified of horror movies," she said. "I'm not an angry person, and I'm not violent in any way. It's just a way of expressing it . . . to let things escape."

A fan of Ninja Turtles and action figures since she was a child, Bomb began making toys three years ago. She is a self-taught artist who honed her skill redrawing favorite comics. While reading about a plush-art show, "it just clicked. I went out the next week and bought myself a sewing machine, got some remnants, and just started."

Her toys have sold out at the London shop Hooky, and she recently signed a contract with ESC Toys to mass-produce Mr. Lertchman, a plush asparagus monster holding a can of spray paint. And now her work is going on exhibit; she'll be represented at "Stuffed," an all-plush show at the Munky King gallery in L.A. on Nov. 15.

Bomb is a collector, too, specifically of designer toys by Kozik, Gary Baseman, Tim Biskup, and Mike and Katie Tado. "They're people I've admired for years, so it's nice to actually own something that they've created, rather than just looking at it in magazines or online or at their shows. It's attainable."

And it has moved into the mainstream. At Happily Ever After, 1010 Pine St., manager Glenn Lash had been admiring Uglydolls for about six years while attending New York toy shows, and the local store began carrying the line a year ago.

The series of soft monsters, each of which comes in various colors and sizes, is the work of artists David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim. Lash said the two met, fell in love, and exchanged long-distance letters on which Kim would sign her name with tiny sketches of little creatures. The love sketches grew into the Uglydolls.

"Now everyone seems to know the dolls, and they need certain ones for their collections," Lash said. Among the most popular are Ice Bat, Uglyworm and Big Toe, "who is hard to get. Everybody knows Big Toe."

Customers buy them for their children (they are baby-safe and lead-free, Lash notes), for themselves, and sometimes for their dogs (they are also chewable and durable). They are made of polar fleece, which is easy to cut, sew and repair as well, Lash said.

Uglydolls inhabit a huge bin at Foster's Homeware, Fourth and Market Streets, which has carried designer vinyl in the past, including the highly desirable Space Monkey, a cleaver-bearing primate by the artist Dalek.

Jason Pennypacker, Foster's visual merchandising manager, said the store had sold Uglydolls for several years. The bin is crammed with dolls, from the smallest that sell for \$6.50 to the 2-foot versions for \$50. There's also a plush-covered Uglydoll journal adorned with an organism named Ox.

"We've always tried to have something that fits who we are - an urban store with things that are unique, that have a city vibe," Pennypacker explained. Current designer toys at Foster's include the windup Knock Man Family, which are "great for your desk to keep you from working."

Foster's is also awaiting a new set of crocheted dolls from a company called Toyolink, similar to Uglydolls. "They are sort of making toys into art, but on a lighter level," Pennypacker said.

Kidrobot Munnys, Kozik Labbits, Tokidoki Moofia figures, and other designer toys have also made it to the tables of Urban Outfitters. And their popularization has gone much further.

At the recent triennial exhibit at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, a 6-foot Kidrobot Munny was part of the show. Kidrobot's founder, Paul Budnitz, offers a line of hoodies, T-shirts and baseball caps with his signature image of the hip-hop child with a space-helmet head, in addition to other artist-designed clothing. Budnitz has also collaborated with Nike to penetrate the sneaker culture, has customized a Kidrobot Rabbit for Volkswagen, and is planning a furniture line and a cartoon series for Nick Jr.

As the designer-toy movement rises from its street-cred origins into the mainstream, Supermodel said, there is a danger of its becoming watered down. "I think it will crest and drop off to a degree," he said.

"But the companies have been very conscious of keeping it art-based and going with artists who are independent. They give them a platform to get their stuff out there in a new way.

"And the artistic merit of the toy itself hasn't gone down just because it's gotten popular. If anything, it's gotten better."

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