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 weird-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 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 untrained 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-washed over the United States and Europe, which started over a decade ago in Japan and Europe, had stolen this good idea back in 1919 (even before vinyl had been invented) and simultaneously, satisfy the desires of their acquisitive audience. Whereas the Modernists agitatedly broke artistic conventions, 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 figures (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 Geppettos – 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.vinylpulp.com
- www.myplastichero.com
- www.artoyz.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, GIJOE – IS THEIR PSYCHOTIC POST-POKEMON LOOK, THEY NONETHLESS HAVE SIMILAR MARKETING GOALS; BOTH ARE PRODUCED TO BE SOLD IN QUANTITY, BOTH WANT TO ATTRACT FOLLOWINGS.

1. 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
Hannah Höch, 1916

3. Mechanical Head
(The Spirit of Our Age)
Raoul Hausmann, c. 1920

4. Limbswish
Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, c. 1917-1918
Metal spring, curtain tassel and wire mounted on wood block. Mark Kelman, New York.

5. King Deramo
Sophie Taeuber, 1918

6. The Middle-Class Philistine
Heartfield Gone Wild

7. Muzribi (Bean Kachina)

8. Hemis (Rippened 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-Akchina
(The Long Hair Kachina)

10. 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).

11. Rinoceronti (Rhinos)
Fortunato Depero, 1923
Courtesy Mart.
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 FAO Schwartz 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 aspire 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 indelible, 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 freedom and organic structure. Because many of the sculptures that you could make had animal-like characteristics, we 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, which we both thought that there were some really big holes in the market. Actually, 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 read it to 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 applications?

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 FAO Schwartz 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

BYRON GLASER, WITH SANDRA HIGASHI, DEVELOPED DRAWINGS FOR ZOLO, THE POST-MODERN MR. POTATO HEAD, AND THE FIRST OF THE NEW WAVE OF ARTIST/DESIGNER TOYS.
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
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 colors, 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 Tedko 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 come over time and from one piece to another. I don’t try to make a point of letting characters change 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. I hope I never limit myself like that. I try really hard to keep myself fresh and not rely on a single theme or are you branching out?

Hey, I should make one of those for adults! Plastic balls. They should have those for adults...

Who is your favorite toy maker? I’m stunned that it has gone as crazy as it has. 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 Looney Tunes to Jean Tinguy—I appeal 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...

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 single 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).

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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, Persvesion. The Art of Gary Baseman and Tim Bukup, (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 traveling in Japan for a collaborative three-man show with Mark Ryden and Tim Bukup. 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 children’s toys, and from there, the whole Dunce series was born.

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

Re-Tardy, whose offence is that he is always late. Obedient School Dropouts, with characters like Toby were 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.

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. 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.

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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?
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What 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 at Toy2R, which I love – the new Gold Egg is amazing.

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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


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 world?

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 gift 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.

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, and I got to be good at making 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. They weren't designed for me.

Who make it, and the collectors who buy it, stuff is probably beautiful and fun for the artists who make it, and the collectors who buy it, so I'm all for it.

www.nif.org/art/illustrators/kirk.mspx

