

Urban Vinyl is a blend of art and toys for toy collectors and art lovers alike...

Outre is a Melbourne and Sydney based gallery that specialises in Urban Art and Vinyl designs. We managed to track down Perth Expat, **Gemma Jones** to discuss all things Urban Vinyl and its place in the Australian culture.

There seems to be an explosion of vinyl character artists? When did you notice the trend in vinyl toy designs?

It seemed to be a gradual transition from designers who specialised in cult vinyl figures to artists taking up the medium. The original leading designers who we first noticed were Hong Kong based Michael Lau and Eric So who did urban, street themes with a hip hop, skate, graffiti aesthetic. It's really been in the last 4 years or so that the explosion of artist figures has taken off. These days there are whole websites, magazines, conventions, galleries and books dedicated to the cult. *Vinyl Will Kill* is one such book, *Super 7* is my personal favourite mag. **Name three of the most internationally recognisable vinyl artist. Why?** Nathan Jurevicius (Australia), Tim Biskup (USA) and Pete Fowler (UK). Nathan combines the best of his illustrative style, his fondness for narrative and folk aesthetic [see illustration]. Nathan's series of figures spring from a larger narrative that he has constructed around Scarygirl; the mini antiheroine searching for her roots. Tim Biskup comes from the 'lowbrow' art scene centering around LA. His art comes from his love of old school Japanese vinyl figures and characters (*Godzilla*, *Booska*, *Garamon*, etc), crossed with his interest in mid-century illustrators like Jim Flora and Mary Blair and his roots in punk rock culture. Pete Fowler, with his background in underground comic culture and design, is the man behind *Monsterism*. Fowler translates his illustrative style into characters which have a magical, modern pseudo-mythical sensibility.

In the late 1990's Hong Kong, a painter and commercial designer named Michael Lau was approached by the band Anidoze to come up with a cover art for their upcoming album. Instead of making it 2D, Michael opted to create original action figures with a contemporary urban theme and photographed it instead. Soon after, *East Touch* magazine, a Hong Kong infotainment magazine gave Michael room to showcase his latest work, the "Gardeners." What came out of this was combination pen and ink drawings with pictures of the actual figures Michael was constructing. The popularity of these unique character designs blossomed and reached a new level when they became original works of art to be displayed in museums and galleries.

(The Gardeners) were 12 inch vinyl figures that represented a modern positive lifestyle. No violence or drugs, but tattooed, pierced, and wearing clothes that the urbanites were wearing at the time.

They struck a very strong chord with everyone who saw them in the local galleries where they were shown. This marriage of toy and art was beautiful in so many ways. The toy collector could appreciate it because now something they love had been raised to a new level, thereby gaining more respect; while the art lovers could dig the new medium on many levels

"My work draws from a variety of influences as diverse as Japanese supernatural myths and legends to a youth spent watching cartoons and reading comics. I always try to push the humorous sometimes dark side with the people, creatures and worlds I create and feel that both the cute and sinister appear to live in near harmony," says Pete Fowler **Who controls the marketing of the characters?** Generally the characters are unlicensed. Marketing generally flows from the production companies, but part of the cult of designer toys is their underground appeal. Marketing is lowkey and exclusive; often word of mouth. Our customers love it when they catch us out with word of a new toy that we haven't heard about yet!

What is the difference between limited editions and mass produced designs?

Jeremy from Jeremyville explains this best:

"The limited production run, status and reputation of the artist, high production values, method of distribution, number of moving parts, number of colours ... they are more like affordable sculptures by an artist, (or) fine art multiples ..."

Where does vinyl designs fit into urban art culture? How would you describe the vinylart aesthetics?

Original urban artists created figures that sprung from the aesthetics of hip-hop, street culture, graffiti and skating. It was all about tough attitude and fashion signifiers. A quite teen masculine realm! Pop culture roots then gave liberty to new artists to transform the medium beyond "kids stuff" and outside of traditional sculpture too. The flip side of pop culture. The new pop art. **How does drawing and animation influence vinyl character design?** Lots of the artists are heavily influenced by animation culture. Many of them have worked in the animation industry too (Tim Biskup, Seonna Hong). On the opposite, Nathan Jurevicius who came from art and illustration, takes his characters and designs to animation.

Have you noticed a crossover of practices across the art/design fields?

This is what vinyl design today is all about. I always think Jeff Koons or Murakami in terms of how vinyl production gives artists a new life, scope and possibilities.

Does the collector have an influence on the market?

Of course. The popularity of certain limited edition figures have lead to spin offs and variants. James Jarvis's *King Ken* figure has been produced different colourways and is now available as a 'flocked' variant. The size of vinyl figures has evolved too. From 'toy' sized, collectors and artists are now thinking in terms of sculpture. **If I want to take my designs and turn them into vinyl characters, where would I go in Australia? What is the process?** Most vinyl production is done in Asia. The costs of production in Australia would be too high. As an artist, the process would be to hook in with a production company who would guide the whole production process from conception to modelling to marketing and distribution. Some of the best such companies include *Medicom, Strangeco, Flying Cat and Critterbox*.